

WAIL A. BARRY

University of Sharjah, UAE

GWEN BOUVIER

University of Glamorgan, UK

Cross-cultural Communication: Arab and Welsh students' use of Facebook

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the major sociocultural attributes of communication via Facebook in two different geographical settings. It identifies cross-cultural differences among two different student cohorts in the UAE and the UK.

Sociocultural specificities were addressed by means of quantitative surveying complemented by qualitative interviewing. The social information processing (SIP) theory and Geerte Hofstede theory of 'cultural dimensions' represented the epistemological framework for the study.

The findings indicate that although the users shared similar responses in terms of their preferences and uses, the study shows that they differ in certain key points related to online behaviour and communication modes (e.g. preferences for contacting friends), conceptualization of Facebook (an extension to university life or a portal to the world) and issues of privacy (expressing oneself openly). These deviations reflect essentially a cultural dissimilarity, which is a core point of the study.

KEYWORDS

Arab
cross-cultural
communication
Facebook
identity
privacy
students
Welsh

Communication scholars are encouraged to study the research implications of new media, especially regarding differences in culture, as it represents a new avenue in the genre of media studies.

INTRODUCTION

The study of new media that has taken a specific focus on Facebook, especially from a cross-cultural perspective, is one of the growing fields of research in the current genre of media studies. This type of research combines many attributes of social sciences and cultural studies, and reflects the importance of taking an interdisciplinary approach in media studies.

The literature on Facebook has revealed a number of key themes about uses which have changed, as have broader approaches and theories to new media and user-generated content in general. More recently, a number of important questions have been asked (but remain unanswered), of which this study is part. Using a cross-cultural study of Arab and Welsh users, which draws on questionnaires and interviews, this research shows how issues of privacy are expressed in specific sociocultural contexts.

The current development in digital technology challenges communication scholars and confronts them with substantial questions that need thorough and thoughtful analytical answers on a sociocultural level. Arguably, the need for this stems from the core impacts of social networking that currently wire the global community (such as the diffusion of user-generated content via new media).

Media studies have already tackled the issue of social networking, which appears to be the super system in which Facebook belongs. The wide and expansive use of this particular social networking site across the planet is correlated with sociocultural attributes. These attributes pose a challenge to communication scholars in examining its users' activity. Therefore, it seems essential to deal with the following core concepts: use, intercultural contact and social reality. These are the constructs that shape the reciprocal relationship between Facebook on the one hand and its users on the other hand.

Thus, the core of the current study has been to figure out the major sociocultural attributes of Facebook users in two different settings. In addition, the two researchers aimed to identify cross-cultural differences between the two groups that make up the sample units of this study. The first group is a purposive sample of Facebook users selected from the mass communication undergraduate students at the University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The second group is composed of undergraduate students of the mass communication major at the University of Glamorgan, Wales in the United Kingdom (UK).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Facebook is one distinguished platform among the latest output of new media. It is a social networking website that was formerly set up for public use in September 2006. In view of the seemingly ever-increasing amount of Facebook users, it is not surprising that the use, function and potential of social network sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Friendster and Bebo are increasingly popular subjects for academic research. Boyd and Ellison describe these types of sites as allowing 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;

3. view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (2007: 221)

The main research strands that have emerged focus on privacy issues, impression management and performance, networks and their structure, and online/offline connections (2007: 221).

Much of the research on Facebook specifically has focused on 'friending', identity performance on personal profiles and within groups, and privacy/security issues (Honeycutt and Cunliffe 2010: 229). Livingstone (2008: 395) noted that among new media research, an increasingly large body of empirical work focuses on the creations of personal profiles, networking with other users, and participating in various groups and other online communities (e.g. Boyd and Ellison 2007; Hinduja and Patchin 2008). Certain strands in this body of research are visible, notably those focusing on the uses and applications of social networking sites (Heiberger and Harper 2008), and the relative strength (Haythornthwaite 2001) or weakness (Ellison et al. 2007) of online connections, with a particular focus on teenage users (Gross 2004).

The literature reviewed below focuses on Facebook 'friending', social uses and privacy issues. In addition, cross-cultural communication literature is broached. This literature review is a necessarily selective and condensed account of literature on topics that are related to, and important for, the topics of this study (for example, literature on identity performance was excluded). But it aims to provide an indication of the work on groupings of subjects that contribute to the broader field of research that this study fits into.

'FRIENDING'

'Friending' on Facebook is the process of making and maintaining friendships. Early research that focused on 'friending' as a type of social interaction on the Internet assumed that online technology would be used to initiate new contacts that would result in face-to-face meetings (Parks and Floyd 1996). The central aim was to engage new connections with people outside of users' pre-existing social or geographical circles (Wellman et al. 1996). However, as social networking sites have become mainstream media – as Facebook has – research has shown that this has not been the case. Lampe et al. (2006: 169) found that rather than initiating new connections these are used in the first place as a tool to maintain established connections. Although other theorists still appear to be suggesting that these sites have the potential for massive expansion of user's social networks (Donath 2007: 233).

There has been more concrete research that has attempted to log the exact nature of the kinds of connections created through social networking sites. Ellison et al. (2007) have shown, for example, that Facebook contacts can consist of loose or weak ties (known as 'bridging') as well as emotionally close relationships within online and offline communities (known as 'bonding'). But subsequently the question has been asked whether there is a need to find out more about the function and nature of the different kinds of contacts in users' long lists of 'friends' (Tong et al. 2008). Hewitt and Forte (2006) had begun to explore this topic by asking whether university students would interact with faculty members, finding that for the most part they would not. West and Lewis (2009: 1209) showed that Facebook promotes mainly weak, low-commitment ties, and found that users generally ended up with what they felt were rather jumbled, mixed collections of 'friends'

ranging from old school friends, relatives, close friends and other people they met randomly. They also explore the different kinds of messages sent to different levels of contacts, from 'wall' messages that can be read by anyone to more regular e-mails.

