

Perceptions and Usage of Social Networks: A Comparison of Japanese and American University Students

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Abstract

From BBS to the arrival of modern social network, freely using the internet has allowed for a multitude of ways for us to share the various happenings in our lives. Through social networks we have become able to do anything, such as posting casual statements and viewing world changing events in real time. However, along with the increase in usage, questions have been raised, such as in regards to what content we should post onto social networks and what is ethical use. Through this research project, I asked how university students ways of communication are being affected by social networks. I also looked into what material is considered appropriate to post to social networks. Furthermore, I placed the question “why” as the focal point and initiated a survey. After analyzing the data, I was able to find that Japanese students are more willing to communicate through social networks than American students. In other words, in Japan it is indispensable for communication. I also found that both American and Japanese students agreed for the most part about what was considered appropriate to post onto social networks.

Introduction

Because of social networking, occurrences which would have been impossible even 10 years ago has become commonplace. For instance, we can now quickly send messages, talk, plays games, and send pictures with ease to anyone around the world. So, how do university students use social networking? Furthermore, when they do use social networks, what types do they need to take into consideration? Through this research, I will explain the differences between American and Japanese students and their perceptions toward social networking.

1. Significance of the Study

When I had studied abroad at Oberlin University in Tokyo, Japan, many of my Japanese friends were using social networks of which I was not aware of their purpose. The more I began to use their social networks, however, the more I noticed that the appropriateness of the content that was posted as well as the frequency of use with social networking was different from how Americans viewed it. So with this research and experience, I looked into the differences in

viewpoints between American and Japanese students towards social networking, or in other words, look at specific facets such as usage and ethics of social networking.

2. Research Questions

- 1) How do social networks affect the ways university students communicate?
- 2) What is considered appropriate to post onto social networks and why?

3. Research Background

3.1. The Definition of Social Networks

According to the online dictionary Merriam-Webster, “social network” is defined: “an online service or site through which people create and maintain interpersonal relationships. (Social Network)” Furthermore, social network is also shortened down using the acronym “SNS”.

3.2. Currently Used Social Networks

While the SNS being used by each country is different, there are also social networks shared between the two countries. Famous SNS used in both Japan and America include Facebook, Twitter, and Google Plus. However, there are also SNS specific to each country. For instance, in America Tumblr and Instagram are popular, while GREE and LINE is often used by the Japanese (通信メディア, 2014; Duggen, 2015; Hudson, 2011).

3.3. Motivations for Using Social Networks

When we use social networks, there are various methods in which we are able to maintain relationships, such as when we click “Like” on a comment. According to Ellison (2014), the cost for keeping up your own relationships is low because one only has to do simple things such as posting comment or using private messenger has made communication far easier. This is evidenced by the number of friends we have on our social networks, which averages 207 people, whereas the actual number of people we consider to be friends is only 76.

Outside of maintaining relationships there are other motivations for using SNS, such as intrinsic motivations like enjoying the use of SNS, or to achieve a level of perceived satisfaction. There are also extrinsic motivations like the number of friends we have within our networks. In

other words, our frequency of use of SNS increases along with the number of friends we have. However, it is important to note that the number of people using a SNS is not important, but rather the number of people within your own network (Lin, 2011). In summary, we use SNS not just to maintain relationships, but we are also motivated by seeing our own networks grow.

3.4. Case Studies

Research done in 2011 by Nagoya University in Japan looked at how SNS could be used in an academic environment. This “Social Learning” program used two programs, Twitter and Libra. Through Twitter, students could exchange opinions about the class and its content, where the educational tool Libra a textbook could be uploaded by the professors and they could have interactions with the students via notes. They then surveyed the students about the usefulness of the “Social Learning” program and found that 85% of the students found the program useful. Because of this case study, we can see that in order to build a relationship between students and teaching SNS could be used to effectively do so (長谷川, 2013).

Social Networks can also be used with marketing, such as in the case study of the 50th annual Grammy Award Show. Last year’s show had a target demographic (14-49) viewership of only 14%, so the Grammy committee decided to initiate the “We’re All Fans” campaign through SNS. As a result, the ages 18-34 demographic spiked up to 34% of total viewership. Furthermore, a large number of people who had watched the Grammys on television then went onto the website to discuss the results. Through this case study we can see that social networks play an important role in creating relationships between the younger generations and businesses.

One other common occurrence on social networks is cyberbullying. As defined by the online Merriam-Webster dictionary, “Cyberbullying” is “”. Saegusa did some research by comparing the frequency of traditional bullying to cyberbullying in Japan, and found that there is a high chance bullying done online is actively increasing in frequency (2010). Barlett also did research about cyberbullying, but did a comparison between Japanese and American university students. His research concluded with Saegusa, but ultimately stated that Americans are much more likely to cyberbully because of cultural factors (2014). Both authors concluded, however, that cyberbullying is difficult to combat because of the anonymity the online world allows for.

4. Research

4.1. Targets of the Study

Overall 63 university students participated in the survey. There were 30 Japanese, 8 male, 22 female, as well as 33 Americans, 18 male, 14 female, and 1 declined-to-state.

