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# Namibian and American Cultural Orientations Toward Facebook

**Anicia N. Peters**

Iowa State University  
Virtual Reality Applications Center  
1620 Howe Hall  
Ames, IA 50011, USA  
anpeters@iastate.edu

**Michael A. Oren**

Iowa State University  
Virtual Reality Applications Center  
1620 Howe Hall  
Ames, IA 50011, USA  
moren@alumni.iastate.edu

**Nicola J. Bidwell**

CSIR Meraka Institute & School of ICT  
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University  
P.O. Box 395  
Pretoria, 0001, South Africa  
nic.bidwell@gmail.com

**Abstract**

Nadkarni and Hofman's [8] meta-review of literature on Facebook usage recommends examining differences in Facebook use between collectivistic and individualistic cultures. We discuss early findings of an exploratory study to compare use between participants in America, Namibia, and expatriate Namibians. From this, we identified five key areas of difference: 1) Motivations for joining Facebook; 2) Attitude toward Facebook connections; 3) Self presentation and photo sharing; 4) Communication about death, religion, and politics; 5) General privacy definitions. However, our findings showed no statistical difference in the Collectivism Scale [10] administered among the three groups, despite Namibia being considered a highly collectivistic country [12] and the US being a highly individualistic country [6].

**Author Keywords**

Facebook; Culture; Digital Convergence; Privacy; Social Networking; Collectivism-Individualism; Namibia

**ACM Classification Keywords**

H.5.2 [Information Interfaces and Presentation, (e.g. HCI)]: Miscellaneous;

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## Introduction

Facebook reports that over 80% of its 845 million users are located outside of the US [4]. However, very few of the numerous studies on Facebook focus on non-Western and/or developing countries; despite criticism that such online spaces affirm offline cultural hegemony [3]. Wang, Norcie and Cranor [11] observed paucity in the number of studies relating to social networking sites' privacy issues in developing regions while other studies (e.g. [2]) note incompatibilities between Facebook and communalist practices in rural villages. Nadkarni and Hofmann's [8] recommend examining Facebook use in collectivistic and individualistic cultures. Thus, we explored how people who originate from a collectivistic culture, in a developing country, orient using Facebook, a social technology created in an individualistic culture. Our exploratory study compared US Americans to two groups of Namibians, one group who study and live outside Namibia and the other who reside in their own country. We examined Facebook's use and its influences on privacy with respect to friendships, religion, politics and life-change events such as births, deaths and career changes.

## Methods

We adopted a mixed methods approach to inform an understanding of Facebook use and cultural similarities and differences.

### *Facebook data content analysis*

As a preliminary study, we requested users in Namibia and the US to release their Facebook data consisting of wall posts, pictures and profile information to us. This method required us (the researchers) to request some of our Facebook friends and previous acquaintances to provide us with Facebook data for a six-month period.

We obtained files from ten Namibians and two Americans as both groups found it difficult and time consuming to export, edit and transfer the data files. Surprisingly, 70% of the Namibian data files were from Namibians studying and living outside Namibia. The content analysis informed our interview- and survey questions as well as led us to identify a sub-group of Namibians who showed differences to local Namibians, namely expatriate Namibians who lived outside Namibia.

### *Interviews and online survey*

Interviews and online surveys consisted of 74 questions on general social networking site exposure and usage, Facebook usage and privacy views, and Facebook's impact on privacy related to life-change events such as births, death, career moves, religion and politics. We also included a collectivism scale [10].

## Participants

Using snowball sampling, our study compared ten US Americans; ten Namibians who were resident in their country and ten expatriate Namibians, who were studying/living abroad. Male/female ratios in samples were 5:5, 2:8 and 4:6 and the mean ages were 35 (expat Namibians), 32 (local Namibians) and 28 (Americans). All participants had Internet access both at home and work/school.

The American participants interviewed consisted of three undergraduate students, one non-student and six graduate students. The ethnic diversity was three African-Americans, one Hispanic and six Whites and native languages spoken were English and one Spanish. 20% of the Americans had travelled outside of the US, although all of them had lived in several states of the US and none of them lived in their birth community.