Others, such as Bugeja (2006), have raised the question of the effects of a student generation who are so committed to maintaining such networks while exhibiting a corresponding loss of engagement with the news media. Eberhardt (2007) commented on the way that a student body at a university can have a sense of community that also runs onto Facebook, looking at things like the way bullying can have a presence at this level. On the other hand, students can also seek out others with the same kinds of concerns and problems (2007: 22). Heiberger and Harper (2008) suggest, therefore, that Facebook can be used to help foster a sense of belonging to the university, crucial where there is a problem with student retention. And finally, in spite of Hewitt and Forte's (2006) findings that contact on Facebook had no impact on students' ratings of professors and surveyed students believed that faculty should not be present on Facebook, Parslow (2008) envisioned the site as a tool for lecturing staff to let students know more about themselves, so they could display a rounded profile with balanced lives and much wider interests than academic pursuits only.

Leading on from this, this article asks whether the above findings differ according to specific sociocultural contexts. In other words, how do users interact differently in countries with cultural backgrounds which are dissimilar, such as a Middle Eastern (UAE) and a European country (UK)? One area that has only just begun to be explored, as in the work of Livingstone (2008), is the way that users actually position themselves to engage with particular communities or kinds of other user. The importance of this matter can be clarified by a look at the other main thread of work on Facebook, that of 'identity'.

SOCIAL USES

In order to further contextualize the current study, it is important to consider the following studies that have dealt with the topic of Facebook and its social use and applications. Boase et al. (2006: 22) explored the nature of online connections. They found that the medium allows people to connect to localized social networks and gain information and support via these connections. Similarly, Joinson's (2008: 1) review of site visit patterns and the use of privacy settings on Facebook profiles identified social connection, shared identities, content, social investigation, social network surfing and status updating as the main factors through which users derive gratification from the site.

In contrast to this, Lampe et al.'s (2008: 721) research on user experiences on Facebook suggested that the site is used to maintain lightweight contact with relationships they had developed offline. These contacts were peers and close online connections, rather than unfamiliar or distant 'friends' making up a support network. (2008: 728–29). A separate strand of research into Facebook use and applications suggested that Facebook wall postings are a site where impression formation and management takes place. Judgements are made by peers about a person's profile and his or her friends based on these postings (Walther et al. 2008).

Arguably, these are studies which throw up observations that are fairly obvious. This points to the importance of doing this study: we may begin the task of thinking about what users think they are doing. What can users do

and what can't they do? What do they avoid and what is displayed? Finally, a significant body of research has focused on the risks involved in the use of social networking sites.

PRIVACY ISSUES

Research on these issues has focused on three main strands: Facebook as a tool of surveillance for marketers and law enforcement; how site software is related to issues of privacy and security; and – most importantly for this study – how young people deal with privacy issues. Early research noted that a discussion of the privacy implications of sharing personal information via Facebook had yet to emerge (Jones and Soltren 2005). The authors warned about flaws in the system, and the potential of using the information for marketing purposes (2005: 1). In light of this, it is interesting that Acquisti and Gross (2006: 36) found that users of social network sites trust their ability to control access to their personal information, but this kind of trust may be largely based on misconceptions about the size and composition of the site's audience, and the visibility of profiles.

Hodge (2006: 123), however, pointed out that users volunteer to show their personal information. But the author also suggested that these users may not conceive of the kinds of uses that could be made of that information: for example, Facebook is involved in a growing number of police investigations. In reference to the points made by Jones and Soltren (2005), Bugeja (2006) pointed out the resemblance between profiles of discussion groups and commercial direct mailing lists. Granting a window into our psyches and buying habits, the site can be used as a surveillance tool for marketers, university officials and parents alike. This would indeed seem to be the case, as Story and Stone (2007) pointed out that Facebook, built initially as a college networking site, is trying to figure out how to translate its popularity into profit through advertising revenue.

Vander Veer (2008) warned that commentators and critics may be behaving alarmist about the security aspect of Facebook, and safety settings can prevent privacy intrusions. Especially teenage users are thought to be at risk, as this group is reported to have 'little sense of privacy and a narcissistic fascination with self-display' (Livingstone 2008: 393). Usefully, the author noted that online privacy is shaped and limited by the affordances of the software driving social networking sites. Rabkin (2008: 1) exposed another issue related to software external to Facebook, which has the ability to mine personal user profiles for information. Answers to security questions, used to authenticate users at, for example, personal banking websites, can be automatically retrieved from Facebook profiles.

West et al. (2009: 615) examined notions of the private and the public in information sharing on Facebook by looking into the different kinds of online friends college students have. Their research suggested that users conceive of Facebook as part of the public or 'semi-public' sphere, yet the site is a space where their private lives take place, rather than with their families outside it (2009: 624–25). Alternatively, Taraszow et al. (2010) investigated the amount and types of personal and contact information that young people disclose via their Facebook profiles. They found that males are more likely to share such data, but that both genders seem equally unaware of risks related to 'friending' strangers and divulging personal data (2010: 86). Wildemuth suggested a number of methodological improvements for surveying such privacy concerns,

including using a philosophical/ethical approach based on surveying through questionnaires (2008: 3).

In view of this, it is of the essence to carry out a comparative analysis of young people in different cultures, examining their sensitivity in what and how much they seem fit to disclose whilst on Facebook. More abstractly put, the study asks whether it is possible to discern any patterns that are cultural-specific amongst the communication of two groups of a similar age but from a dissimilar cultural background.

CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION LITERATURE

As such, the current study addresses the cross-cultural communication patterns of two different groups of Facebook users. In turn, this has led the researchers to consider the above concept. Levine, Park and Kim (2007) maintained that there is a need for a current theory that guides the development of hypotheses and analytical tools that communication scholars use while they discuss the idea of cross-cultural communication. They believe that investigating the cultural similarities and differences require a 'strong' conceptual foundation. That is why communication scholars are encouraged to focus on the collective culture of the group, communication patterns, context, intercultural versus cross-cultural communication and interactive cultural relationships.

Critically, the ideas presented by Levine and his colleagues pave the way for a critical assessment of the role played by Facebook as a new media platform, which is operative in the cultural sphere of user communities: for example, it is important to explore the cultural characteristics of users if communication scholars aim to draw out cross-cultural differences.

Furthermore, assessing cultural specificities cannot be easily based on quantitative calculations. However, different qualitative levels of analysis may be required to test the language, communication patterns and attitudinal behaviour of Facebook users. To this effect, the current study must not overlook the theoretical interdisciplinary dimensions of both culture and communication studies.

McQuail contends that the social and cultural dimensions of mass communication are difficult to assess. Of course, new media are part of mass communication systems. He adds that communication scholars hardly have the methodological capacity to measure larger trends at a higher level of analysis. This is why it is imperative that studies that conduct this kind of assessment need to have the theoretical and argumentative dimensions that enable it to draw out general trends. He concludes that media are unlikely to be the main driving forces of fundamental long-term changes in society. However, media act as a channel that makes society aware of changes that have taken place. This is accomplished by circulating content that stimulates debate about these changes (McQuail 2008: 501).

Critically, it is possible to apply McQuail's argument to the current topic. This suggests it is not possible to determine (and generalize) that Facebook brings about sociocultural changes among its users. However, communication scholars may yet turn up indications of larger trends in the patterns of Facebook use, which invite further examination. Indeed, this is one core of the current study.

Leonard, Van Scotter and Pakdil (2009) found that advances in communication technologies have made great progress in bridging time and distance. However, sociocultural differences are still formidable obstacles to

effective communication. Communication processes occur in specific cultural contexts with unique normative beliefs, assumptions and shared symbols. Furthermore, the authors added that culture influences the kind of content that is communicated, to whom the communication is directed, and how the communication is executed. They believe that there has been little systematic cross-cultural research to explain the influence of communication media on communication effectiveness. Thus, their study proposed that culture has an impact on perceptions of media effectiveness. The authors advanced conceptual knowledge by presenting new perspectives on the cultural dimensions of individuals' perception of media and their effectiveness.

Much of this early research seems to have taken the first steps in accounting for media that, at first glance, appeared to challenge all that our field had previously done with top-down media. Much of this now seems rather mundane. And there appears to be a newer thread of thinking in the field that less romanticizes the Web 2.0 phenomenon of user centeredness that seems to fail to consider content. What are the interesting questions that have been asked, or now might be asked, to avoid the mundane type work?

In light of the previous sections of the literature review, it seems there is a functioning correlation between the concept of communication and the construct of culture, and we think much can be revealed by cross-cultural research. Arguably, this kind of relationship challenges communication scholars to identify the type and nature of this relationship. Applied to the current study, it aims to identify the type of intercultural communication as well as the cross-cultural communicative patterns that exist among specific culture groups of Facebook users. Possibly, dual or integrative theoretical approaches may foster and polish the thesis statement of the current study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL INFORMATION PROCESSING (SIP) THEORY

Having reviewed a significant spectrum of media studies that covered the current topic, researchers regarded the 'social information processing (SIP) theory' by Joseph Walther (1992) as one possible theoretical frame to be used here.

Researchers tried to formulate a theory that explains the nature of virtual communities or online interactions. Few theories can explain the forming and management of impressions and relationships due to the novelty of certain forms of new media. Arguably, SIP can be applied as a theory that encapsulates this kind of new media genre. Walther coined the theory that suggests that due to the lack of nonverbal communication inherent in online interactions, people formulate ways to present and interpret individuating information. He contended that people seek out and interpret cues that serve as substitutes of nonverbal communication. A common example of this is the use of emoticons.

The interactive nature of new media confronts communication scholars with the necessity for theorizing the attributes, use, content, potential and intercultural affinities that may be induced on users via new media platforms like Facebook. Studies showed that people are motivated in interactions with others to delve into interpersonal and interactive relationships that consequently form impressions, and from which develop intimate relations. Walther's theory constructs people as beings capable of adopting and interpreting alternate methods to form impressions of others. This happens

when we consider the Internet or other new media as agents of change that influence and shape people's communication behaviours.

The second possible theoretical approach is that of Geerte Hofstede's 'cultural dimensions' (2001). This approach is justified on the basis of using it to analyze the issues of cross-cultural communication and the intercultural communication patterns of Facebook. Hofstede's theory seems to enable communication scholars that focus on new media to understand the nature of different cultures that are being examined. Furthermore, it may help scholars to identify the interactive patterns inherent in a given culture.

METHODOLOGY: AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY BASED ON SURVEYING

The current study utilizes the survey research as part of a two-dimensional experimental study conducted on two groups of university students in the University of Sharjah, UAE and the University of Glamorgan in Wales, UK. A total of 100 undergraduate students of mass communication were purposively selected to participate in an experimental study dealing with the cross-cultural communication impacts of using Facebook.

