SOCIAL NETWORKING WEBSITES IN INDIA AND THE UNITED STATES: A CROSS-NATIONAL COMPARISON OF ONLINE PRIVACY AND COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

This study examined cross-national differences in the usage of social networking websites (SNWs) between university students in India and the United States. A total of 245 Indian university students and 241 American university students completed a survey about privacy attitudes and behaviors as well as communication patterns on SNWs. Many of the traditional propositions about cross-cultural values and related notions about trust and communication patterns did not explain differences in behavior between Indian and American students. In particular, Indian students, who are considered being from a collectivist society, and American students, who are considered being from an individualist society, exhibited many common communication patterns. When they did exhibit different communication patterns, Indian students reported communication behaviors considered significantly more individualist than the American students. This research suggests that additional cross-cultural research is needed about the usage of SNWs and other forms of computer-mediated communication.

Keywords: Social Networking Websites, Privacy, Cross-Cultural Communication, Computer-Mediated Communication

INTRODUCTION

Social networking websites (SNWs) have grown in popularity among all segments of society, but particularly among younger groups such as university students. Facebook is an example of the enormous amount of social interaction that occurs on these websites. Approximately 85% of all American university students at 4-year institutions use Facebook. There are 67 million active users worldwide, half of whom log in at least once each day for an average of twenty minutes. Approximately 250,000 people apply for profiles each day. Nearly 14 million photos are uploaded each day [12]. Of course, Facebook is just one of dozens and dozens of SNWs that each has millions of active users.

Popular business and news magazines such as *BusinessWeek* and *Time* run near-weekly articles about the impact of SNWs on business and society. SNWs are often pointed out as important forms of communication within the workplace and intriguing avenues for marketing, even changing the way business is done [2, 6, 8]. Other articles indicate that such optimism for usefulness in the workplace is exaggerated and that there are downfalls to social networking websites in the workplace [1, 15]. They can consume bandwidth and storage consumption, create legal liabilities, expose a system to malware, decrease employee productivity, provide unwanted personal information about employees, and even risk publicizing secret corporate information [23].

For university students, SNWs have an equalizing effect in that people often feel the freedom to express themselves in ways not possible through other outlets. SNWs have even been identified as increasing self-esteem among younger people [5, 11, 18, 21]. Yet, newspaper and magazine articles also point out the problems of content on SNWs being viewed by bosses and principals, resulting in some cases in being kicked out of school or losing jobs [19].

Since the enormous amount of social interaction facilitated by SNWs throughout the world is a fairly new phenomenon, research about cross-national differences in attitudes and usage of SNWs is particularly warranted. India and the United States are countries which engage in a great deal of online communication due to the rise in customer service, computer programming, and other service positions outsourced to India from the United States [22]. An understanding of cross-national differences among university students' attitudes toward and usage of SNWs can help provide insight into how cross-national virtual work will be conducted in the future. A great deal of research has been conducted about

cross-cultural values and communication practices, yet scant research addresses how these findings apply to the online environment, particularly for SNWs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

SNWs are a relatively new form of online communication. The first SNW was SixDegrees.com, which was launched in 1997. The current popularity of SNWs, however, is an even more recent phenomenon and it wasn't until 2003 when they were considered mainstream. The top two SNWs, MySpace and Facebook, began in 2003 and 2005, respectively [4]. In June 2007 these two websites combined for nearly 170 million unique visitors [7]. While the popularity of SNWs has become a global phenomenon, various websites have become market leaders in various countries and regions around the world: Orkut in Brazil and India, Mixi in Japan, LunarStorm in Sweden, Hi5 in smaller Latin American countries, Bebo in the United Kingdom, or Cyworld in Korea, to name a few. Each website contains features that appeal to the various national cultures [4].

Literature about SNWs is fairly limited and has mostly focused on impression management and security [3, 4, 10, 17, 24]. One consistent finding has been that SNWs are used primarily to sustain existing offline relationships—few users use SNWs to meet people [4]. However, no cross-cultural studies of SNWs are known to have been conducted. In a 2008 analysis of the literature on SNWs, Boyd and Ellison concluded that "scholars still have a limited understanding of who is and who is not using these sites, why, and for what purposes, especially outside of the U.S." (p. 15) [4].