4.2. Research Methodology

A survey was created in both English and Japanese, and data was collected via Google Forms.

5. Results

5.1 RQ1: How do social networks affect the ways university students communicate?

When communicating to family and friends via SNS, Japanese students had a tendency to post onto SNS about a wide array of topics far more than Americans. For instance, when they had “Ate some delicious food”, only 35% of Americans would post while 70% of Japanese about the food they had just ate.

Next, both participants were asked how long they spend using a variety of communication tools, including SNS. 70% of Japanese students indicated they SNS more than 30 minutes a day, while American students utilized texting to communicate more often.

Participants were also asked how upset or happy they would get over various situations on SNS. Situations like “Receiving a lot of comments on a photo” and “Seeing a message be read with receiving a reply” obtained some reaction, but overall it was not a strong one. On the other hand, outside of “Not receiving ‘Likes’ on a good post”, Japanese students had stronger reactions towards everyday scenarios more often.

When asked about the degree of necessity of SNS in their everyday lives, 93% of Japanese students thought there was at least some degree of necessity, while only 60% of American students agreed.

Lastly, students were asked if they felt that interpersonal communication skills had been diminishing because of an overreliance on social networking. 73% of Americans answered that we were losing our ability, and only half of the Japanese respondents thought so.

5.1.1. Summary of Results 1

Japanese students used SNS for longer periods, and the frequency of posting about a variety of content was higher than American students. Furthermore, whether it was a positive or negative reaction, Japanese students tended to have a reaction towards the happenings on SNS more than Americans. Both groups agreed there was some degree of necessity for SNS, however, Americans were more willing to strongly agree that we are slowly losing our ability to communicate with one another because of our reliance on SNS.

5.2. RQ2: What is consider appropriate to post onto social networks and why?

First, I asked students how they felt about changing their relationship status on SNS, and about 57% of American students thought it was okay to change it within 3 months. Japanese students (77%) agreed that it was not appropriate to change your status.

I followed up by asking if students thought the content they posted onto social networks would affect their chances at getting and keeping a job. Only 27% of Japanese students thought so, while 54% of American students thought there was a strong effect on their job prospects.

Ethics related to the posting of content on SNS was then asked. First, a scenario was presented about posting pictures onto SNS which had other people in it, but you had not asked for the permission to upload from those people. Both groups thought it was unethical to similar degrees, with two Japanese students replying, “One could say that is an invasion of their privacy.”

Next, I asked about the ethics of criticizing people within your network even if you know they will not see the post. Yet again, both groups thought it was unethical. One American wrote, “I believe this is unethical because if two people have an issue, its between them. No need to put dirty laundry on social media.”

Finally, students were then asked if it was okay to post a video about a political rally that was disrupted by the police adding your own political commentary to the situation. Americans thought that this was completely ethical, while half of Japanese respondents had no opinion to the situation. This is the only time the two groups different in responses. A popular defense by Americans who thought it was ethical stated either that it was a First Amendment right granted by the Constitution, or “Free Speech”. Half of the Japanese students who had no opinion said it was because they had no experience with political issues.

Finally, I asked students if they thought their friends were sensitive to the political, religious, and personal views that their friend held when they posted to SNS. Both groups thought their friends were sensitive or insensitive to similar degrees. Then they were then asked to rate their own awareness towards their friends, and surprisingly Americans were sensitive with only 18% of students stating they were “Not really sensitive” or “Completely Insensitive”. On the other hand, about half of the Japanese students (47%) thought they were insensitive towards their friends on SNS.

5.2.1. Summary of Results 2

Overwhelmingly, American students thought it was appropriate to quickly change their status on SNS, whereas most Japanese thought the changing of the status itself was not appropriate. Furthermore, I thought it was interesting that American students considered that the content they posted had a stronger impact on their job chances. Both groups agreed the posting of pictures and criticism onto SNS required thinking about the ethics before doing so. However, government related topics were a dividing issue. Most Americans argued that the posting of content onto SNS was guaranteed by the Freedom of Speech, while Japanese students just did not have any interest in politics. Finally, Japanese students were less likely to be sensitive to their friends and their viewpoints over social networks.

6. Conclusion

Japanese students feel that there is a greater necessity for SNS than American students. Consequently, this also means they will spend more time using SNS, use SNS to communicate to their friends and family more often, and will be more strongly impacted when something occurs over a social network. By these results, I find that Japanese students have had their communication ability more strongly affected by SNS. Conversely, it was interesting to find that while Japanese students felt a necessity for SNS, when they do post they do not really consider the possible damage which can be done in either they professional or private life. Nonetheless, both groups of students agree that material which can cause damage to a reputation or create obstacles for other people is unethical.

7. Discussion

7.1. Limitation of Study

Because this study was only directed towards university students, this study is not reflective of either country as a whole.

7.2. Future Research

In order to obtain a comprehensive view of society, I would like to have people from different generations also take my survey.

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