Basically, the nature of the current study requires the researchers to conduct an experimental study. The survey of the literature referred to numerous other experimental studies. Ho and McLeod (2008) used an experiment embedded within a Web-based survey to examine the influence of contextual (i.e. face-to-face versus online chat room discussion) and social-psychological factors on individuals' willingness to express opinions. The sample units were asked whether they would be willing to express an opinion if they were placed in a face-to-face discussion group in one condition and in an online chat room discussion group in the other condition. Findings indicated that print news use, fear of isolation, communication apprehension, future opinion congruency and communication setting significantly predict willingness to speak out.

But not only fear of isolation negatively impacted upon opinion expression. A similar trend could be spotted when examining computer-mediated discussion. Findings suggest that computer-mediated communication may avoid some of the dysfunctional social-psychological influences found in face-to-face interactions and create a forum conducive for public deliberation.

Similarly, Ramirez (2009) examined the predictions of future relational outcomes. He did so by means of conducting two experimental studies. Results indicated a connection between an information-seeking role and information valence, which significantly increased the degree of interactivity. As such, the communication format was correlated with the effect of an information-seeking role.

Van Der Heide and Walther (2009) also conducted an experimental study to examine persuasive messages delivered via computer-mediated communication. They found that impressions of a sender are obscured. In addition, they maintained that persuasion occurs on the basis of the strength of arguments in computer-mediated interactions. This research tests a synthesis of Walther's (1992) social information processing theory and Chaiken's (1980; 1987) heuristic-systematic model. The method of the study drew on an experiment to test the consequences of exposure to two heuristic cues: e-mail domain and expertise disclosures. Based on this, the authors assessed participants' judgments of a sender's credibility, and their attitudes toward a message topic.

Findings indicated a link between increased exposure to heuristic cues and participants' judgments of a sender's credibility. The relationship between exposure to heuristic cues and topical attitude judgments was mediated by participants' judgments of a source's credibility. While measures of heuristic processing did not increase as participants were exposed to more heuristic cues, exposure to these heuristic cues impacted the amount of systematic message processing. This suggested new considerations about the use of thought-listing in the assessment of persuasive message processing.

The experimental nature of the study helped generate the main questions for the survey, which was combined with qualitative interviewing. As such, we provided greater explanatory power to the results than quantitative surveying research normally allows. A problem with surveying is that it tends to marginalize qualitative answers which can provide richer data than closed questions allow for. This issue arises from quantitative surveying procedures, where an issue, such as nature of Facebook use, is broken down into concepts which are then recategorized to form a different 'whole'. However, this problem is outweighed by the benefits of the perspectives that surveying helps generate. Had this method not been used, it is unlikely that the findings below would have been uncovered and empirically verified.

Furthermore, although the interplay between the interviewing and surveying as different, though complimentary, methods is generally not examined within this study, the interplay between the data generated as a whole is examined as they discuss themes and issues which are closely related. Generalization of the theory generated by this research would be increased by applying qualitative sampling to a greater range of participants. For instance, the findings would be made more robust by examining other (qualitatively chosen for their cultural difference) student cohorts in addition to those included in this study, and by examining a wider range of issues.

OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

'Cross-cultural communication': different societies and lingua-cultures have different tacit norms for interpersonal communication. Such differences matter a great deal in many people's lives. Every lingua-culture inherits, and transmits, historically and culturally-shaped ways of thinking (Wierzbicka 2010).

'Impression management' (appearance, personality, behaviour): simply enough, it is the way Facebook users express themselves through the platform.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the major technical and cultural traits of Facebook users?
2. What negative and positive experiences of using Facebook have users experienced?
3. What are their major uses?
4. To what extent do they conceive of Facebook as an open cultural sphere?

HYPOTHESES

1. The use of Facebook is correlated with induced sociocultural affinities among the student community.
2. Facebook users would likely seem more open and free to express themselves with a real identity more than on any other new media platform

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The sample selected at the University of Sharjah (UAE) was composed of 100 students divided into 20 male and 80 female students. The sample from the University of Glamorgan (UK) broke down in 38 male and 62 female students. The frequency is expressed in percentage in the tables below. As mentioned in the methodology section above, the survey made use of closed, quantifiable questions. This was combined with qualitative interviewing, which consisted of questions that were aimed at rendering richer, more open-ended results.

Quantitative analysis of the various modes of usage (by counting the frequency and nature of use) allows comparative analysis of UAE and UK students' relative quantitative use of Facebook. Using qualitative answers as an addition to this is preferable to using more rigid counting within pre-conceived categories because it allows analysis to emerge from the data, rather than being pre-determined and then forced upon the data. Thus, these findings start off by drawing a quantitative picture of a meaningful set of categories that represent the nature and frequency of use, as well as students' choices online. This is then followed by a discussion of the open, qualitative answers, so minimizing the reductive nature of much quantitative analysis.

Table 1 indicates that Welsh students are heavy users of Facebook in comparison to the Arab students, who showed a more interactive use of the medium, which is based on setting up friendly relationships (see Table 2). In contrast, the Welsh students used Facebook heavily as a communication pattern. This kind of variation reflects the way in which each of the different cohorts conceives of Facebook: for example, it was found that Welsh respondents use Facebook as a communication tool to a greater degree than Arab respondents. In comparison, Arab students tended to immerse themselves deeply in Facebook as a new sphere or new culture according to their own perception. Arguably, this explains why they were much more interactive in setting up 'wall' relationships.

Use of Facebook/day	Frequency UAE (%)	Frequency UK (%)
Less than one hour	50	20
One – two hours	30	11
More than two hours	20	69

Table 1: Density of use.

	Frequency UAE (%)	Frequency UK (%)
To set up friendship	40	6
To exchange information	18	23
To send messages	1	44
To play games	10	10
Other	30	17

Table 2: Reasons for using Facebook.