In cross-cultural values and practices research, most researchers rely on the cultural dimensions developed by Geert Hofstede. Based on 116,000 survey responses from approximately 60 countries, he identified four cultural dimensions—individualism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, and masculinity—which account for fundamental differences in work-related values among global societies [16]. William Gudykunst is among the foremost intercultural communication scholars who has identified how Hofstede's cultural dimensions influence trust and communication. He also developed the anxiety/uncertainty management (AUM) theory to describe how individuals and groups manage the inevitable anxiety and uncertainty involved in meeting and interacting with those who are not acquaintances (strangers) [6, 13, 14].

Gudykunst identified individualism-collectivism as the most influential cultural dimension on trust and communication. Individualism involves the degree to which individuals should take care of themselves and become integrated into groups. Collectivist cultures tend to be more ambiguous, less direct, less open, less inclined to talk, and avoid confrontations; whereas individualist cultures tend to be more direct, more open, more inclined to talk, and more likely to directly address confrontations. Collectivists tend to interact with fewer friends but for longer periods of time. Individualists tend to interact with more people but for shorter periods of time. The Indian culture is considered medium to high in collectivism whereas the American culture is considered high in individualism [14, 16].

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research was designed to make a cross-national comparison of Indian and American university students' attitudes toward and usage of SNWs. In particular, the following research questions were asked: (R1) What differences are there between Indian and American students in terms of privacy on SNWs? (R2) What differences are there between Indian and American students in terms of communication patterns on SNWs? (R3) To what degree do differences in collectivism and individualism in these two cultures explain the differences between Indian and American university students in terms of online privacy, trust, and communication patterns?

An online survey was created based on a survey conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project among American teenagers [20]. Survey items were used that addressed attitudes towards privacy and behaviors to ensure online privacy. Also, survey items were selected that dealt with communication patterns. Survey items were slightly reworded for relevance to university students and several additional survey items were added. This survey provided a good basis for understanding basic cross-national differences in attitudes towards online privacy and communication. Since the survey responses were categorical in nature, results were analyzed with chi-square (χ2) tests.

Altogether, 366 university students in India and 272 college students in the United States took the survey. Among the Indian participants, 245 students (66.9%) indicated they had at least one profile on a social networking website and proceeded to complete the entire survey. Among American students, 241 students (89.0%) did so. The university students in

India were contacted through friend lists on SNWs by an Indian colleague of the researchers. His friend list contained approximately 200 friends and he encouraged his close friends to pass the survey link on to other university students. We are unable to identify the response rate since we cannot track how many potential Indian participants saw an invitation to take the survey. However, we believe the response rate was high since nearly all responses came in within one week, and we believe the invitation would have stopped being passed on fairly quickly. The American university students who took the survey were offered extra credit by instructors at four universities—two in the South, one in the East, and one in the West. Nearly all students who were offered the extra credit took the surveys.

RESULTS

When students were asked how public their profile was (as illustrated in Table 1), the majority of Indian university students (69.5%) make their profile visible

for anyone to see compared to roughly a quarter of American students (28.6%) who make their profiles public. American students (66.0%) are far more likely to make their profiles only visible to friends compared to less than one fourth of Indian students (22.8%) who do so. Small percentages of American students (5.3%) and Indian students (7.7%) do not know to whom their profiles are visible.

