Social Networking Sites Across Cultures and Countries: Proximity and Network Effects

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Social Networking Sites Across Cultures and Countries: Proximity and Network Effects

Ulrike Rohn

International social networking sites (SNSs), such as Facebook®, outnumber domestic networks in terms of membership numbers in many countries. This article reports on focus group interviews with Estonian, Russian-Estonian, and German SNS users whose aim it was to investigate their desire for cultural or geographic proximity in SNSs, as well as the attraction of network effects of large international SNSs. Based on a new model of proximity in SNSs, the interviews suggested that users self-create proximity in SNSs more than they desire it from what the SNSs offer to them. The interviews also suggested that the extent to which users self-create or desire cultural and geographic proximity differs across cultural groups, as the Russian-Estonian SNS users indicated the greatest need for cultural proximity, but a comparatively small need for geographic proximity. Furthermore, the interviews suggested that users are attracted to SNSs with a large international membership base, as it reassures them that no change of network is required if they ever wished to connect with people from different cultures or countries. Large international SNSs attract users with network effects, and it lies in the nature of SNSs that they allow users to self-create as much proximity as they wish.

Keywords: Culture; Focus Groups; International; Internet; Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites (SNSs) are an international phenomenon. In many countries, the large international SNS Facebook®, which has over 800 million users worldwide, has taken the lead over domestic networks in terms of membership numbers (comScore,
According to the concept of network effects, a large international network is more valuable to any user than a smaller national one. At the same time, SNS users may desire cultural or geographic proximity in their choice and use of SNSs. Thus, studies have found that SNS users are most likely to connect with users from their own cultural and geographic environment in SNSs (Liben-Nowell, Novak, Kumar, Raghavan, & Tomkins, 2005; Tillema, Dijst, & Schwanen, 2010). Likewise, some cultural groups, such as the Russian-language communities in post-Soviet countries, are largely attracted to more culturally closed networks, such as the Russian network Odnoklassniki.

This study aims to find out whether users’ preference of an SNS is determined by geographic and cultural proximity, as well as an SNS’s network effects. To this end, the article puts forward a new model of proximity in SNSs that includes potential areas of proximity. It also introduces elements of network effects that may play a role in users’ preference of particular SNSs over others and their usage of these SNSs. The theoretical conceptualizations of proximity and network effects that this article puts forward were applied in focus group interviews with SNS users in Germany and Estonia. The aim of these interviews was to learn about the interviewees’ attitudes toward the different proposed potential elements of proximity and network effects. The article will introduce the results of these interviews and thereby provide an initial understanding of the importance of the various elements, which may be tested in future quantitative studies.

### Introducing a New Model of Proximity in SNSs

*Proximity* is a term widely used in the context of cross-cultural media trade, whereas the concept of *cultural proximity* argues that audiences prefer media that have been produced in their own cultural environment over media that have been produced elsewhere because they are more “proximate” to them (Iwabuchi, 2001; Rohn, 2010, 2011; Straubhaar, 1991).

This article puts forward a modification of the concept of cultural proximity to be applied in the context of SNSs. It suggests two main adaptations. First, SNSs that aim to attract people across cultures and countries differ greatly from media content that aims to attract audiences as much of the content in SNSs is generated by the users themselves. Hence, a model of proximity in SNS needs to take this phenomenon into consideration. Second, this article does not only look at cultural proximity, but also at geographic proximity, in SNSs. The difference between cultural and geographic proximity becomes clear when considering that SNS users of the Russian community in Estonia, for instance, may express a need for cultural proximity through their preference for SNSs from Russia, but may express a need for geographic proximity through mainly being connected with people who live in Estonia. With these two adaptations, the model of proximity in SNSs that this article proposes views both cultural and geographic proximity in two parts of an SNS: the “framework” and the “filling” of SNSs.

The framework of an SNS is what it offers to its users. In the framework, an SNS may offer cultural or geographic proximity to a user when (a) it carries a brand image that is associated with the user’s culture or geographic region, (b) it is owned by a
company with origins in the user’s culture or geographic region, (c) its layout design and usability are what people in the user’s culture or geographic region are familiar with or prefer, (d) it allows the user to operate the SNS in his or her own language, (e) its existing membership base consists of a large number of people from the user’s culture or geographic region, and (f) the advertising displayed through the SNS is in the user’s language and offers products and services from the user’s environment.