	Frequency UAE (%)	Frequency UK (%)
Write on my wall	62	33
E-mail	10	64
Upload photos	20	11
Do quizzes	0	0
'Poke' my friends	8	2

Table 3: Preferences when using one's account.

The proportion of students who use Facebook to 'exchange information' and play games is not dissimilar. Conversely, a significant disproportion of answers fell in the non-specific 'other' category, which invites further, more detailed research.

In Table 3, the first and foremost feature to be noticed is the variations in how Facebook accounts are chiefly used. A total 62 per cent of the Arab students write on their walls, in comparison to a mere 33 per cent of their Welsh counterparts. Rather, the Welsh students seem to prefer sending messages, which arguably points to a more personal kind of use and less 'mass' public performance. This, however, is contradicted by a majority of Arab students exchanging pictures, which could be conceived of as both personal and a form of display.

The most striking difference in Table 4 below is the relative number of students who access their Facebook accounts in a traditional manner (a whopping 96 per cent of Arab users), versus the Welsh students who give preference to regularly checking (as suggested by Table 1 above) their accounts 'on the go' via mobile technology. It would be too simplistic to explain this by a difference in availability of technology. Rather, these results may be the product of significant cultural differences which pigeonhole Facebook as an online culture.

The differences displayed in Table 4 express that Arab respondents tended to heavily connect Facebook through their university networks in comparison to the majority of their Welsh counterparts, who use Facebook via other sources but with a greater intensity.

Critically, this questioning of the sociocultural traits of the users tries to answer the first research question of this study. It also maintains that there is a 'cultural sphere' that was created by the existence of new media and was diffused by the increasing numbers of users. The impact of this on media studies reveals the importance of user-generated content studies.

	Frequency UAE (%)	Frequency UK (%)
Computer	96	20
Cell Phone/Mobile	4	15
SMS/Text	0	65

Table 4: How Facebook is accessed.

	Frequency UAE (%)	Frequency UK (%)
Less than 30 friends	38	0
31–50 friends	22	2
51–100 friends	20	11
More than 100	20	87

Table 5: Total number of connections ('friends').

Tables 5 through 10 focus on Facebook 'friends'. It gauges the total number of friends, interaction with them, as well as the nature of these connections. The first feature to be noticed in Table 5 is the UK emphasis on having a large friend network. The majority of UAE students have fewer friends, suggesting a cultural difference in the way in which Facebook is used as a social platform.

Figures in Table 6, then, fluctuate within very narrow limits. The comparable number of students inviting or being invited to link as friends simply indicates that there is a compromise between the two groups of users. We may carefully propose that perhaps students may be more reticent to seeking out others, but in view of the similarity across the two categories this is but a small difference.

The nature in which these links are established is closely correlated to the kinds of contacts that are formed. Table 7 indicates that many Arab contacts are acquired through university networks, suggesting Facebook has much the same function here as a specific community network such as a university campus. It is important to note that the University of Glamorgan does not have a similar university network. This goes a way towards explaining why the relationship between the number of students is reversed between the Arab and Welsh students. Possibly, it indicates that Facebook is an extension of social life beyond the university sphere for the latter. Interestingly, this notion is not supported entirely by the qualitative answers below in which Arab students express a wish to expand their cultural horizons.

	Frequency UAE (%)	Frequency UK (%)
Searching for them and adding them	48	44
Being invited	52	56

Table 6: Method in which 'friends' were acquired.

	Frequency UAE (%)	Frequency UK (%)
University network	68	0
E-mail contacts	18	18
Others	14	72

Table 7: Number of 'friends' acquired via other platforms.

	Frequency UAE (%)	Frequency UK (%)
Close friends	22	29
Acquaintances	16	28
Family members	8	3
Class mates	14	13
Unknown people	6	7
Others	34	20

Table 8: Nature of 'friends' connections.

When probing this issue further, the results displayed in Table 8 show that the directions of variations follow roughly the same pattern. Close friends constitute the core of these students' Facebook connections, followed closely by more loosely defined 'acquaintances'. These, together with the non-identified 'others' category, make up the three main peaks in this table.

We did not anticipate such a high degree of similarity as regards the amount of family members and class mates who are Facebook friends for the two student cohorts. The close similarity is surprising, especially in view of the majority of Arab students having acquired friends via their university network. The differences we have indicated are on a small scale, which affects neither how users stay in touch with friends, nor how friends are interacted with.

Such information can be gleaned from Tables 9 and 10. The greater predominance of e-mailing/sending personal messages to friends by the Welsh students is contrasted with more wall posting on the behalf of the Arab student. This fits in with the findings in Table 3 above. This once again

	Frequency UAE (%)	Frequency UK (%)
E-mailing them	16	21
'Poking' them	0	9
Writing on their wall	38	30
Commenting on them	22	24
Other	24	16

Table 9: Methods of staying in touch with 'friends'.

	Frequency UAE (%)	Frequency UK (%)
I express myself openly on my wall	62	68
I only e-mail my close friends	26	17
I add funny comments	12	15

Table 10: Types of interaction with 'friends'.

'Setting up relationships'	'To socialize with others'	'It is something new'
'Exchanging information'	'To reflect and express my identity'	'To upload my photos'
'To join the group'	'To know other cultures'	'It is entertaining'

Table 11: UAE relative importance of Facebook.

provides evidence that the modes of expressing oneself on Facebook differs according to the way in which Facebook is used: it can be a platform for self-expression, reaching out into the world (UAE) or a means to maintaining pre-existing personal friendships (UK). Still, the variation is low. The only significant exception in this is 'poking', which is not habitual among the UAE students.