Table 1. Public Nature of Online Profile

How public is your profile?	India (n=259)	USA (n=241)
visible to anyone	180 (69.5%)	69 (28.6%)
visible only to friends	59 (22.8%)	159 (66.0%)
don't know to whom it's visible	20 (7.7%)	13 (5.3%)

Note. (χ2 (2, N = 499) = 96.77, p = .000**).
*p < .05; **p < .01

Table 2. Attitudes toward Sharing Information Online

Please tell me if you think it is okay to share the following information with someone you just met on the Internet:	India	USA	χ2	N	df	p
state where you live	176 (72.1%)	162 (67.2%)	1.38	485	1	0.239
school name	183 (75.3%)	190 (78.8%)	0.85	484	1	0.356
IM screen name	132 (55.5%)	145 (60.7%)	1.33	484	1	0.249
city or town where you live	190 (78.2%)	128 (53.1%)	33.8	477	1	0.000**
last name	164 (68.0%)	114 (47.5%)	20.8	484	1	0.000**
email address	158 (65.3%)	128 (53.3%)	7.14	481	1	0.008**
your blog or a link to your blog	109 (45.6%)	110 (45.6%)	0.00	482	1	0.994
cell phone number	33 (13.8%)	30 (12.4%)	0.18	480	1	0.672

Note. *p < .05; **p < .01

Table 3. Types of Information Provided on SNWs

We would like to know if the following kinds of information are posted to your profile, or not. You can just tell me yes or no. On your profile, do you provide …?	India	USA	χ2	N	df	p
First name	232 (93.2%)	231 (95.9%)	1.69	490	1	0.194
Last name	200 (81.3%)	214 (89.2%)	5.96	486	1	0.015*
Photos of friends	129 (52.4%)	219 (91.3%)	90	486	1	0.000**
Photos of yourselves	168 (68.6%)	230 (95.4%)	59.1	486	1	0.000**
City or town	228 (91.9%)	214 (88.8%)	1.39	489	1	0.239
Link to their blog	75 (31.0%)	43 (18.0%)	11	481	1	0.001**
School's name	193 (79.1%)	233 (96.7%)	35.1	485	1	0.000**
IM screen name	127 (52.9%)	121 (50.8%)	0.21	478	1	0.650
email address	215 (87.0%)	172 (71.4%)	18.3	488	1	0.000**
stream audio or MP3 files	56 (23.4%)	60 (25.21%)	0.21	477	1	0.651

Note. *p < .05; **p < .01

When asked about attitudes toward sharing information on SNWs (as illustrated in Table 2), Indian and American university students showed many similarities and differences. There was no significant difference in terms of thinking it was okay to share the state where you live, school name (India: 72.1%; USA: 67.2%), IM screen name (India: 55.5%; USA: 60.7%), or a link to a personal blog (India: 45.6%; USA: 45.6%). There was also not a difference in attitudes toward sharing a cell phone number online with someone you just met – just 13.8% of Indian and 12.4% of American university students thought this was okay. Indian students were significantly more likely to think it was okay to share the city or town where one lives (India: 78.2%; USA: 53.1%), one's last name (India: 68.0%; USA: 47.5%), and one's email address (India: 65.3%; USA: 53.3%); however, it should be noted that approximately half of American university students thought it was okay to share each of these items.

When asked about types of information that students provide on SNWs (as illustrated in Table 3), Indian students and American students nearly always provide first names (India: 93.2%; USA: 95.9%), last names (India: 81.3%; USA: 89.2%), and city or town where they live (India: 91.9%; USA: 88.8%). American students were significantly more likely to upload photos of friends (India: 52.4%; USA: 91.3%), upload photos of themselves (India: 68.6%; USA: 95.4%), and provide a school name (India: 79.1%; USA: 96.7%). Indian students were significantly more likely to provide email addresses (India: 87.0%; USA: 71.4%) and links to their blogs (India: 31.0%; USA: 18.0%).

When asked how they would respond to a complete stranger who initiates contact (as illustrated in Table 4), American students were far more likely to simply ignore the communication (India: 46.9%; USA: 74.3%) whereas Indian students were far more likely to respond and find out more about the person (India: 44.0%; USA: 24.1%). Indian students were also far more likely to directly tell the stranger to leave them alone (India: 9.1%; USA: 1.7%)

When asked from where students most frequently accessed their SNWs (as illustrated in Table 5), American students were more likely to do so from home (India: 66.8%; USA: 75.9%) or school (India: 6.9%; USA: 17.8%). Indian students were more likely to access SNWs from someplace else (India: 22.7%; USA: 2.9%), which probably indicates Internet cafés.

