



## 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 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 increased self-censorship, more users from Namibia, where family and community structures are important, 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.

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### 1. Introduction

With a worldwide monthly user base of over 1.39 billion monthly active users (Facebook Newsroom, 2015), Facebook has shaped perspectives on and policies about privacy and cultural practices in the United States (US) and connected people across the world (Kerr, 2013; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2008). 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, such as 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 & Holman, 2012). Nevertheless, while some research examining Facebook has been done in non-Western countries and 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

Abbreviations: US, United States; FGs, focus groups.

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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 the 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 & Calandro, 2014). While we do not 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 (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 among 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, et al., 2013; Wyche, Schoenebeck, et al., 2013). Uimonen (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 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, Asemah, Ekhareafu, and Olaniran (2013) found that Nigeria’s core cultural values were being redefined among 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, Bidwell, Blake, Kapuire, & Rehm, 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, Vertesi, Dourish, Philip, & Grinter, 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,

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