Arguably, Table 10 tells us more about the intensity with which the users interact on Facebook. Privacy concerns surface here, with similar results in the same category. Numbers of students do not show any tendency to increase or decrease when it comes to openly expressing oneself on walls. More dissimilarity is noticeable when it comes to the use of personal messaging, which suggests the Welsh students are prone to e-mail superficial connections as well as close ones.

The sociocultural attributes of the overall sample revealed that they are totally immersed in setting up social networking based on the fact that they are hyper in communication, texting, writing on Facebook walls and the existence of an abundant numbers of connections. This outcome meets what was mentioned before in the social information processing (SIP) theory. It maintained that users of interactive media seek out this kind of communication pattern. To this effect, the media genre in this kind of studies revealed the importance of sorting out the attributes uses and intercultural affinities amongst users. Again this meets what was mentioned in Geerte Hofstede theory of 'cultural dimensions'. Seeing that this theory enables communication scholars to analyze issues of communication among cultures, it is useful here to understand the cross-cultural communication patterns thrown up by the data.

Culture is perceived to be a core factor in media research on Facebook. However, quantitative studies are unable to assess cultural specificities, especially among groups of different cultural backgrounds. This would explain why many scholars lay much importance on ethnographic qualitative techniques and methods. The qualitative questions generated by the interviews revealed a set of categorized answers as shown in the tables below:

'Getting to know new people'	'Joining groups'	'Supporting causes'
'Expressing myself'	'Keeping an eye on others'	'Keeping in touch'
'Romantic links'	'Supporting friendships'	'Organising groups'

Table 12: UK relative importance of Facebook.

This second part of the study reflects the relative importance of using Facebook. In the above tables there are points of agreement and disagreement. This may be seen as indicative in the sense that the cultural diversity stems from the answers of respondents: for example, Arab respondents use Facebook to know other cultures. This reflects the global aspect of these media platforms. On the other hand, Welsh respondents used Facebook for many reasons that match their Arab counterparts' choices but they added two further important uses. The first one being to support causes, which reflects the liberal democratic aspect of using new media in a western environment. The second one being to have romantic relationships, which is nonexistent among the Arab respondents' cited uses. This reflects the nature of the Arab culture, which is a very conservative one in comparison to western culture, especially when it comes to the expression of users' romantic aspirations.

The most striking similarity is in the relative number of students making reference to Facebook as an open and even equalizing sphere for having social contact. Seeing Facebook as within the conceptual framework of a public sphere model throws up other issues in view of the complexity of, and criticism on, the concept. These answers are nonetheless indicative of a popular belief among these student users that Facebook constitutes an open communication channel with the world, or at least the part of it we choose to access for sharing, expressing views and managing connections.

One critical point that needs to be considered here is the political and social movements that resulted from the diffusion of new media. Needless to say that Facebook was one of the core factors that led to the creation of the 'Arab Spring'. This term typifies the political developments in some of the Arab countries in the Middle East in late 2010–11, which started with toppling dictatorial regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. Other countries that at the time of writing this journal article were still involved in similar political struggles include Libya, Syria and Yemen. As such, one can envision Facebook as a virtual launch pad for social movements in the Middle East.

The qualitative answers of the Arab respondents also revealed that Facebook was seen as a substitute for poor societal relationships. It also represents a cultural alternative for audiences who want to be exposed to western culture. On the other hand, Welsh respondents regarded Facebook as a global platform that enables users to represent their identities and get people organized.

The final question posed prompted students to consider issues of privacy. The UAE sample students were undecided about identifying a clear-cut opinion here. It could be said that their answers were relatively balanced in a way that reflects some key ideas to be discussed in future research. For example, those

'Free sphere for all classes'	'It substitutes poor social societal relationships'	'It support ties and connections'
'Right answer for youth community'	'It is a cultural alternative'	'TV satellite channels promoted it as a model'
'It is a new phenomenon'	'It exposes us to western culture'	'It is easy and informative'

Table 13: UAE major reasons for Facebook diffusion.

'Can be accessed via phone/text any time of day'	'Everyone else is on Facebook (especially peers)'	'Enables you to find people back from your past'
'Global platform'	'Easy way to manage friendships'	'Open, equal sphere'
'Way of expressing yourself and showcasing your identity'	'Possible to organize cause and get people involved'	'Software that allows you to share (images, video)'

Table 14: UK major reasons for Facebook diffusion.

who regarded Facebook as a threat to their privacy believed in this as affecting their personal information and photos. Meanwhile, others were satisfied with the safety measures undertaken by the system administrator of Facebook. However, all insisted on the fact that Facebook is an open, free and excellent sphere of information, which ties into the findings in Tables 13 and 14 above.

Opinions on the issue of privacy among the UK sample users, however, was more divided, with the majority of students not showing any great concern. Although students acknowledged potential threats, such as having their data and images accessed by strangers, most were not imminently concerned about abuse of this information. Rather, worry tended to be expressed about possible embarrassment caused by pictures posted of nights out, and what others might make of them. A general feeling of trust was apparent in the security of Facebook software, the safety of using it and in the goodwill of its user community.

CONCLUSION

The current study tried to shed some light on the sociocultural features and habits of communication through Facebook. Two student cohorts of 100 users each constituted a purposive sample in two geographically different settings: the University of Glamorgan in Cardiff, Wales (UK) and Sharjah University, UAE.

The main differences reflect essentially a cultural dissimilarity which is a core point of the study. Although they shared the same features in terms of their preferences and uses, to a greater extent they differed in certain key points related to cultural orientation, communication modes and issues of privacy. Sociocultural specificities were addressed by means of quantitative surveying and qualitative interviewing. The social information processing (SIP) theory and Geerte Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions helped to give an epistemological framework for the study.