In terms of specific ways in which students use SNWs to communicate with friends (as illustrated in Table 6), Indians and Americans were quite similar in the practices of posting messages to a friend's page, space, or wall (India: 89.6%; USA: 94.6%); sending a bulletin or group message to all friends (India: 51.6%; USA: 57.9%); and posting comment's to a friend's blog (India: 45.3%; USA: 53.8%). American university students were far more likely, however, to send private messages to a friend within the social networking system (India: 65.9%; USA: 92.9%).

Table 4. Online Contact Initiated by Strangers

Thinking about the last time you were contacted online by someone who was a complete stranger to you, how did you respond?	India (n =)	USA (n =)
Just ignored it	114 (46.9%)	179 (74.3%)
Responded so I could find out more about the person	107 (44.0%)	58 (24.1%)
Responded and told them to leave me alone	22 (9.1%)	4 (1.7%)

Note. ($\chi2$ (2, N = 484) = 41.43, p = .000**).
*p < .05; **p < .01

Table 5. Location From Which Access SNWs

From where do access your social networking website most often?	India (n =)	USA (n =)
home	165 (66.8%)	183 (75.9%)
school	17 (6.9%)	43 (17.8%)
someplace else	56 (22.7%)	7 (2.9%)
don't know	9 (3.6%)	8 (3.3%)

Note. (χ^2 (2, N = 484) = 50.30, p = .000).
*p < .05; **p < .01

When asked about how many friends they make at least weekly contact with (as illustrated in Table 7), Indian and American students were fairly comparable and there are not significant differences. Indian university students tend to have slightly more online friends with whom they communicate frequently than offline friends. Whereas higher percentages report having 1 to 4 or (offline: 19.7%; online: 15.4%) 5 to 9 offline friends (offline: 32.%%; online: 26.9%), higher percentages report having 10 to 14 (offline: 16.7%; online: 17.9%), 15 to 19 (offline: 10.7%; online: 12.8%), 20 to 29 (offline: 6.8%; online:

Table 6. Communication Methods on SNWs

We'd like to know the specific ways you communicate with your friends using social networking sites. Do you ever…?	India	USA	$\chi2$	N	df	p
post messages to a friend's page, space or wall	223 (89.6%)	228 (94.6%)	4.26	490	1	0.039*
send private messages to a friend within the social networking system	162 (65.9%)	222 (92.9%)	53.73	485	1	.000**
send a bulletin or group message to all of your friends	126 (51.6%)	139 (57.9%)	1.92	484	1	0.165
post comments to a friend's blog	110 (45.3%)	129 (53.8%)	3.46	483	1	0.062

Note. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$

Table 7. Online Versus Offline Friends

How many friends do you keep regular contact with each week?		0	1 to 4	5 to 9	10 to 14	15 to 19	20 to 29	30 or more
India	In offline-life	8 (3.4%)	46 (19.7%)	76 (32.5%)	39 (16.7%)	25 (10.7%)	16 (6.8%)	24 (10.3%)
	In online life	8 (3.4%)	36 (15.4%)	63 (26.9%)	42 (17.9%)	30 (12.8%)	23 (9.8%)	32 (13.7%)
	In online life (friends who have never met before)	63 (26.5%)	103 (43.3%)	37 (15.5%)	12 (5.0%)	9 (3.8%)	5 (2.1%)	9 (3.8%)
USA	In offline-life	2 (0.9%)	40 (17.7%)	58 (25.7%)	48 (21.2%)	32 (14.2%)	29 (12.8%)	17 (7.5%)
	In online life	11 (4.8%)	45 (19.8%)	44 (19.4%)	53 (23.3%)	27 (11.9%)	22 (9.7%)	25 (11.0%)
	In online life (friends who have never met before)	183 (77.5%)	36 (15.3%)	5 (2.1%)	6 (2.5%)	2 (0.8%)	2 (0.8%)	2 (0.8%)

Note. For offline-life: (χ^2 (7, $N = 488$) = 14.01, $p = .051$); For online life: (χ^2 (7, $N = 487$) = 7.87, $p = .344$); For online life (friends who have never met before): (χ^2 (7, $N = 483$) = 128.37, $p = .000$**).
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$

9.8%), or 30 or more online friends (offline: 10.3%; online: 13.7%).

