Space Interpretation of Social Network Site from Cultural Perspective: A Case Study of Computer-mediated Collaboration in Digital Media Studio Project

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this poster is to present how the space interpretation, as a cultural dimension, influences the students’ usage of social network sites (SNSs) in computer-mediated collaboration at the University of Edinburgh. The results found that the private and public concepts were the core factors of space interpretation. Two primary social network sites, Facebook and Blog, were categorized into private and public space by students for different purposes in computer-mediated collaboration. Blog mainly represented as an exhibited space; Facebook was applied as a private space for sharing information and communicating, which also indicated the transformation of personal space cognition. Moreover, the space interpretation of SNS Facebook was influenced by different level of cultural diversity or homogeneity. The distance provided by Facebook was not close enough for a cultural diversity group to disclose their opinions during the collaboration. The study suggests that the cultural dimension can enhance the design of SNS for the customization and content control in improving information sharing and communicating which can optimize the usage of SNS for computer-mediated collaboration.

**Keywords:** computer-mediated collaboration, social network site, cultural perspective


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1 **Introduction**

With the rapid development of Web 2.0, computer-mediated collaboration has been a critical research field. Prior studies focused on group cohesion and optimized collaboration of online collaboration (Fussell, Kraut, Lerch, Scherlis, McNally & Cadiz, 1998; Lou, Abrami & D’Apollonia, 2001). Recently, social and psychological aspects, such as perception of group belonging and trusting, also call for attentions because of their essentialness for effective learning and collaboration (Kreijns, Kirschner & Jochems, 2003; Kirkman, Rosen, Gibson, Tesluk & McPherson, 2002; Kirkman, Rosen, Tesluk & Gibson, 2006; Paul & McDaniel, 2004). Researchers also indicated certain conundrums to influence groups’ performance, such as coordination complications, social loafing in virtual groups, establishing and sustaining social interaction that depends on the trust or sense of belonging (Kreijns et al., 2003). On the other hand, these conundrums could bring more meaningful cognitive processes through individual interpretation like not taking critique as a personal attack (Weinel, Bannert, Zumbach, Ulrich Hoppe & Malzahn, 2011).

As researchers pointed out (Fulk, Steinfield & Schmitz, 1987), information richness of media will affect collaboration through individuals’ interpretation. In terms of computer-mediated collaboration, the lake of face-to-face interactions resulting in individual distrust (Hill, Bartol, Tesluk & Langa, 2009) has been an important issue for researchers and practitioners. Several studies have suggested combining computer-mediated communication with FTF communication for improving the effectiveness of computer-mediated work (Duarte & Snyder, 2001, Kirkman et al., 2002, Lipnack & Stamps, 2000). Although these studies have provided critical factors influencing the collaborative behaviors in computer-mediated groups, few studies examine the influence of individual’s interpretation of space in computer-mediated environment. The reason for taking space is an important factor because the concept of space influences an individual’s
behaviors and it can be regarded as cultural dimension (Hall & Hall, 1990). Therefore, space could be useful approach to explore the attitudes and behaviors of media usage especially in a multicultural computer-mediated collaboration. To fill the gap, this present study adopted cultural dimension to investigate how the interpretation of space affect the usage of social network site (SNS) in computer-mediated collaboration of digital animation group in Digital Media Studio Project at the University of Edinburgh.

2  Space as Culturally Analytic Dimension
As the way of communication through personal interpretation (Hall & Hall, 1990), space has been studied as cultural dimension of a society for decades. Researchers (Fulk et. al., 1987) also indicated that space, as social environment, provides important social information through different types of communication among coworkers. That is, space which could be an online or offline setting may be affected by individual’s interpretation and directly or indirectly influence collaboration. Therefore, investigating the usage of social network site from cultural dimension of space is meaningful for the development of computer-mediated collaboration especially in the cross-cultural environment.

3  Research Method
This study employed case study with participant observation, individual interviews and online questionnaire during February to May, 2012. Participants were students involved in Digital Media Studio Project (DMSP) at the University of Edinburgh. Students were major in digital animation. There were twelve students (N=12) in animation group divided into two small groups. Each group had six members: four animators, one sound maker and one musician. Group members came from different cultures. The task assigned by supervisors for students was to make a digital animation and create a website to document their design process. Two supervisors, as assistants, only provided advices for animation.

Students communicated via different conduits. Face-to-face and computer-mediated communication, such as email or SNS, was adopted during collaboration. Both of them chose Facebook as their communicative platform. To document working process, both groups created website and Blog to display their development of works.

There were totally twelve students; seven students completed online questionnaire, and nine students accepted individual interviews. The findings were based on students’ group discussion, texts on SNS, individual interview and online questionnaire.

4  Private Facebook and Public Blog in CMC
The notion of private and public would influence the space interpretation of SNS. This study found that Blog was defined for “formal”, and Facebook was for “non-formal”. That is, Facebook was regarded as a private space where any idea and opinion can be discussed rather than Blog.

4.1  Facebook: A Communicating and Sharing Information Space
Students formed Facebook group as an online limited-accessing space which was much more private than Blog. Students discussed everything on Facebook including meeting time, working process report, providing opinions and suggestions for others’ works, negotiating and collaborating issues. The texts on Facebook were based on the way of speaking. The word such as “cool”, “great”, “ha” appeared often especially in response and the grammar might not be examined. The post on Facebook is a system of dialogue for the purpose of communication. Facebook group may not be a perfectly private space but, for students, it actually provided the private control to isolate the non-relevant users which made coworkers focus on communicating.
Blog: an exhibited space

Blog, contrast to Facebook, was defined as a public and official space. Students exhibited more completed works and less opinion on Blog. They did not communicate the working details or pass personal messages on Blog. Blog is a public field watched by supervisors, peers and anonymous viewers whereby students behaved carefully and conservatively when publishing on this “public” space. Most Blog posts displayed the progress of animation rather than the individual works. “What have done” was the primary purpose for Blog posting.