Results gave strong evidence that there are sociocultural affinities that are correlated among the two samples of Facebook users regarding the nature and frequency of use, as well as students' choices online. Nevertheless, significant deviations included Arab students preferring to post on 'walls' (thus performing for many) versus Welsh students preferring to send individual messages. It is difficult to conclusively determine what this means, though these priorities are obviously deeply embedded in cultural conceptions of communication and maintaining social relationships.

A further difference could be seen among which ways friends were acquired. Facebook among the Welsh students can be conceptualized as an extension of social life beyond the university sphere. Qualitatively, however,

the Arab students expressed a clear wish to use Facebook as a means of reaching out to the world.

In addition, both groups agreed on expressing themselves openly. This reveals the importance of the identity question in Facebook studies. For Arab respondents, it was a problematic aspect to reveal one's real name and use it to register a profile. It was evident that UK Facebook users are more certain about expressing their real identities. Indeed, this is indicative in the sense that platforms of new media encourage users to express themselves openly with real identities. Hence, communication scholars are encouraged to study the research implications of new media on the cultural level because this represents a new avenue in the genre of media studies.

If we now return to the hypotheses put forward in this study, the research has revealed that the first one, which suggested that the use of Facebook is correlated with induced sociocultural affinities among the student community, was proven. This is evident in light of the relative importance of Facebook to the respondents. Furthermore, it is evident that many similarities exist between Arab and Welsh respondents in terms of the cultural and social characteristics of using Facebook.

As for the second hypothesis, it appears that Facebook users would likely seem more open and free to reveal their real identity. There was a close similarity between Welsh and Arab students on this matter. But as became clear in the many sites of Arab states that witnessed a growing impact for Facebook on mobilizing social movements that led to the emergence of the 'Arab Spring', Facebook may lend itself more so to doing this than any other new media platform.

The importance of this outcome is that it contradicts past research that dealt with the concept of uncertainty. Early computer mediated communication (CMC) studies mentioned that uncertainty is an essential feature of user-generated content. The above result of our study indicates that the diffusion and development of new media correlates with new changes on the level of media theorization and application. Thus, it seems substantial for communication scholars to consider this point, which matches with the need for exploring new horizons in methods, techniques, paradigms and theories in new media genres.

REFERENCES

- Acquisti, A. and Gross, R. (2006), 'Imagined Communities: Awareness, information sharing, and privacy on the Facebook', in G. Danezis and P. Golle (eds), *Lecture Notes in Computer Science: Privacy Enhancing Technologies*, vol. 4258, pp. 36–58.
- Boase, J., Horrigan, J. B., Wellman, B. and Rainie, L. (2006), 'The Strength of Internet Ties', *Pew Internet and American Life Project*, 25 January, http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/172/report_display.asp. Accessed 22 June 2010.
- Boyd, D. and Ellison, H. (2007), 'Social Network Sites: Definition, history, and scholarship', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13: 1, pp. 210–30.
- Bugeja, M. J. (2006), 'Facing the Facebook', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 52: 21, <http://chronicle.com/article/Facing-the-Facebook/46904>. Accessed 27 April 2010.
- Chaiken, S. (1980), 'Heuristic versus systematic information processing and the use of source versus message cues in persuasion', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39, pp. 752–66.

- (1987), 'The Heuristic Model of Persuasion', in M. P. Zanna, J. M. Olson and C. P. Herman (eds), *Social Influence: The Ontario Symposium*, vol. 5, Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, pp. 3–39.
- Donath, J. (2007), 'Signals in Social Supernet', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13: 1, pp. 231–51.
- Eberhardt, D. (2007), 'Facing up to Facebook', *About Campus*, September/October, pp. 18–26.
- Ellison, N., Steinfield, C. and Lampe, C. (2007), 'The Benefits of Facebook "friends": Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12: 4, pp. 1143–68.
- Gross, E. (2004), 'Adolescent Internet Use: What we expect, what teens report', *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 25: 6, pp. 633–49.
- Haythornthwaite, C. (2001), 'The Strength and the Impact of New Media', in *Proceedings of the Hawaii International Conference on Systems Sciences*, Hawaii, USA.
- Heiberger, G. and Harper, R. (2008), "'Have You Facebooked Astin Lately?'" Using technology to increase student involvement', *New Directions for Student Services*, 124, pp. 19–35.
- Hewitt, A. and Forte, A. (2006), 'Crossing Boundaries: Identity management and student/faculty relationships on the Facebook', in *Proceedings of CSCW'06*, Banff, Canada.
- Hinduja, S. and Patchin, J. W. (2008), 'Personal Information of Adolescents on the Internet: A quantitative content analysis of MySpace', *Journal of Adolescence*, 31: 1, pp. 125–46.
- Ho, S. and McLeaod, D. (2008), 'Social-psychological influences on opinion expression in face-to-face and computer mediated communication', *Journal of Communication Research*, 35: 2 (April), pp. 190–207.
- Hodge, M. J. (2006), 'The Fourth Amendment and Privacy Issues on the "New" Internet: Facebook.Com And Myspace.Com', *Southern Illinois University Law Journal*, 31, pp. 95–123.
- Hofstede, G. (2001), *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations Across Nations*, London: Sage.
- Honeycutt, C. and Cunliffe, D. (2010), 'The use of the Welsh language on Facebook – an initial investigation', *Information, Communication & Society*, 13: 2, pp. 226–48.
- Joinson, A. (2008), 'Looking at, looking up or keeping up with people? Motives and uses of Facebook', in *CHI 2008 Proceedings: Online Social Networks*, 5–10 April, Florence, Italy, pp. 1–10.
- Jones, H. and Soltren, J. (2005), 'Facebook: Threats to privacy', <http://groups.csail.mit.edu/mac/classes/6.805/student-papers/fall05-papers/Facebook.pdf>. Accessed 22 June 2010.
- Lampe, C., Ellison, N. and Steinfield, C. (2006), 'A Face(book) in the Crowd: Social searching vs. social browsing', in *Proceedings of CSCW'06*, Banff, Canada, pp. 167–70.
- (2008), 'Changes in use and perception of Facebook', in *Proceedings of ACM 2008 Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work*, San Diego, USA.
- Leonard, K., Van Scotter, J. and Pakdil, F. (2009), 'Culture and Communication: Cultural variations and media effectiveness', *Journal of Administration & Society*, 41: 7 (November), pp. 850–77.
- Levine, T., Park, H. and Kim, R. (2007), 'Some conceptual and theoretical challenges for cross-cultural communication research in the 21st century', *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 36: 3, pp. 205–21.