The filling of such a framework is the user-generated content by the SNS members. Here, a user may express a desire for proximity by creating proximity him- or herself when she or he (a) uses the SNS in the language version of his or her own language, (b) is connected to people from his or her cultural or geographic environment, (c) communicates with his or her contacts in his or her mother tongue, or (d) forwards links to online media content from his or her cultural or geographic environment. In addition, an SNS user may also express a need for proximity through the choice of an SNS that originates from his or her cultural or geographic environment.

Network Effects Across Cultures and Countries

The theory of network effects stems from economic theory and claims that the value of a network depends on the number of users (David & Greenstein, 1990; DiMaggio & Cohen, 2005; Katz & Shapiro, 1986; Rohlfs, 1974). In contrast to the concept of cultural proximity, the theory of network effects originates from the context of networks and, therefore, needed no modification for the purpose of this study. Due to network effects, the more members an SNS has, the more attractive it is for its members (Ahn, 2009; Cusumano, 2011; Kwon, 2011). Although not all members of an SNS may be relevant to a user, according to Reed’s Law (Reed, 2001), the utility of a social network scales exponentially with its size, even if the direct number of contacts per individual is very small.

For the purpose of this study, the concept of network effects was operationalized by focusing on network effects of SNSs that attract users from multiple cultures and countries. Hence, elements of network effects are seen in (a) a large international membership base and (b) international language versions offered by the SNS.

Method

Focus group interviews with German and Estonian SNS users and SNS users of the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia were conducted in April and May 2010. The aim of these interviews was to identify possible attitudes toward the suggested areas of proximity and elements of network effects.

The German group consisted of eight participants, all of whom were recruited through announcements in newspapers on a first-come, first-served basis. The eight Estonian and seven Russian-Estonian participants were recruited through random selection from participants who, in a previous study, had answered that they had a profile on an SNS.

The groups were nearly balanced in terms of gender, with ten female and thirteen male participants. Their ages ranged from 19 to 39, and their occupations represented
a diverse mix including high school and university students, employed professionals, and a stay-at-home mother. This variety suggested a great diversity in terms of attitudes and behaviors toward SNSs.

With the aim of finding out how important it was to the interviewees that an SNS offered proximity through its framework, interviewees were asked why they had chosen a particular SNS over another and whether their choice was influenced by a desire for cultural or geographic proximity that the SNSs offered through its brand, ownership, layout, usability, language versions, membership base, or the advertising it displayed. With the aim of finding out to what extent interviewees self-created proximity in the filling of the SNSs, they were asked which language versions they used, how culturally and geographically diverse their contact lists were, what language they communicated in with their contacts, and how culturally and geographically proximate the online media content was that they forwarded through their SNSs. With regard to the power of network effects of large international SNSs, focus group participants were asked if they thought that offering international language versions and having an international membership base made an SNS more attractive.

Background: Germany and Estonia and the Choice of SNSs

Germany and Estonia were chosen as case countries, first, because Germany, with a population of nearly 82 million, and Estonia, with only 1.3 million people, provide for very different environments for SNSs and SNS users, which would suggest a resulting diversity of attitudes toward proximity and network effects. Whereas Germans, for instance, can choose from a great number of domestic SNSs, there are only a few SNSs with Estonian origin.

Second, Estonia, a country of the former Soviet Union, was chosen because it allowed for the consideration of two different cultures, as 26.3% of the population (Statistics Estonia, 2011) belong to the Russian-speaking minority. Interviewing the Russian-Estonians promised to provide insights in terms of a possible desire for cultural proximity in SNSs across national borders as opposed to geographic proximity within national borders.

User statistics suggest a great demand for cultural proximity in SNSs by Russian-Estonians. By the end of 2010, the three most popular SNSs among the Russian-Estonians were all SNSs from Russia: Mail.ru, Odnoklassniki, and VKontakte. In contrast, the three most popular networks among the ethnic Estonian population were Facebook, Orkut, and Rate (Turu-uuringute AS, 2011). The three most popular SNSs in Germany were Facebook, VZNetzwerke, and wer-kennt-wen.de (Nielsen, 2010). Both the Estonian and the German SNS users have been increasingly attracted to Facebook at the cost of domestic SNSs.

Results: Offered Proximity in the Framework of an SNS

Interviewees in all three groups suggested that brand, ownership, layout, usability, and advertising were not areas in which proximity was desired. In fact, they did not think that SNSs had any brand image. Similarly, they did not care about who
owned an SNS, and the layout and usability also did not play any role in their choice of SNS. With regards to advertising, the following statement by an Estonian participant was typical of interviewee opinions: “I do not notice ads there. This is not what I focus on. When you go to a network, then you focus on your people, on the communication.”

