CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN NETWORK COMMUNICATION - ANALYSIS ON THE BASIS OF COMMUNICATION BEHAVIOUR IN A HIGH-CONTEXT AND LOW-CONTEXT CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

The problem of cultural differences has been the subject of scientific research for many years. Particular importance was given to this issue in the context of analysis of cultural dissimilarities in the light of globalisation processes that influence unification, including in particular cultural unification. At the same time, rapid development of new media, particularly social media, influences the way of communication, mainly of younger users, thus supporting the processes of cultural unification. The considerations made in this article refer to the analysis of behaviour that in network communication accompanies the representatives of a low-context culture (German students), a high-context culture (students from Kiev) and Polish students, who in their behaviour are identified as the representatives of features attributed to both a high-context and a low-context culture, according to the typology proposed by Geert Hofstede. The text indicates at the most important cultural differences that occur in network communication and that are identified in attitudes and interactions of students, at the same time also marking similarities in communication behaviour of representatives of different types of cultures. The following text and the research results included in it are part of the stream of analyses of the social media influence on the processes of cultural unification and cultural change that occur in digital reality, including pointing to the possibilities for the use of new media to strengthen social processes connected with multiculturalism.

Keywords: social media, cultural identity, communication behaviour, high-context culture, low-context culture.

INTRODUCTION

The attempt at identification of high and low context cultures undertaken by Edward T. Hall, was based mainly on the interpretation of cultural differences that
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Occur in the communication aspect. The creator of the sentence "culture is communication, and communication is culture" claims that the level of communication of individuals determines their cooperation and ability to identify differences, the understanding of which makes it possible to build relations and enter into interactions between individuals (Hall 1984). The considerations of Edward T. Hall became the point of departure for the continuation of research into the essence of communication processes that occur in culturally diversified environments. Geert Hofstede, identifying indexes defining cultural differences characteristic of collective and individualistic cultures, revealed in what way cultural differences influence attitudes, behaviour and identity of the individual, also in confrontation with the representatives of a culture presenting other systems of values. According to Geert Hofstede differences lie in the values that are imperceptible, while identities are manifested in attitudes and behaviour. Studying the importance of cultures in the functioning of structures and institutions, Hofstede emphasised stronger connections with values than with differences in identities of individuals (Hofstede 2007).

The processes of network communication are more and more often becoming the subject of analyses treating communication in social networking services as an alternative source of shaping social attitudes and behaviour, identifying interactions the network users are involved in. Using social websites influences individualisation of users' attitudes. Leah A. Lievrouw notes that: "Media culture in the digital era has become more personal, sceptical, ironic, unsteady, idiosyncratic, based on cooperation and extremely diversified." (Lievrouw 2012: 265). On the other hand, Manuel Castells emphasises that new media enable "mass self-communication", which means horizontal, interactive communication networks based on the Internet, mobile phones, digital media and social websites (Castells 2007). Simultaneously, the research shows that interactions taking place in network communication are usually unstable, temporary and weaker than those that occur in real reality. They are also multiple and they exist in connection with other forms of social existence (van Dijk, 2010). According to Lyn Gorman and David McLean the potential of new media lies in the radical transformation of relations between the media and their recipients i.e. the consumers of content (Gorman, McLean 2009: 265). But at the same time the authors claim that no social reconfigurations occur thanks to new media but what takes place there is merely a continuation of structures and processes from real reality. Thus communication in new media does not exert an important influence on social change but it only replicates attitudes and actions occurring in real reality. Social research also points to different effects of using the Internet, usually emphasising the weakening of relations in the real world as a result of time spent in virtual reality (van Dijk, 2010). However, all the more often it is also proven that virtual contacts are complementary to relations existing in the real world. If it is impossible to keep up personal relations with some people in the real life, such contacts are usually continued on the Internet. Krystyna Skarżyńska emphasises that the level of activity based on interaction is growing with the intensity of using new media - by participation in discussion groups, online chats and collective games (Skarżyńska 2009: 404). On the other hand, David Dombrowsky emphasises the role of social media in shaping new identities of individuals, that are the effect of network communication, writing that: "The individuals’ profiles on social networks are manifest social interactions. The profiles
are manifest offers to others to engage with them, to engage with the individual`s constructions of identity that are realized on these profiles and to react to them. Social networks are spaces which are made to enable constructions of identity /.../ These online platforms do not just provide space for communication but they animate the users to interact with others on the social network" (Dombrovsky 2012: 94).

