

LOCALISING SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES: SOME MARKETING IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

Social networking sites such as Facebook, Google+, Twitter, Pinterest and others already attracted millions of users, many of whom have integrated these sites into their daily routines. New social networking sites find it increasingly more difficult to enter the market. One of opportunities to make the site more attractive for local users while targeting not only population of country of origin is to localise it. 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. Further on assumptions on some possible marketing implications given in order to better explain provided conceptual framework and its possible practical applications.

Keywords: adaptation, cultural differences, localisation, marketing, social media, social networking sites.

JEL Classification: M31, M39.

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 Facebook, Google+, Twitter, Pinterest 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).

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). eMarketer (2012) estimates that just over 1.2 billion people around the world used social networking sites at least once per month as of December 2011. eMarketer predicts this number will encompass nearly 1.5 billion internet users by the end of 2012. 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 (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.

Studies addressing international but traditional websites revealed that users prefer to visit more frequently and stay longer on websites if those are localised (Cyr & Trevor-Smith, 2004; Faiola & MacDorman, 2008; Marcus & Gould, 2000; Singh, Zhao, & Hu, 2005; Vyncke & Brengman, 2010). According to boyd & 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. Despite of some increase of interest in recent years research in respect to cultural issues in social networking sites as to date is not ample and rather fragmented.

Goal of the article is to identify important constructs that are specific to the social networking sites localisation from marketing perspective.

Methods used: A literature review and analysis is undertaken into research performed in area of localisation of social networking sites from marketing point of view.

Definition of social networking sites

Researchers use quite a number of terms, which are related to social networking sites, such as “internet social networking” (Richter, Riemer, vom Brocke, & Große Böckmann, 2009), “social web sites” (W. Kim, Jeong, & Lee, 2010), “social networking services” (Marcus & Krishnamurthi, 2009) and others. Definitions of these terms are overlapping but do not cover exactly same area.

Currently most commonly used 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 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”. (Beer, 2008) argued that this definition 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 author agree to Beer (2008) opinion, that networking includes maintaining of the present social network and is not limited to extension of ones’ network with only new acquaintances.

Defining localisation and role of culture in it

In traditional marketing literature term “localisation” often used as contrast to term “globalisation” (e.g. S. Ramarapu, Timmerman, & Ramarapu, 1999) instead of “adaptation” which is commonly used in contrast to “standardization” (e.g. Ryans Jr, Griffith, & White, 2003). In most cases authors seem to assume terms to be self explanatory and do not provide any definition. Though practitioners opinion studies show that cultural issues are peripheral factor for their international marketing decisions (Vrontis, Thrassou, & Lamprianou, 2009), theoretically culture considered important factor in international marketing (Engelen & Brettel, 2011). 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, this term seems 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, author 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 & Kuvykaite, 2008):

1. Standardisation strategy uses promotional messages internationally, translating but not otherwise modifying headings, illustrations or copy.
2. 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.
3. Third school of thought offers a compromise (or contingency) approach – appropriateness of standardisation depends on the product, consumer characteristics and environmental factors.

Cultural environment has strong impact on the decisions of standardization/ adaptation in the international market (Virvilaite, Seinauskiene, & Sestokiene, 2011). Thought 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 & MacDorman, 2008; Marcus & Gould, 2000; Singh et al., 2005; Vyncke & Brengman, 2010). 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).

Previous research on cross cultural differences in social networking sites

Despite increasing interest in recent years cultural issues in social networking sites are researched less than a decade still (earliest studies known to author published in publicly available articles dated 2006).

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 polychromic / 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). Such trend is also reflected in research carried out on cultural issues in social networking sites to date as most authors based their studies on Hofstede's (1980) culture dimensions (individualism / collectivism dimension used most often).

Authors who carried out research on cultural issues in social networking sites 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 (Vitkauskaite, 2010).