The question as to whether users found it important that an SNS offered its service in their mother tongue was answered differently across the groups. Whereas the Russian-Estonians found it important that the networks they used offered its services in their mother tongue, not all of the Estonian and German interviewees thought so.

In regards to the framework that an SNS offers, only the existing membership base appeared to be an area in which proximity was desired by all groups. Participants reported that on an SNS they wished to be able to connect with people from their environment.

Results: Expressed Proximity in the Filling of an SNS

The interviews suggested that proximity plays a much greater role in the filling of the framework than in the framework itself. This finding was most obvious with the online media content that participants said they had forwarded to their contacts via an SNS. This content was almost entirely in their own language and from the country they lived in.

In terms of contact lists, Estonian and German interviewees reported to be connected with a lot of people from different cultures, whereas the Russian-speaking participants stated that their contacts mainly, if not all, had Russian as their mother tongue. Many of these interviewees lived outside of Estonia, suggesting a high need for cultural, but not for geographic, proximity. Indeed, the focus group interviews suggested a very low connectivity between the ethnic Estonian and Russian-Estonian populations in SNSs, for which language barriers were reported to be the main reason.

Not surprisingly, the more connected participants were across different cultures, the more they used English when communicating in their SNSs. The use of English was much more common among the Estonian and German participants than the Russian-speaking participants. Also, in terms of language version used, the Russian-speaking participants expressed greater cultural proximity, as they all said that they used their networks in Russian. Among the Estonian and German participants, some reported to use the English language version of Facebook because they found that Facebook’s German and Estonian versions were poorly translated and because they wanted to use the network in its original language.

Results: The Power of Network Effects

Germans, Estonians, and Russian-Estonians all expressed the wish to be able to connect with people from different countries in SNSs, which made SNSs with an international membership base more attractive. In the German focus group, many
reported that the reason why they had left the German network StudiVZ in favor of Facebook was because StudiVZ offered its service only in German, making it difficult for non-German speakers to join. One interviewee said: “Sooner or later you meet someone from another country who you want to stay in touch with... then you switch to Facebook, because it is international.”

Whereas the German and Estonian participants regarded the fact that an SNS offered different language versions, or at least an English version, as a prerequisite for an international membership base, the Russian-Estonian interviewees found the Russian language version sufficient as it allowed them to connect with Russian native speakers across many countries.

**Discussion**

Although the focus groups included three different cultures, and participants were diverse in their sociodemographic criteria, the interviews showed many similarities in terms of the participants’ attitudes toward various proposed elements of proximity and network effects. In terms of the proposed model of proximity, the study suggested that SNS users self-create proximity in the filling of the SNS more than they demand it from the offered framework of the SNS. Furthermore, the study suggested that some of the proposed possible areas of proximity in SNSs are not important to SNS users. These include brand, ownership, layout design, usability, and the advertising it displays. By contrast, the study suggested that the existing membership base, the language used, the contact lists, and the content forwarded through SNSs reflected a desire for cultural and geographic proximity by SNS users. Therefore, this article suggests that future research should focus on these areas of proximity in SNSs.

Despite the similarities across groups, the study found many differences between the Russian-language group and the two other groups. For example, the interviews suggested a greater need for cultural proximity but a smaller need for geographic proximity in SNSs by the Russian-Estonian group. However, one should bear in mind that the groups were not representative of SNS users in the three case cultures; nor do the Russian-language Estonians, as the only diaspora included in the study, allow for general statements about diasporas. With results of further investigation from a quantitative approach with studies that include more than one diaspora group, however, the results of this study and the proposed theoretical framework of proximity and network effects might contribute to existing investigations into diaspora and communicative networks (e.g., Brinkerhoff, 2009; Hepp, Bozdag, & Suna, 2012).

The interviews suggested that a large international membership base makes an SNS more attractive to potential users, compared to local and domestic SNSs, as it reassures the users that no change of network is required if they ever wished to connect with people from different cultures and locations. This reassurance is important as they would have to leave years of accumulated connections and content behind if they did so.

Findings that SNS users are much more likely to connect with users from their own cultural and geographic environment (e.g., Liben-Nowell et al., 2005) do not contradict the attraction of SNSs that cross cultural and geographic boundaries. Large
SNSs with users from different cultural and geographic backgrounds attract users with their network effects. It lies in the nature of SNSs that they allow users to self-create as much proximity as they wish.

References


