

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR LOCALISATION OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

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Abstract. Social networking sites (i.e. Facebook, Orkut, Cyworld, etc.) already attracted millions of users, many of whom have integrated these sites into their daily routines. It is becoming more difficult to enter the market for new social networking sites. One of options to make website more attractive for local users while targeting not only population of country of origin is to localise or adapt the website. This article provides conceptual framework for localisation of social networking sites from marketing point of view. Proposed framework is built on basis of traditional marketing mix, cultural dimensions suggested by G. Hofstede (1980) and building blocks of social networking sites.

Keywords: adaptation, cross-cultural difference, localisation, marketing, social media, social networking sites.

Jel classification: M15, M16, M31.

1. Introduction

Information communication technologies and Internet in particular help companies to reach global markets much easier. Web 2.0 technologies made it easier for consumers to connect to global communities as well. Providers of social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook, Cyworld, and Bebo have attracted millions of users and their sites are used widely across the world. What is interesting to note, however, is that none of these sites are equally popular across cultures (Marcus, Krishnamurthi 2009). For example MySpace is very popular in the USA, with about 74 % of the market share despite its famously cluttered layout, but captures only 2.9% of the Japanese market share (Marcus, Krishnamurthi 2009). It is another prove that nations do not give up cultural identities – quite the opposite, they seek to save it (Urbšienė 2011).

Research of traditional international websites (from web 1.0 era) indicates that users tend to prefer websites that are localised, adapted for their culture (Cyr, Trevor-Smith 2004; Faiola, Matei 2006; Marcus, Gould 2000; Simon 2001; Singh *et al.* 2005; Zahir *et al.* 2002). Though there are recommendations on how content of websites should be localised in respect to cultural differences (Marcus, Gould 2000; Singh, Pereira 2005), research in respect to cultural issues in social networking sites as to date is not ample and rather fragmented. According to boyd and Ellison

(2008), the bulk of social networking site research has focused on impression management and friendship performance, networks and network structure, online / offline connections, and privacy issues. In addition a growing body of scholarship addresses other aspects of social networking sites, their users, and the practices they enable but more work in this area is needed.

Goal of the article is to provide a conceptual framework for localisation of social networking sites.

Methods used: A literature review and analysis is undertaken into research performed in area of cross-cultural differences impact on social networking sites.

2. Social Networking Sites definition and trends

Researchers use quite a number of terms, which are related to social networking sites, such as “internet social networking” (Richter *et al.* 2009), “social web sites” (Kim *et al.* 2010), “social networking services” (Marcus, Krishnamurthi 2009). Definitions of these terms are overlapping but do not cover exactly same area.

Currently most popular definition of social network(ing) sites is one proposed by boyd and Ellison (2008). They define Social Network Sites as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other us-

ers with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site". Beer (2008) criticised this definition on the grounds that it is too wide and includes all sites that feature social network of any kind (and not just as core features). He also disagreed that social networking sites are only for making new relations.

As it is not intended by this article to propose ultimate definition of social networking sites, it will be Boyd and Ellison (2008) definition that will be used as basis in this paper, though term of social networking sites is used instead of social network sites, as authors agree to Beer (2008) opinion, that networking is not limited to extension of ones' network with only new acquaintances, but includes maintaining of the present social network as well.

The first well-known social networking site is SixDegrees.com, which was launched in 1997; its name originates from the six degrees of separation concept. Six degrees of separation is the theory that anyone can be connected to any other person through a chain of acquaintances that has no more than five intermediaries. SixDegrees.com users could create their profiles, have a list of friends and contribute information to their community. Although this site attracted million of users, it could not evolve into a sustainable business and closed down in 2000. Since 2003 there was a revolution and uptake of social networking sites. This revolution has brought a dramatic shift on the business, the cultural and the research landscape of the world wide web (Pallis *et al.* 2011).