They maintain close ties with immediate family, but less so with extended family. The occupations and field of studies of American participants were more or less comparable to the Namibian participants.

The ten expatriate Namibians (expats) consisted of different tribes/ethnic groups: four Owambos, one Herero, one Masubia (Caprivian), two Coloreds and two Basters. Their native languages were Oshiwambo, Otjiherero, Subia, Afrikaans and English. All expats were mostly graduate students currently based in different countries such as US, India, Malaysia, Canada or who had lived in Germany.

The ten Namibian locals consisted of six Owambos, one Damara, one Baster and two Coloreds with native languages being Oshiwambo, Damara>Nama, Afrikaans and English. All Namibians had a minimum of a Bachelors degree mostly from one of the local universities in Namibia and most were in careers comparable to the US participants. Most of the expat Namibians and all local Namibians had been born in a rural/semi-urban village/town and moved to the capital city (urban) later in life for studies or careers.

### **Results and Discussion**

All three groups showed no significant differences on the individualistic-collectivistic scale ( $p > .05$ ). All three groups showed similarities in most of their Facebook activities, frequency of access and usage, friends, awareness of privacy settings and actual privacy setting adjustments. Since there were so many similarities, we will limit our discussion only to the main differences we found.

#### *Motivations for joining Facebook*

Namibians had no prior social networking experience prior to Facebook in contrast with 20% of expats and

80% of Americans who had prior social network use such as MySpace. Americans had been active on Facebook for a mean of 5 years and local and expat Namibians at 4.5 and 3.5 years respectively.

Namibians joined Facebook to keep in touch with friends and family, keep up with the gossip, find long-lost friends and because of Facebook's popularity. American participants joined Facebook mostly to keep in touch with professional colleagues and as part of the College experience, but also to keep in touch with family and friends. This difference also reflects that Namibians joined Facebook much later than Americans after it was opened beyond the college crowd.

#### *Families & Friends*

Namibians maintained on average closer ties online and offline with immediate and extended family than the American participants. Namibians also accepted all friend requests, which contrasts with Americans. Namibians' reasons for accepting unknown friend requests were mostly that they were open to learn from others and evaluated what the prospective "friend" wrote on his/her walls, his/her pictures, mutual friends, gender, looks, location and career. Another reason is that Namibians might consider it rude to deny friend requests. This surfaced in a Facebook thread when one friend suggested that another friend, concerned by this dilemma, should accept the unknown requests and then remove the unknown "friends" later.

A few of the Americans also had unknown friends, but they rather evaluated friend requests on the basis of whether they knew each other and how the "friendship" would benefit them. Most American interviewees indicated that they simply deny or ignore unknown friend requests and one of the few who had unknown

friends indicated that those were relatives that he had never met before.

Namibians tend not to remove friends, but do restrict certain friends or groups from seeing their posts and photos. If they did remove friends they mostly said this was due to “rudeness” or “unacceptable behavior” whereas restricting friends was based on trust in commenting on pictures or wall posts. Namibians also used language switching as a way of restricting friends, which contrasted to the Spanish speaking American.

American participants periodically remove friends if they have not spoken in a long time or gain no value in their updates. However, they do not block or restrict views. This echoes Wang et al.’s findings that Americans had the least desire to restrict users [11], but contrary to their interpretation of this, we found participants indicated that they find it too complicated to decide on whether to restrict views and simply remove the friends if they have to restrict their views of certain friends.

#### *Self-Presentation and photo sharing*

Namibians mostly share pictures featuring themselves. Often they are the main focus of the picture with very little surroundings shown, even when they share pictures of their village settings. One participant responded that one of the activities that has changed since joining is that he poses for Facebook pictures to upload. Friends usually comment on the poster’s physical appearance in the picture, which suggests that we cannot be limited about thinking only how people present themselves online, but realize that the presentation of “self” is not governed solely by a user’s own direct manipulation of their profile. Rather things

that others say about us may be more compelling than things we say about ourselves.