Collectively, over half of Indian students (54.2%) have more than 10 online friends with whom they interact weekly, compared to 44.5% who have more than 10 offline friends with whom they interact weekly. Among American university students, roughly the same percentages report having the same number of offline and online friends with whom they interact weekly.

When asked about the number of online friends who university students have never met in person, Indian students reported far more contact. While nearly all American students (77.5%) reported having no online friends who they had never met before, about the same percentage of Indian students (73.5%) reported having online friends who they had never met before.

In terms of content published or communicated on SNWs (as illustrated in Table 8), high percentages of both Indian and American students communicated about personal hobbies (India: 80.3%; USA: 86.6%), music (India: 74.3%; USA: 86.6%), movies/TV (India: 74.3%; USA: 86.6%), friendships (India:

76.6%; USA: 79.9%), other entertainment (India: 63.4%; USA: 54.9%), sports (India: 63.1%; USA: 66.8%), jobs/work (India: 53.5%; USA: 58.4%), and religion/spirituality (India: 45.1%; USA: 50.0%). Indian students were far more likely to publish or communicate about games (India: 57.3%; USA: 39.7%), health issues (India: 25.4%; USA: 8.9%), shopping (India: 34.4%; USA: 18.9%), and fashion (India: 37.4%; USA: 17.3%). American students were far more likely to publish or communicate about social events/parties (India: 47.8%; USA: 68.5%), romance (India: 29.4%; USA: 53.8%), and school/homework (India: 30.2%; USA: 49.2%). As far as the total number of content items selected, Indian students on average selected 8.53 (SD = 4.29) compared to American students who on average selected 9.03 (SD = 3.49).

CONCLUSIONS

In our study we intended to identify cross-national differences in online privacy (R1) and communication patterns on SNWs (R2). In addition, we intended to identify the degree to which the American individualist culture and the Indian collectivist culture explained these variations (R3).

We describe our conclusions in three sections. The

American students are far more likely to simply

Table 8. Content Published or Communicated on SNWs

What content do you publish or communicate about on your social networking website?	India	USA	χ2	N	df	p
Personal Hobbies	192 (80.3%)	207 (86.6%)	3.41	478	1	.065
Music	179 (74.3%)	207 (86.6%)	11.58	480	1	.001**
Movies/TV	176 (74.3%)	206 (86.6%)	11.40	475	1	.001**
Games	133 (57.3%)	95 (39.7%)	14.57	471	1	.000**
Other entertainment (besides music, movies/TV, and games)	147 (63.4%)	130 (54.9%)	3.51	469	1	.061
Social events/parties	109 (47.8%)	163 (68.5%)	20.50	466	1	.000**
Romance	67 (29.4%)	128 (53.8%)	28.48	466	1	.000**
Friendships	180 (76.6%)	191 (79.9%)	.77	474	1	.381
School/homework	68 (30.2%)	117 (49.2%)	17.29	463	1	.000**
Jobs/Work	123 (53.5%)	139 (58.4%)	1.15	468	1	.283
Politics	68 (29.7%)	89 (37.2%)	2.99	468	1	.084
Religion/Spirituality	105 (45.1%)	119 (50.0%)	1.15	471	1	.284
Sports	147 (63.1%)	159 (66.8%)	.72	471	1	.398
Health issues	58 (25.4%)	21 (8.9%)	22.27	463	1	.000**
Shopping	78 (34.4%)	45 (18.9%)	14.26	465	1	.000**
Fashion	85 (37.4%)	41 (17.3%)	23.79	464	1	.000**
Travel/Vacations	82 (36.8%)	71 (30.0%)	2.40	460	1	.121

Note. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$

first section addresses online privacy (R1). The second question addresses online communication patterns (R2). We include our analysis about the impact of individualism and collectivism within each of the first two sections (R3). We conclude with a section about future research about cross-national differences on SNWs.