Blog is “We”; Facebook is “I”

The results found that the interpretation of space in SNS could affect the identity of group and individual. The difference to distinguish Facebook from Blog is that individuals shifted their stand point from the group to the personal. For example, a student Hank, as a composer, wrote the message about how he arranged music as following:

I added the opening music to Dropbox folder entitled Music. I’ve timed the little piccolo runs at the start to start and stop in time with when the box moves. I’ve taken some liberties with the timing of the rest of it to make that section last a bit longer. I had the idea that when the violin slide starts, that’s when the camera would pan over slightly to the box...

On the contrary, the expression post by Hank on Blog exhibited group work rather than the individual. The post is as following:

We discussed as a group that the opening sequence could be longer, so I left gaps in between these lines. ...The happy/heroic feeling is quickly snatched away in the final cadence as the next scene is back inside the box. I figured by ending it on a slightly darker tone, it gives the impression that something sinister is in the box. So when we see it’s a little caterpillar, it seems pretty funny...

He focused on the music of animation. The word “I” in here was an objective related to work for animation. When mentioning the decision about the extension of opening music, student not only used “we” as subject but also emphasized “discussed as a group”. He stressed that is a group decision not by himself. He put the “I” under the “we” that appeared as an entity on Blog.

As for Facebook, Hank adopted more “I” to express his ideas about animation. The sentences were informal and uncompleted. Moreover, he made the decision by himself and explained the reason on Facebook. He uploaded the work but did not ask the opinions; he still focused on the animation but not emphasized on “we” or “group”. He spoke from a personal angle. The “we” in above paragraph represented the role of viewers rather than a group. That is, if a space is more private and without authority, the consciousness of entity would become implicitly and individuals’ opinions would be explicit. Comparing to Blog, Facebook could be seen as a privately public space (Lange, 2007).

The Cultural Influence of Communicating Distance on Facebook

Although both groups used Facebook as privately communicating platform, the results found that distinctions of SNS usage existed among students with different cultural background. Group A was comprised mainly by students from the same background which represented cultural homogeneity; group B was in opposite situation with cultural diversity. The topics discussed on Facebook of group A included reporting working process, sharing ideas, negotiating the division of works or commenting on others works. On the contrary, the posts by group B were related to the arrangement of time meeting, working report or ideas sharing. The comments or opinions seldom performed on Facebook. When asked why no discussing on Facebook, an Asian girl in group B answered:
We are not used to talk or discuss things on Facebook. The Westerns do this more often than us. We like to talk face-to-face.

The only one girl with the European background in group B, reversely, reported that she got used to communicate the work details on Facebook. The results suggested different interpretations of the space on Facebook influenced by cultural background, which led students adopted different communicating strategy.

From cultural perspective, certain Asian cultures, such as Korea and China, incline to communicate in the close distance due to the collectivism (Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011). Moreover, in terms of the Internet usage, researchers indicated that the Asians put more emphasis on social interaction rather than information seeking (Chau, Cole, Massey, Montoya-Weiss, & O’Keefe, 2002). However, the Asian students in group B did not interact more online. Apparently, for group B, the distance provided on Facebook was not close enough to share the important information, but only for reporting and arranging schedule. The highly cultural diversity existed in Asia was reflected on group B which Facebook could not correspond to the need of sustaining relationships. On the contrary, although the student in group A from different countries, most of them shared the European culture so that they could adopt the similar cultural context which had the distance acceptable for them to discuss on Facebook.

The results illustrate that the group with high cultural homogeneity can share the close space interpretation to facilitate the collaboration through social network sites. For computer-mediated collaboration, the distance in virtual space could be enlarged by the degree of cultural diversity that may influence personal information behaviour. Therefore, as social network sites become a collaborative venue which afford different levels of cultural diversity, a specific space for collaboration needs to be separated and redesigned the information structure to diminish the cultural influences in order to enhance the quality of collaboration.

Figure 1: Space Interpretation of Blog in Computer-mediated Collaboration
Conclusions
This study suggests that the usage of SNS could be influenced by the space interpretation in computer-mediated collaboration. Private and public space, as a dimension measured by students when interpreting the space, is actually the ramification of the identity. The identity includes the concept of “I” and “We”, or individual and group. However, the dichotomy cannot be either simple or straightforward especially in the context of computer-mediated communication (West, Lewis, & Currie, 2009).

The results indicate the design implications of SNS which is employed as the supportive tool in computer-mediated collaboration. The study found that the level of cultural diversity of a group inclined to enlarge the interpretation of space which affected the communication and collaboration on the SNS. In other words, the current SNS still needs to overcome cultural boundaries and develop the cultural trust which will influence computer-mediated collaboration. As groups or organizations increasingly supplement their collaborations with SNS, it is important to be aware of cultural touch points, where the interpretation of space may become the limitation to meet different individuals’ and groups’ social needs. The more customization and content control in improving information sharing and communicating could help to optimize SNS usage for computer-mediated collaboration.

As for the limitation of this study, supervisors’ suggestions might affect students’ attitudes toward the usage of SNS. The involvement of supervisors made Blog become a more formal and serious space which influenced students’ performances, whereby the interpretation of space to Facebook and Blog was polarized. For future study, the core issue is to map an elaborative cultural dimension as an analytic indicator to evaluate and improve the information and interface design of social network site for computer-mediated collaboration.
7 References

8 Table of Figures
Figure 1: Space Interpretation of Blog in Computer-mediated Collaboration ........................................... 841
Figure 2: Space Interpretation of Facebook in Computer-mediated Collaboration ........................................... 842