A Four-Level Approach to the Study of Cross-cultural Social Networking

Yifan Jiang, Oscar de Bruijn and Antonella De Angeli

Manchester Business School, Booth Street West, Manchester, M15 6PB, UK. Yifan.Jiang@postgrad.mbs.ac.uk, {Oscar.deBruijn/Antonella.De-Angeli}@mbs.ac.uk

Abstract. Unlike other online communities, social networking sites (SNSs) provide the platform for individuals to present themselves and to connect with others through list of connections. Researching social capital, which arises from networked relationship on cross-cultural networking, can help us gain a systematic understanding of cultural differences and their roles in cross-cultural interaction in terms of cultural differences (individual level), cross-cultural relationships (relationship level), cross-cultural social networks (network level) and cross-cultural social-capital (consequence level). This paper hopes to highlight these areas and suggest a future research strategy that brings together these four different levels.

Keywords: Social networking, cross-cultural interaction, social capital, cultural differences, self-presentation

1 Cross-cultural Social Capital and Research Strategy

Boyd and Ellison [1] defined SNSs 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 users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system”. Social capital, defined as “a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors – whether persons or corporate actors – within the structure” [3], can be formed or maintained through the use of SNSs, such as Facebook [5]. Some SNSs attract members from all over the world, and have the potential to substantially increase the amount of communication between people who do not share a cultural background. As a result, cross-cultural social capital can emerge through such online interaction. Having reviewed the literature about this area, we have identified two problems to be examined.

Firstly, several former studies in online social networking have focused on cultural differences in users’ behaviour. For example, a recent study investigated an inventory of self-presentation on Windows Live Spaces owned by either British or Chinese students studying at British universities [4]. It revealed strong cultural differences in line with the distinction between the ‘interdependent self’ who mostly originated from Eastern societies and the ‘independent self’ originating mostly from the Western society. Chinese students were more accommodating and more inclined to host filter blogs - blogs composed of filtered feeds from other people blogs. These differences implicated the designing for SNSs across different cultures. However, little is known
about the role of these differences in a cross-cultural interaction on SNSs. Our research strategy seeks to fill this gap between cultural differences and cross-cultural interaction in an attempt to contribute to the design of cross-cultural networking sites.

Secondly, we introduce the idea of cross-cultural social capital, because the cross-cultural significance of these sites lies not only in interaction between people from different cultures, but also in the cross-cultural networks that they support. Indeed, several studies have shown that the consequences of social networking differ depending on the structures of networks that connect the individuals [2], [3], [10]. These consequences provide the motivation for people to engage in social networking activities, which make understanding these networks essential in the quest for understanding the role and value of SNSs for cross-cultural social networking.

We argue therefore that there is a need for a multidimensional approach that looks at individual cultural differences, the problems associated with cross-cultural relationship building, and the nature and value of cross-cultural social networks. We call these different perspectives the individual, relationship, network and consequence levels. The following parts present the way of combining four levels together in the research of cross-cultural networking.

2 Previous Research Approaches

Previous research has studied cultural differences at the individual level. For example, Markus and Kitayama [9] have found cultural differences in construal of self and others, which can influence individuals’ cognition, emotion and motivation. Triandis [12] argues that there are three sorts of self: private, public and collective. Culture determines the degree in which each of these is manifest in people’s personalities. Other research has studied cultural differences at the relationship level by focusing on interpersonal communication. To illustrate, Hall’s [6] high and low context cultures explains differences in the communication styles of Eastern and Western societies. Research studying cultural differences apparent at the network level has also been attempted. For instance, Hofstede’s [7] five dimensions of culture with respect to national work-related values can be used to explain cultural differences in the prevalence of the structures of social networks. For example, the prevalence of densely connected social networks may be higher in collectivist than in individualist cultures, although we are not aware of any evidence for this. Finally, research on social capital has been conducted mainly at the collective level (e.g., [2], [3], [11]).

This lack of proper understanding of social capital in individual level can be a barrier to creating a systematic understanding of cross-cultural social capital. However, one study [5] has attempted to connect social capital with individual’s psychological well-being. By using Putnam’s [11] bonding and bridging social capital, the former pertaining to tight social relations (strong ties) and the latter relating to mapping loose connections (weak ties), along with their own definition of maintained social capital, the ability to continue relationships after geographical separation, they found people with low self-esteem benefitted from the use of Facebook in terms of the perceived amount of bridging social capital it brought them.
3 Our Research Approach

The four-level approach we advocate in this paper matched the features of SNSs and elements of social capital (Table 1). To illustrate, we can start with the research on the role of cultural differences in online social interaction at the individual level, through individual’s self-presentation on the personal homepages or profiles in SNSs. We can also focus our research on the network structure of different groups in SNSs.

Table 1. The Embodiment of Four Levels on SNSs and Social Capital.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels of Approach</th>
<th>Individual Level</th>
<th>Relationship Level</th>
<th>Network Level</th>
<th>Consequence Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Features of SNSs</td>
<td>A profile or a homepage</td>
<td>Friend list</td>
<td>Networks or groups</td>
<td>Activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elements of Social Capital</td>
<td>Individuals</td>
<td>Social ties, trust, reciprocity, norms</td>
<td>Network structure, norms</td>
<td>Benefit and cost</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A typical cross-cultural network is shown in Figure 1 (different colours represent individuals from different cultural backgrounds). The connection between individuals A and B forms a cross-cultural relationship. With the increase of this kind of connections, a cross-cultural network can be created. Through online intercourse, individuals may build their own perceptions towards the benefit and cost of being in this network. These consequences may influence their inner thoughts; and therefore affect the relationships, as well as the network structure. Changes in the network, for example, by more people from a particular culture joining, will affect the perceived benefit of the network and thereby the relationship between individuals A and B. That is to say, in our hypothesis, these four levels will connect as a loop. Theories and findings of cultural differences will be used to explain the phenomenon occurs at different levels in this circle.

Fig. 1. The Embodiment of Four Levels in a Cross-cultural Network
4 Example

We have adopted this research approach and based our preliminary research upon the cultural differences found in literature. To illustrate, our first study examined the effectiveness of cross-cultural online communication, by measuring the cross-cultural social perception of specially constructed online representations of a typical British and a typical Chinese person [8]. This study showed that differences in communication style and self-presentation affected people social perceptions. People from different cultural backgrounds rely on different cues when forming impressions of others. Moreover, it highlighted that people’s impressions of different social groups significantly affected their intentions for social interactions with people associated to that social group. These impressions may, therefore, have significant consequences for establishing cross-cultural relationships. This example has shown the connection between individual and relationship levels through the influence of personal perception on cross-cultural friendship building. Future studies will focus on the question whether these differences also influence the structure of cross-cultural networks. In addition, research is currently being carried out to test whether the relationship between cross-cultural communication on SNSs and perceived social capital depends on people’s perception on their own and other cultures.

References
4, De Angeli, A.: Cultural variations in virtual spaces design. AI & Society. (To appear)
8, Jiang, Y.F., de Bruijn, O., De Angeli, A.: The perception of cultural differences in online self-presentation. Interact’ 09 (To appear)