Majority of studies to date seek to find cultural differences in user motives to use of social networking sites (e.g. Barker & Ota, 2011; Chapman & Lahav, 2008; Y. Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011), privacy and security issues (e.g. Krasnova & Veltri, 2010; Marshall, Cardon, Norris, Goreva, & D'Souza, 2008; Wang, Norcie, & Cranor, 2011), constructs pf social capital (e.g. Choi, Kim, Sung, & Sohn, 2011; Ji et al., 2010) and self-representation (e.g. Cho, 2010; DeAndrea, Shaw, & Levine, 2010). Few researchers study marketing related issues.

Most of the studies 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 (Vitkauskaite, 2010). Bulk of studies compares users' attitudes of or social networking sites of USA and one or few Asian countries (e.g. China, Korea, Japan, Taiwan). If particular social networking sites are chosen it is Facebook and most popular local social networking site of chosen Asian country (e.g. QQ, Cyworld, Mixi, Wretch respectively) (e.g. Barker ir Ota, 2011; Cho, 2010).

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.

Proposed conceptual framework for localisation of social networking sites

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.

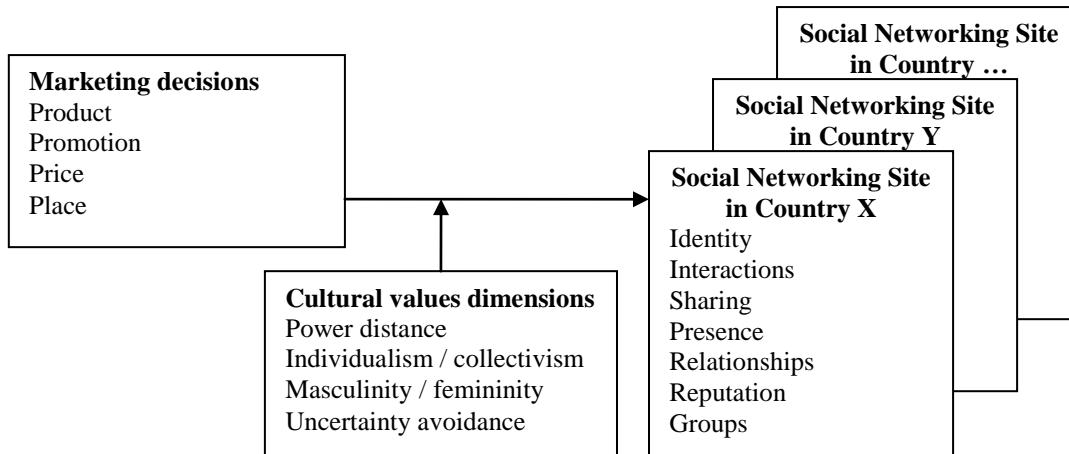


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for localisation of social networking sites

As mentioned already, 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 includes 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). Mislove, Marcon, Gummadi, Druschel, & Bhattacharjee (2007) for example, 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, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre (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 (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011).

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.

Assumptions on some possible marketing implications

Following assumptions derive from content analysis of findings of previous studies. Because of limitations of space very few assumptions on some possible marketing implications are provided here.

Identity functional block represents the extent to which users reveal their identities in a social media setting. This can include disclosing information such as name, age, gender, profession, location, and also information that portrays users in certain ways (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011).

In the USA (individualistic culture), users use social networking sites primarily to share very personal and/or sensitive (e.g., personal pictures, emotions, sexual preferences, school and work affiliations) information, either broadcast to the world or to close friends (Chapman & Lahav, 2008). Members' pictures viewable by non-members on the first page of MySpace in the USA, user-profile pictures are of the individuals themselves (Marcus & Krishnamurthi, 2009).

In China (collectivistic culture), respondents are much less likely to post personal information; only 1 of 10 respondents had even posted a photo of himself in his profile (Chapman & Lahav, 2008). On Mixi in Japan (collectivistic culture) no member information is accessible by non-members, on Cyworld Japan pictures of animals, toys, or even celebrities are used in a user's profile in place of her/his photo (Marcus & Krishnamurthi, 2009).