Undertaking the analysis of the meaning of cultural differences in the context of network communication processes the objective is to establish if the Internet reconciles cultural differences thus becoming the platform enabling a dialogue between cultures (supporting multiculturalism processes), or if attitudes and behaviour declared by network users are so different that in network communication there rather occurs confrontation of values than a dialogue between them. The analysis contained in this article is based on results of research that was carried out as part of the international research project in Berlin, Krakow and Kiev in 2016. Surveys were conducted in a group of randomly selected 200 university students in each city - Protestant University of Applied Sciences in Berlin, Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski University in Krakow and Boris Hrinchenko University in Kiev. The aim of the project was to establish how the representatives of different types of cultures shape their communication attitudes and what interactions they enter into in the processes of network communication.

In order to establish research criteria in the project a division of cultures made by Geert Hofstede was used, that consisted in identification of cultural differences (Hofstede 2007). On the basis of specified criteria of identification of cultures, students in Berlin representing a low context culture and students in Kiev as the representatives of a high-context culture took part in the survey. On the other hand, in Hofstede's typology students from Krakow were identified as representatives of high or low context cultures, depending on which cultural criterion the analysis concerned.

Cultural differences in network communication - identification of similarities and differences

In all three cities students treat the Internet as the main source of information, using first of all social and content websites and using mobile applications. The most frequent reason for using the social media according to the respondents` declarations is the access to current information (answers: Berlin - 56.71%, Krakow - 67%, Kiev - 72.5%). Similar responses were given to the question about the use of social media for keeping up or building relations on the Internet (answers: Berlin - 48.98%, Krakow - 52.58%, Kiev - 42.5%). Social media were regarded as channels not important for presenting one's own opinions and views by students in Berlin and Krakow (answers: Berlin - 54.64%, Krakow - 51.54%, Kiev - 29.5%). The respondents in Kiev revealed different attitudes in this respect because as many as 45% of them pointed that such channels were an important place to present their views and opinions. Access to entertainment and fun was indicated as an important possibility by 55.16% of students in Berlin. For respondents in Krakow and Kiev this reason was not that important. As many as 42.86% of the respondents in Krakow and 57.5% in Kiev treated it as unimportant. On the other hand, the respondents from Kiev (53.5% answers) treated social media as the most important possibility to create and share content with other users, while students from Krakow (25%), and the majority of students from Berlin (54.12%) indicated at this aspect as completely unimportant.
Analysing the presented data we may state that using social media by students in each city has not so much a cultural importance but a political one. The political system in Germany and Poland may be treated as stable so Internet users are less engaged in activities aimed at overcoming the deficit of democracy through new media. Channels in new media are more often used as carriers of entertainment and fun, information and the means to keep up relations with other users. Ukraine is in this respect far from political standards of the other two countries. It is a country where there is still a deficit of democratic values, so the Internet is the source of knowledge, information and building Ukrainian identity, particularly for young people. Social media were used widely and on a mass scale during protests at EuroMaidan and also at the time where there were no mass media promoting democratic values in Ukraine, what reassured young people (and it was mainly because of them that the events at Maidan took place at the turn of 2013 and 2014) that the Internet was an important carrier of information, making it possible to show one's views freely. As regards students from all of the studied cities they thought that the dominating reasons for which they used the social media were: access to information and building and keeping up relations with friends.