- Livingstone, S. (2008), 'Taking Risky Opportunities in Youthful Content Creation: Teenagers' use of social networking sites for intimacy, privacy and self-expression', *New Media Society*, 10, pp. 393–411.
- McQuail, D. (2008), *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, 5th Edition, London: SAGE.
- Parks, M. R. and Floyd, K. (1996), 'Making friends in cyberspace', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 1: 4, <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol1/issue4/parks.html>. Accessed 25 April 2010.
- Parslow, G. (2008), 'The 60 million users of Facebook include our students and colleagues', *Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Education*, 36: 2, p. 166.
- Rabkin, A. (2008), 'Personal Knowledge Questions for Fallback Authentication: Security questions in the era of Facebook', in *Proceedings from the Symposium on Usable Privacy and Security (SOUPS)*, Pittsburgh, USA.
- Ramirez, A. (2009), 'The Effect of Interactivity on Initial Interactions: The influence of information seeking role on computer-mediated interaction', *Western Journal of Communication*, 73 (July – September), pp. 300–25.
- Story, L. and Stone, B. (2007), 'Facebook retreats on online tracking', *New York Times*, 30 November, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/30/technology/30face.html>. Accessed 22 June 2010.
- Tarasow, T., Aristodemou, E., Shitta, G., Laouris, Y. and Arsoy, A. (2010), 'Disclosure of personal and contact information by young people in social networking sites: An analysis using Facebook profiles as an example', *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics*, 6: 1, pp. 81–101.
- Tong, S., Van Der Heide, B., Langwell, L. and Walther, J. B. (2008), 'Too much of a good thing? The relationship between number of friends and interpersonal impressions on Facebook', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13, pp. 531–49.
- Van Der Heide, B. and Walther, J. (2009), 'Computer-mediated Communication and Persuasion: Testing a social information processing/heuristic-systematic synthesis', in *International Communication Association (ICA) Annual Meeting Chicago*, 21–25 May, Chicago, USA.
- Vander Veer, E. A. (2008), *Facebook: The Missing Manual*, Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media.
- Walther, J. (1992), 'Interpersonal Effects in Computer-mediated Interaction: A relational perspective', *Communication Research*, 19, pp. 52–90.
- , Van Der Heide, B., Kim, S., Westerman, D. and Tong, S. (2008), 'The role of friends' appearance and behaviour on evaluations of individuals on Facebook: Are we known by the company we keep?', *Journal of Human Communication Research*, 34: 1, pp. 28–49.
- Wellman, B., Salaff, J., Dimitrova, D., Garton, L., Gulia, M. and Haythornthwaite, C. (1996), 'Computer Networks as Social Networks: Collaborative work, telework, and virtual community', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 22, pp. 213–38.
- West, A., Lewis, J. and Currie, P. (2009), 'Students' Facebook "friends": Public and private spheres', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 12: 6, pp. 615–27.
- Wierzbicka, A. (2010), 'Cross-cultural Communication and Miscommunication: The role of cultural keywords', *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 7: 1, pp. 1–23.
- Wildemuth, B. M. (2008), 'The Illusion of Online Privacy', *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*, <http://www.ils.unc.edu/~wildem/Publications/CHI2006-Privacy.pdf>. Accessed 22 June 2010.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Barry, W. A. and Bouvier, G. (2011), 'Cross-cultural Communication: Arab and Welsh students' use of Facebook', *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research* 4: 2+3, pp. 165–184, doi: 10.1386/jammr.4.2-3.165_1

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Dr. Wail Ismail A. Barry is associate professor of mass communication at Ain Shams University, Egypt but currently on leave at the University of Sharjah, UAE. His research interests include: social media impacts, intercultural communication, and international communication. Dr. Wail was cited in many journals and can be searched via Google scholar as Wail Ismail A. Barry.

Contact: College of Communication, University of Sharjah, P.O. Box 27272, Sharjah, United Arab Emirate (UAE).

Tel. + 971 50 8980387

Fax. +971 (6) 5050688

E-mail: wail@sharjah.ac.ae/wail@aucegypt.edu

Dr. Gwen Bouvier is a lecturer of communication, media and cultural studies at the University of Glamorgan, Cardiff, UK.

She earned a Ph.D. from Aberystwyth University in television news and journalism. She is currently teaching courses on international media, imagined communities and representation theory. Her publications have focused on September 11 and representation, discourse analysis and social media.

Contact: Lecturer Communication, Media, and Cultural Studies, Cardiff School of Creative and Cultural Industries, University of Glamorgan, ATRium, 86-88 Adam Street, Cardiff, CF24 2FN, Vale of Glamorgan, UK.

E-mail: gbouvier@glam.ac.uk

Copyright of Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research is the property of Intellect Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

Copyright of Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research is the property of Intellect Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.