Based on these finding assumption regarding *product* localisation is following: for individualistic cultures social networking sites should provide possibilities for user to be as public as possible and could also include some reminding applications so that user would be prompted to broadcast himself. Meanwhile for collectivistic cultures social networking sites should be significantly more discrete – profiles of users should never become public as well as it should not require too much personal information upon account setup (e.g. photo depicting user himself should not be required). Regarding *promotion* localisation, social networking sites targeting collectivistic cultures should avoid over emphasizing of self presentation possibilities provided by the site.

Relationships block represents the extent to which users can be related to other users. 'Relate,' means that two or more users have some form of association that leads them to converse, share objects of sociality, meet up, or simply just list each other as a friend or fan. Consequently, how users of a social media platform are connected often determines the what-and-how of information exchange (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011).

Japanese (collectivistic culture) Mixi users in sample had substantially fewer online connections, with an average of 58 friends compared to an average of 281 friends for Facebook users (USA, individualistic culture) (Fogg & Iizawa, 2008). Korean (collectivistic culture) users are likely to have a relatively small number of close friends on social networking sites, they feel uncomfortable if prompted to befriend

acquaintances or even strangers. Meanwhile USA users' connections are friends and acquaintances, including strangers whom they allowed to be friends for certain specific reasons. They seem to be aware of their control over their friends list. U.S. participants tend to be proud of having many friends regardless of the actual relational level of these friendships (Cho & Park, 2012).

Based on these finding assumption regarding *product* localisation is following: social networking sites targeting individualistic cultures should enable users to easily connect with other users (tools could be used for bulk invitations to become friends), also various possibilities to easily find new friends should be enabled. Meanwhile for collectivistic cultures main emphasis should placed on maintaining close circle of friends and family, so that strangers would have less opportunities to prompt requests for becoming friends. Regarding *promotion* localisation, social networking sites targeting collectivistic cultures should emphasise relationships maintenance aspect of their services in their promotional messages (e.g. home page). Social networking sites targeting individualistic cultures could emphasise possibilities to enlarge personal social network by finding and connecting to new friends.

Reputation block represents the extent to which users can identify the standing of others, including themselves, in a social media setting. Reputation can have different meanings on social media platforms. In most cases, reputation is a matter of trust, but since information technologies are not yet good at determining such highly qualitative criteria, social media sites rely on 'mechanical Turks': tools that automatically aggregate user-generated information to determine trustworthiness (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011).

Chinese users devote significant energy to managing and increasing their online display of status. This status is shown through "lucky" account numbers, usage points, and home page decorations such as the "QQ flower" that grows with points. Status increases as one's site is viewed more often, one is logged in more frequently, more content is linked to it, and one spends more money or purchases a status subscription (Chapman & Lahav, 2008).

Status of social networking users in many countries is also measured by the number of connections ("friends") – small number of friends usually means low status. Though meaning of large number of connections is different across countries. For example Korean (collectivistic culture) users are embarrassed to have large numbers of connections. "User is concerned that revealing that he had a large number of il-chon relationships would misrepresent him as a person who made superficial relationships with a broad range of people instead of pursuing deep relationships with a core group of friends". For users in USA (individualistic culture) larger number of connections seems to represent their better social life, connectedness with various people, so larger the number, better the status (Cho & Park, 2012).

Based on these finding assumption regarding *product* localisation is following: various and multiply tools for display of status of users should be offered when targeting collectivistic cultures, though it should not be based on numbers of friends. Targeting social networking site to individualistic cultures as opposite, number of connections could be used as major indicator of status, greatly emphasized on the site.

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.

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 issues in social networking sites are based on Hofstede's (1980) culture dimensions (power distance, individualism / collectivism, masculinity / femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and Confucian dynamism). 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 and suggested possible marketing implications is that it is based on theoretical assumptions only and it should be tested empirically in the future.

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