Students from Kiev representing a high-context culture use social media to promote content that is culturally different than their own (50% declared sharing such content on the Internet). In this they differ from students in Berlin who are not particularly interested in it (21% share such content on the Internet) and in Krakow (30% share culturally different content). This may result from the fact that students in Kiev treat differences as something unique and at the same time interesting. Respondents in Berlin have everyday contacts with representatives of other cultures, what automatically means that they do not treat communication on the Internet as a place where it is interesting to share content referring to different cultural values. However, the above data emphasise that for the respondents in Kiev social media are an important channel through which they get to know multiculturalism. This may confirm the deficit of such experiences in everyday life of respondents, which they try to overcome by analysing issues devoted to multiculturalism on the Internet.

Studying students' behaviour they were asked if they read electronic versions of newspapers on the Internet and if they share links to interesting articles through social websites. Also in this case students' answers were similar. 57.81% students in Berlin, 62.76% in Krakow and 61.11% in Kiev declared themselves as readers of electronic versions of newspapers sharing links on their social websites. Students' answers to the question about commenting on the content of articles to which they published links on social websites also looked similar (in Berlin 35.83% answers, in Krakow 41.5%, in Kiev 41.09% answers). The responses also confirmed a similar attitude of students towards content published by them on the Internet - they share it more often than they comment on it. Similarity of attitudes towards content disseminated by the respondents was also shown by friends of the respondents - commenting on published articles was declared more often (answers: 61.54% in Berlin, 65.57% in Krakow and 57% in Kiev). This data proves that network communication behaviour of users is the same, regardless of the type of culture represented by them. Differences appear as regards the topics of content shared on the Internet. And thus students in Berlin (as representatives of a low-context culture) share information concerning politics (which
does not simultaneously mean that they comment on it or talk about it), but the issues connected with religion, patriotism and history are not interesting for them. For students in Berlin social issues and topics connected with globalisation and migrations are also important. For respondents from Kiev (as representatives of a high-context culture), on the other hand, topics connected with history and religion are important, as well as patriotic and national issues (what may mainly stem from the shaping of the Ukrainian identity after the events at EuroMaidan). Another important type of content that the respondents from Kiev share on the Internet are issues connected with education. Explanation for the use of Internet information in educational processes should rather be found in the students' search for knowledge alternative to the one offered by the Ukrainian educational system. In Berlin and in Krakow using the Internet in educational activities is normal. The issues of migrations and globalisation that take place in the world to a much lesser extent arouse interest of people in Krakow and Kiev, what may result from the fact that in both these cities this issue is not an identifiable problem that directly concerns the respondents.

Students also differ as to the declared content that they would share on a social website as a message promoting their homeland. Respondents in Berlin, as representatives of a low-context culture, where individualistic values dominate, are more divided in their preferences as to the propagated advertising message about their country. They also allow publicising such materials that would ironically refer to the presentation of history of their country (26.96%), or would ridicule national vices of their fellow countrymen (35.96%). Attitudes of students in Krakow and Kiev are much less varied, both groups present rather collectivist values that minimise individualism and promote thinking about the group. Students in Krakow and Kiev are prone to sharing information that describe their country only in positive terms on social websites - presenting values that are shared by the inhabitants of the country as a group and describing the beauty of the country. None of the respondents in Kiev would decide to publish information that would ridicule national vices of their countrymen on the website used by them and only 5% would decide to publish content ironically treating the history of their country (for students in Krakow it was respectively 7% and 8% of answers).

The analysis of the use of social websites for self-presentation purposes, i.e. promoting the achieved success, revealed that 56.12% students from Krakow and 44.44% from Kiev do it, while in Berlin using social media for this purpose was declared by 32.47% of respondents. The identified differences may be the result of cultural differences - an individualistic or collectivist culture, where individuals have different relations with the group, resulting from their attitude towards rivalry. However, taking into account that simultaneously with the representation of different cultures there occurs the phenomenon of a varied level of economic development, differences in presenting achievements (in the study it was not precisely stated what kind of success this exactly concerned), may also be an illustration of success in the economic sense, which in the German society, with dominating values encouraging free expression, are less important than in the Polish or Ukrainian society, where values still promote survival (Harrison, Huntington 2000).