According to study carried out by InSites Consulting (2010) 72 % of worldwide population of Internet users are users of at least one social networking site (most of them are users of at least two social networking sites). According to comScore (2011) in October 2011, social networking ranked as the most popular content category in worldwide engagement, accounting for 19 percent of all time spent online. Nearly 1 in every 5 minutes spent online is now spent on social networking sites – a stark contrast from when the category accounted for only 6 percent of time spent online in March 2007. There is no doubt, it has evolved over the years to become an integral part of the global online experience, in many ways both mirroring and augmenting the offline social experience.

3. Defining localisation and role of culture in it

In traditional marketing literature term "localisation" often used as contrast to term "globalisation" (i.e. by Ramarapu *et al.* 1999) instead of "adaptation" which used in contrast to "standardization" (i.e. Ryans *et al.* 2003). In most cases authors do not provide any definition for any of those terms. Though studies on practitioners opinion show that cultural aspects are peripheral factor for their international marketing decisions (Vrontis *et al.* 2009), theoretically culture considered important factor in standardisation / adaptation debate (Douglas, Wind 1987). Culture and social world has an impact on values of people. Those values have an impact on attitudes and behaviour in turn (Alas, Tuulik 2007).

Localisation Industry Standards Association (2007) defines localisation this way: "Localisation involves taking a product and making it linguistically and culturally appropriate to the target locale (country/region and language) where it will be used and sold." This definition is most often used in relevance to information communication technologies. As websites are also attributed to information communication technologies, authors deem this term suitable for defining localisation of social networking sites in context of marketing as well. Apparently language and culture are two main constructs in this definition. As language could be understood as integral part of culture, authors will focus on cultural issues only in this article.

Companies which decide to target their website to international market, can choose one of strategies for approaching users in different countries (Alimienė, Kuvykaitė 2008):

- Standardisation strategy uses promotional messages internationally, translating but not otherwise modifying headings, illustrations or copy.
- Localisation (or adaptation) strategy posits that consumer difference may have been widening and that messages should be tailored according to culture, media availability, product life-cycle stages and industry structures.
- Third school of thought offers a compromise (or contingency) approach – appropriateness of standardisation depends on the product, consumer characteristics and environmental factors.

Though these strategies derive from traditional marketing, they did not lose its importance in the context of virtual environment. A number of studies were carried out in order to find out whether users prefer localised or standardised websites (Cyr, Trevor-Smith 2004; Faiola, Matei 2006;

Marcus, Gould 2000; Simon 2001; Singh *et al.* 2005; Zahir *et al.* 2002). Researchers found that users prefer to visit more frequently and stay longer on websites if those are localised. This leads to the conclusion that websites should be localised in respect to cultural differences (Singh *et al.* 2005).

4. Previous research on cross cultural differences in social networking sites

Most studies on cross-cultural difference impact on various online activities are based on Hofstede’s (1980) culture dimensions (power distance, individualism / collectivism, masculinity / femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and Confucian dynamism), as well as Hall’s (1976) dimensions (high / low context and polychronic / monochronic cultures). This reflects well research trends in traditional marketing – 60 per cent of all studies carried out in last 20 years were based on Hofstede’s (1980) culture dimensions (Engelen, Brettel 2011). This trend applies to researching cross cultural issues on social networking sites as well.

Table 1 summarizes research related to cross-cultural issues in social networking sites. Table includes data on studies which were published in scientific articles that could be found online (in Science Direct, Springer, Emerald, ProQuest and other databases, as well as using Google Scholar search engine). Queries used for search were “cross cultural” or “cultural differences” in combination with “social network site”, “social networking site”, “online social networking”, “social networking service” and similar.

Authors of these articles use different definitions of social networking sites which mainly results in different scopes of research, - in some cases it meant excluding sites mainly meant for sharing user generated content, as Flickr (photo sharing), YouTube (video sharing) though other authors consider these sites as social networking sites as well.