Online Privacy on SNWs

Generally, American university students are far more cautious than Indian students about online privacy on their SNWs. They are much more likely to only allow friends to view their profiles and less likely to think it is okay to share various types of information online (such as last name or email address). However, American students also tend to be more likely to provide information online that identifies them, such as last name, photos, and school name. Indian students, by contrast, tend to be less cautious about online privacy on SNWs and are more likely to interact with strangers who initiate contact with them. Furthermore, Indian students are far more likely to directly ask strangers to leave them alone and

ignore unwanted communications. These findings are in contrast with traditional understanding of collectivist and individualist communication patterns. Individualists tend to be more trusting, open, and direct in exchanges with strangers, whereas collectivists tend to be less trusting and evasive in unwanted exchanges.

Online Communication Patterns on SNWs

In terms of online communication patterns, Indian and American students who use SNWs are quite similar in terms of posting messages to friend's pages, sending bulletins or group messages to all of their friends, and posting comments to friends' blogs. However, Indian students far less frequently send private messages to a friend within the social networking system. This may indicate the collectivist mentality of Indians in that communications are more often to be shared among social networks.

Indian and American students did not show significant differences in the number of online versus offline friends with whom they make at least weekly

contact. Furthermore, they tend to have roughly equal numbers of online and offline friends, although Indian students who have many friends (10 or more) tend to have slightly more online than offline friends. These findings are interesting for several reasons. First, this indicates the pervasive nature of SNWs in the lives of Indian and American students in that their circle of online friends is at least as large as their circle of offline friends (of course, many of these friends fall into both categories). Second, this is not in line with traditional assumptions about individualists and collectivists in that in offline environments individualists interact with more friends but for shorter periods of time whereas collectivists interact with fewer friends for longer periods of time.

It is also particularly striking that Indian students are far more likely to maintain a circle of online friends with whom they have never met face-to-face. Generally, individualists are assumed to be more trusting, active, and mobile in developing friendships. Also, this tends to illustrate that existing literature, which identifies making friends as a rather insignificant aspect of SNWs, may be culturally based. While this study seems to indicate that small percentages of Americans use SNWs to make friends and thus confirm other studies of Americans in this regard, it also indicates that Indian students are prolific in making and sustaining friendships online.

Finally, the research showed that Indian and American students communicate and publish on their SNWs about a wide array of topics. For both groups, publishing about entertainment and personal hobbies are extremely popular. American students are more likely to use SNWs to arrange offline activities, such as social events, parties, and coordinating schoolwork. Again, this indicates the stronger American tendency to focus on SNWs as sustaining existing relationships.

**Future Research about
Cross-Cultural Differences on SNWs**

Clearly, cross-cultural research about the use of SNWs is required for several reasons. First, this research illustrates that online privacy and communication behaviors do not match traditional understanding of cross-cultural differences. In this case, Indian and American university students did not exhibit many of the contrasting behaviors associated with collectivists and individualists. There may be several reasons for this. The medium itself (SNWs) may explain some of these differences and, thus, is cause for additional research. Also, globalization may

have caused some convergence of cultures, causing less collectivist attitudes and behaviors among Indian students and more collectivist attitudes and behaviors among American students. However, globalization itself is spread through online forums such as the SNWs. Thus, if this is the case, additional research in how SNWs contribute to this change is required. Second, the appeal of SNWs among university students indicates that such technologies will be increasingly important tools for the workplace. Indeed, as individuals who grew up using SNWs enter the workforce, their very expectations for how work should be done may profoundly affect how work is managed. Likewise, with increasing numbers of virtual teams composed of members of different cultures, the need to understand cultural variation on attitudes and usage on SNWs will become more relevant.

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