Differences in interactions entered by students representing different types of cultures illustrated the tendency to quarrel on the Internet. The analysis seems to show that the propensity to quarrel is not a derivative of a culture represented by the
respondents. Half of the students in Kiev, who are representatives of a collectivist culture, where entering into direct confrontations is frowned upon, declared that they enter such relations as quarrels when they participate in discussions on the Internet. On the other hand, students in Berlin, as representatives of an individualistic culture, show a smaller propensity for quarrels and confrontational way of discussing things on the Internet. Ukraine, according to the cultural criterion proposed by Geert Hofstede, represents a model of a low masculine culture, as opposed to Germany or Poland. In masculine countries, verbal fights are present and the level of aggression in Internet discussions established in studies has a reversed distribution. Looking for a justification other than the cultural indexes we may find the explanation in the fact that in Ukraine an intensive process of political changes has been going on for a few years and it has influenced the shaping of identity. This may be important for network communication, where users, differing in opinions, freely use the freedom of expression and hold disputes about their views. Research also revealed that respondents in Berlin are more prone to remove from their circle of friends people who have different views than their own. Students from Berlin, as representatives of an individualistic culture, have loose relations with other people, value harmony and voluntariness of interactions and are reluctant to confront views other than their own. Also, responses given by students in Krakow were quite interesting. They rather represent an individualistic culture according to the model by Geert Hofstede, but the attitudes revealed in the study were closer to those presented by their counterparts from Kiev, as representatives of a collectivist culture. This may indicate that students from Krakow do not share values characteristic of the model of an individualistic culture, or being also representatives of a high masculine culture, they are interested in having in their circle of friends people representing other cultural values, with whom it is possible to talk, also as adversaries (research revealed a relatively high level of aggression shown by Polish students who quarrel on the Internet). Simultaneously, analyses revealed a high level of anxiety of students in Berlin connected with exposing and presenting their own views in Internet discussions, different than the content of posts they comment on. It seems that sources of this anxiety should be looked for in the phenomenon of political correctness that prevents frank articulation of views in network communication, where comments do not have a private character and their content is visible to other users. Although students from Berlin represent an individualistic culture, openness in speaking their mind is limited in the public space for them. Political correctness as a social phenomenon is not that strong in Poland and in Ukraine, what is also confirmed by students declaring bigger openness to commenting on content they do not agree with, thus revealing their own views. At the same time, although students in Kiev and Krakow hold open disputes on the Internet, also quarrelling, they are not prone to remove friends who do not share their views and opinions and who express differences having cultural sources.

Conclusions
The surveyed students have shown different attitudes in processes of communication in social media in a few analysed areas identifying communication behaviour. Social media are used first of all to access current information and keep up or build relations with friends. Students in Berlin treat social media as the source of fun
and entertainment more often than their Ukrainian friends. On the other hand, respondents in Kiev put much more attention to the possibility of presenting their own opinions and views on the Internet and the chance to create and share their own content. Differences in these attitudes should rather be found in the political and social situation of respondents than in cultural differences. For a few years, students in Kiev have taken part in the processes of shaping the national identity, which was manifested during protests at Maidan at the turn of the 2013 and 2014 initiated by young people, mainly students. Moreover, Ukrainian students intensively used social media as communication channels during protests, creating alternative content to news presented in Ukrainian mass media, thus revealing their own views and opinions about the changing political and social reality. Looking for a reference to cultural differences identified by Geert Hofstede we may conclude, that German students, as representatives of the individualistic culture, are more focused on satisfying their own needs than on building a network community in the processes of communication. Creating a community may in this case mean being active in social media, that is designing one's own content and sharing it, at the same time identifying and disseminating one's own views.