Most of the studies mentioned analyse only few social networking sites and/ or in respect of few countries, in most cases involving only very limited numbers of users, if involving them at all. As noted by Marcus and Krishnamurthi (2009), it is important to not over-generalize and assume that all design elements of social networking sites successful in one of countries is guaranteed to provide the same results in other countries ranking similarly on Hofstede’s (1980) cultural dimensions. Thus larger scale research is needed to reach

significant results: there should be more countries involved and more social networking sites taken into consideration.

Table 1. Overview of research of cross-cultural issues in social networking sites

Author	Social networking sites / Countries	Research object / Based on cultural dimensions
Fragoso (2006) (in boyd, Ellison 2008)	1 site (Orkut) / 2 countries (Brasil & USA)	The cultural differences in appropriation of SNS / none
Hjorth, Yuji (in press) (in boyd, Ellison 2008)	2 sites (Mixi & Cyworld) / 2 countries (Japan & Korea)	Differences in usage of SNS / none
Herring <i>et al.</i> , (2007)	1 site (LiveJournal.com) / Users’ journals in 4 languages: RU, PT, FI & JP	Usage of language / none
Chapman, Lahav (2008)	5 sites (Facebook, MySpace, SkyBlog, QQ & Cyworld) / 4 countries (USA, France, China & South Korea)	Differences in the SNS sites user goals and behaviour / none
Lewis, George (2008)	2 sites (MySpace & Cyworld) / 2 countries (USA & Korea)	differences in deceptive behaviour on SNS / Hofstede (1980) model
Marshall <i>et al.</i> (2008)	0 sites / 2 countries (USA & India)	Comparison of students’ attitudes toward and usage of SNS (focus on online privacy and communication issues) / Hofstede (1980) model
Guo, Yu (2009)	0 sites / 2 countries (USA & India)	privacy and trust on SNS in a cross-cultural context / Hofstede (1980) model
Marcus, Krishnamurthi (2009)	39 sites / 3 countries (Japan, South Korea & USA)	differences in appeal of SNS / G. Hofstede model
Krasnova, Veltri (2010)	1 site (Facebook) / 2 (USA & Germany)	disclosure-relevant determinants differences / Hofstede (1980) model
Barker, Ota (2011)	2 sites (Facebook & Mixi) / 2 (USA & Japan)	differences in types of use and motives for use of SNSs / none
Kim, Sohn, Choi (2011)	0 sites / 2 countries (USA & Korea)	difference in motivations for using SNSs / none