This finding is consistent with Zhao and Jiang’s study that Chinese users, who are considered highly collectivistic, tend to show “polished” images of themselves while Americans tend to prefer group pictures [13]. Presentation may take the form of “See me first and foremost in the context of my group”; but such identity performance does not necessarily imply a collectivist approach to personhood [14]. Like Wang et al. [11], we speculate that this contradictory collectivism-individualism paradigm could be attributed to collectivistic cultures’ desire to project a good image and status to social groups.

#### *Privacy of births, death, religion and politics*

Namibians share their religious and political views on Facebook as well as post about death, which is considered private and taboo by Americans. This finding is contradictory to Nadkarni and Hofmann’s hypothesis that individualistic cultures will share their private information and discuss potentially controversial topics with their Facebook friends [8].

Since American participants use Facebook as a professional network they indicate that they consider what to post and avoid religion and politics. Two participants indicated that they posted about politics before and will not so do again based on comments received. One participant indicated that she “did not want to jeopardize her husband’s career through their joint Facebook friendships” by posting about politics or controversial topics.

Namibian participants not only share religious thoughts openly and frequently, but they also subscribe to religious updates such as the daily verse or “On this

day, God wants you to know". However, most of them equally subscribe to the daily horoscope, which reflects the Namibian culture that although 85% of Namibians are Christians, Christianity co-exists with traditional beliefs and practices [1].

#### *Death*

Literature reveals memorial walls and ongoing posting seem to have become the norm on Facebook with many writings on the topic and a session dedicated at CHI 2011 [5]. However, American participants indicated that they do not show grief, as this is considered private. They also do not share sad news on Facebook as Facebook is a "happy space" and one should share only happy and positive news. Two participants also indicated that sharing about death on Facebook is like "emotional support seeking" and they do not seek emotional support. Although 70% of American participants had not experienced death of a person known to them, they have all seen memorial walls.

In contrast, while only 10% of local Namibians and 20% of expatriate Namibians have encountered memorial walls, they do post and share about death in their own posts and comments frequently. Namibian participants encountered death regularly due to HIV/AIDS, traffic accidents or violence, and mourning and funerals are a lengthy communal activity. Namibians indicated that Facebook has become a cheap and fast way to distribute death notifications and pass on condolences to console family members. However, they indicated that they would write on the walls of the living family members as opposed to the deceased's wall or memorial page.

#### *General privacy concerns*

Like Strater and Lipford's [9] we found, across all three groups, that people rarely update privacy settings although all three groups get privacy notifications via reposts of friends or Facebook official notifications. However, contrary to previous studies [11], we did not find Americans to be more concerned about privacy, rather Namibians indicated that they and their communities were more concerned about keeping information safe or hiding one's affairs. Americans indicated that nothing is really private on the Internet and their home communities are fairly open about issues. One Namibian lamented that Facebook somewhat changed their privacy perceptions as it dictates what to do and thus they reveal more of themselves; such as sharing thoughts and actions. Through its rigid overarching structure and uniform style and presentation, Facebook itself seems to reassert monoculture and dissuade an appreciation of difference.

#### **Conclusion**

Our online survey method excluded many interested Namibians who accessed Facebook only via non-smart cellphones and had no access to an Internet enabled device, also no white Namibians were included. Along with our snowball sampling method, it created a sample bias, such that we interviewed Namibians in similar career fields, similar education levels, similar access to technology and in urban settings.

We think that the differences found despite no significant difference in collectivistic orientation may be important in several ways. Firstly, the contradictions in the collectivism-individualism paradigm replicate the problems that HCI encounters with all social psychological models of cultural difference [7].

Secondly, differences do show that Namibians appropriate the representation of social connections offered by Facebook. However, thirdly, our data suggests that Facebook contributes to changing views of social constructs.

The status of online spaces remains as ambiguous, problematic and in need of regular and ongoing analysis as traditional offline spaces. It is, of course, impossible to consider one without the other.

Thus, our future work extends our qualitative methods to include ethnography and focus groups, to complement the quantitative survey tools and analysis models applied to national culture. We will also interview Namibians and Americans who have restricted Internet access and who have not been exposed to Facebook for such a long period as the current sample.

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