Respondents in all three cities declared using the same channels in social media. Students in Kiev use chats and forums more often than their counterparts from other cities, what would confirm previous findings about bigger engagement in the area of presenting one's own opinions and views on the Internet. For students in Kiev social media are a place of popularising content presenting different cultural values, what may also mean that the respondents find on the Internet information they are not able to obtain from other sources, including from their own experience. This is interesting information for them and they pay attention to it and notice cultural dissimilarity with its source in Internet news. Research revealed that preferences of students concerning the choice of channels in social media and communication behaviour on the Internet are similar, regardless of the cultural model the students belong to. Respondents are more willing to share information on the Internet than comment on it.

Cultural differences are distinctly visible in students as regards the thematic scope of content that they promote on the Internet with the use of social websites. German students clearly demonstrated their belonging to a culture where individualistic values dominate and which is orientated on the future, by showing that the topics concerning history, religion, patriotism and national values were much less important for them. But important issues include politics, globalisation, migrations, and social matters. For students from Kiev, as representatives of a collectivist culture, important topics are those regarded as quite unimportant by their German counterparts. Students from all studied cities chose satirical and jocular comments about reality as the most important content for them. This would confirm that network communication is less formal and it enables more humorous comments about reality than in media regarded as traditional channels of communication. Sharing satirical messages by students is explained by the global phenomenon of memes, which usually comment on the reality in a jocular manner. However, it should be emphasised here that interest in looking for satirical and humorous content alone does not mean that the same jokes are acceptable for all respondents. This results from distinct cultural differences which were shown in students' declarations concerning the advertising message about their country that they would share on social websites. The respondents in Germany, as representatives
of a culture with a low power distance, not only had differing opinions but in over a half of the answers allowed ironic content, ridiculing national vices of their compatriots as these materials that they would be able to publish. Students from Krakow and Kiev confirmed that in this respect they shared values characteristic of a culture with a higher power distance index.

Analysing the declared activity of students in social media it should be emphasised that it presents strong influence of cultural values on attitudes and behaviour of students, particularly in the context of identification of individualistic and collectivist cultures. Such attitudes are noticeable in the answers of Polish students who sometimes are located between individualistic and collectivist culture but more often show features of the former. However, attention should be drawn to the fact that more often it is the representatives of collectivist cultures who tend to show individualistic features in network communication processes than the other way round. This enables putting forward a hypothesis that social media may in the long run influence the increase of the level of individualisation of attitudes of individuals, simultaneously leaving from the model of a collectivist culture and moving towards the individualistic one, not only as regards attitudes revealed in virtual reality but also actual sharing cultural values different than those where this identity was formed. More often it is also Ukrainian students who treat the topics published on the Internet as a potential source of education and thus in the long run the reason of potential cultural changes, than students in Berlin. It is interesting to establish that German students are much more anxious to reveal their own views on the Internet than their counterparts from Krakow and Kiev (also as regards presenting opinions and views on the Internet, students in Berlin showed much less interest). It seems that the influence on the reluctance of students in Berlin to manifest their own views and to comment on posts of other users is exerted by political correctness, which introduces a dissonance between what the student would want to show and what they really think, what is limitation of their freedom of speech in the context of political correctness and participation in public debates.

To sum up, the above research presented a dependence of content showed on the Internet on sharing certain cultural values by students, what usually results from the fact of socialisation going in accordance with defined dominating cultural patterns. Despite the fact that attitudes and communication behaviour are similar, the message itself depends on the cultural model shared by the student. The most important criterion that determines differences in content published on the Internet depends on the type of collectivist and individualistic culture. And it is possible to observe that students from collectivist cultures show tendencies to individualistic attitudes in network communication and not the other way round. This leads to a conclusion that communication with the use of channels in social media may lead to increasing individualisation of attitudes which, as a result, may modify cultural identities of an individual.
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