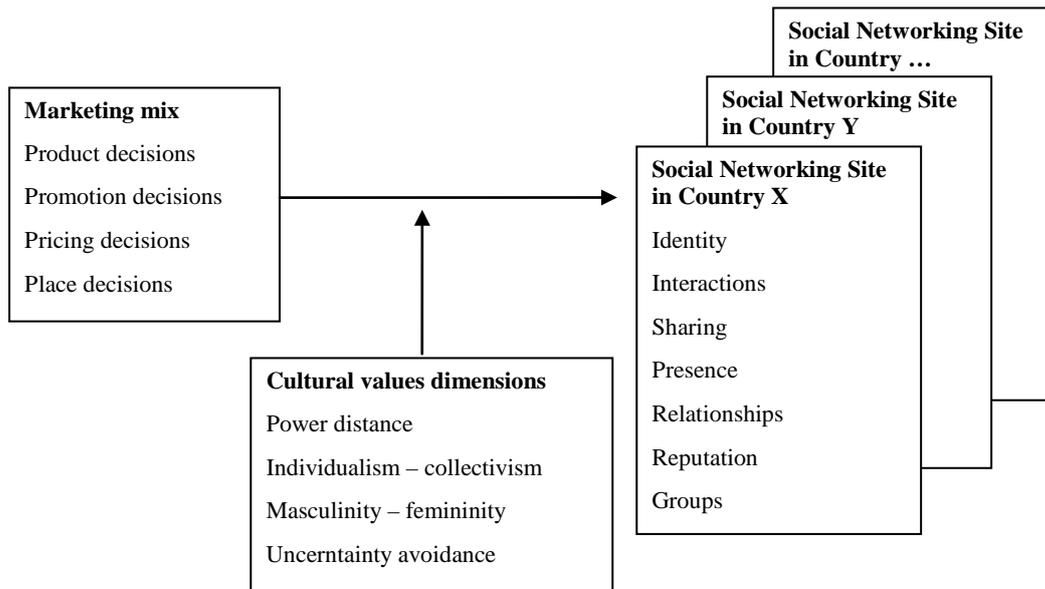


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework for localisation of social networking sites

5. Proposed conceptual framework for localisation of social networking sites

As said earlier in this paper, most studies on cross-cultural difference impact on various online activities as well as in traditional marketing research are based on Hofstede's (1980) culture dimensions. Thus proposed model will include original four dimensions proposed by Hofstede's (1980): power distance, individualism / collectivism, masculinity / femininity and uncertainty avoidance. Newer two dimensions are excluded as their impact is not much researched not only in traditional marketing studies, but in e-business research as well.

Only very recently there appeared some attempts to identify main elements or building blocks of social media sites (which also applies for social networking sites). For example Mislove *et al.* (2007) indicated that main elements of social networking sites are users, links and groups. Most exhaustive model of elements of social media sites is provided by Kietzmann *et al.* (2011). The authors use a honeycomb of seven functional building blocks: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups. Each block allows to unpack and examine (1) a specific facet of social media user experience, and (2) its implications for firms. These building blocks are neither mutually exclusive, nor do they all have to be present in a social media activity. They are constructs that allow us to make sense of how different levels of social media functionality can be configured. So this model will be used in proposed framework to represent components of social networking sites.

Proposed model is also addressing marketing point of view. It is based on marketing mix. Though there is a number of marketing mixes suggested for virtual environment (see Constantinides 2006), most of them build on classical 4P model and most of those that are not based on classical 4P model are focused on some specific industry (e.g. music products). Thus, authors choose to base the proposed framework on classical 4P model adopted for virtual environment: product, place, price and promotion.

Conceptual framework for localisation of social networking sites is graphically presented in Fig. 1. According to the model localisation of marketing mix elements is directly impacted by cultural differences (based on Hofstede (1980) cultural values dimensions model) and expressed through changes in various components of social networking sites.

6. Conclusions

Social networking sites are web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.

Though first well-known social networking site is SixDegrees.com was launched in 1997 already, to date, the bulk of social networking site research has focused on impression management and friendship performance, networks and network

structure, online / offline connections, and privacy issues and there is not much research carried in respect to cultural differences as well as marketing issues in social networking sites.

Previous studies on whether websites should be localised or standardised point to one general conclusion – that web content needs to be adapted to the different cultures of its targeted consumers. Authors assume this conclusion applies to social networking sites as well.

Most studies on cross-cultural difference impact on various online activities are based on Hofstede's (1980) culture dimensions (power distance, individualism / collectivism, masculinity / femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and Confucian dynamism), as well as Hall's (1976) dimensions (high / low context and polychronic / monochronic cultures). This applies to researching cross cultural issues on social networking sites as well. Though most of the studies on cross-cultural issues in social networking services analyse only few social networking sites and/ or in respect of few countries, in most cases involving only very limited numbers of users, if not involving them at all.

This paper proposes conceptual framework for localisation of social networking sites basing on seven building blocks of social media sites (identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups), Hofstede's (1980) cultural values dimensions (power distance, individualism / collectivism, masculinity / femininity, uncertainty avoidance) and marketing mix (product, place, price and promotion).

Limitation of proposed framework is that it is based on theoretical assumptions only and it should be tested empirically in the future.

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