

HOW CULTURE & IDEOLOGIES INFLUENCE DIFFERENT INTERNET USES AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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Abstract

The scope of this research paper is to discuss how culture and ideologies influence different internet users among international students at different levels of study. The focus is on those students studying in the United States at different levels of learning. It is about how an International student home country's culture, nation's policies and ideologies influence his/her internet usage habits, or the type of information she/he is interested in browsing. Other vital variables that will be put into consideration will be the students' age, students' class, where internet is being used, majors and gender. It is also very important to note that these cultural and ideological factors may work in favor for increased use of internet in some regions while in other regions the same factors may work in disfavor.

Keywords: Internet uses, information technology, cultural differences, online habits, international students

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Introduction

The trends in internet usage among international students have more to do with their home countries' cultural beliefs, policies and practices about internet. In some cases, it has also to do with ideological positions about internet. Interestingly, there is no clear-cut or demarcation about such trends in internet usage depending on such identified factor. The whole population does not uniformly subscribe to one belief or attitude towards the use of internet. However, taking individuals as a representative of the wider society, when a considerably bigger number subscribe to a certain belief, then it is easy to draw analyze trends. This is portrayed in the form of internet browsing habits and can also be derived practically through direct opinion from a category of students. It is also worth noting that some minor factors such as stereotypes, biases, and religious interpretation ultimately determine the internet usage among international students.

Various Ways International Students Use the Internet: Literature Review

A study was carried out to investigate the interactions between acculturative stress of East Asian international students and their use of the Internet. The survey was conducted among one hundred and fifteen international students in the United States. It found out that most students used the internet as a source of information, entertainment and as a social utility. Cultural background was not a hindrance to using the internet; neither was using the internet perceived to conflict with ideological differences (Ye, 56; Friedman 772).

In a study carried out to find how culture affects internet usage among adolescent students of Arab origin in the US, the survey found out that there is a correlation between the two. A survey conducted by the P.I (Pew Internet) and A.L.P (American Life Project) found out that the largest population of up to 89% of teenagers do use e-mail while 75% use instant

messaging (IM). However, back at home, the knowledge of Internet usage among Arabic youth, despite the recent deployment of Internet in the region, is very little and sparse (Lenhart, Madden, and Hitlin; Whitlock et al.). In terms of gender, with regard to females, the study found that cultural traditions limit communication with people outside their close family networks. These customs include: a female cannot show her face except to close family members, a female is not allowed to interact with others, neither male nor female, without permission from her family, and a female is not allowed to touch or be touched by males (e.g., a handshake with a work colleague is not permitted). Using Internet, e.g., email, chat room, online discussion and online games, may represent a strong conflict with traditional culture and social expectations towards women.

Another research found that internet usage among South African students was relatively higher than that of the rest of students with African origins. The study found that South African students were more at ease using the internet without being affected by either cultural biases or ideological concerns about the origin of the technology. For them, they considered the extent to which internet, as an innovation is advantageous over other methods of performing the same task (Brown et al., 386; Tan and Teo, 45). The study also found that back at home, relative advantage has been shown as a relevant factor of influence on cell phone banking adoption in South Africa. Convenience was also identified as being a factor that influenced the choice of electronic distribution channel for financial services (Black et al., 167; Horrigan5; Brown et al., 390).

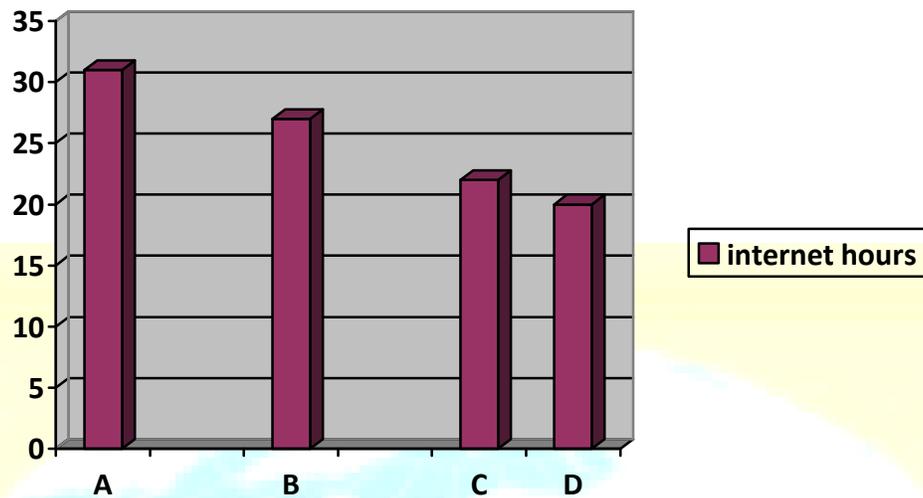
Latin American and Caribbean countries have surprisingly had no cultural bias towards using the internet. Despite ideological differences between some of them and the United States, most international students understand the value of education. They thus approach internet usage with no cultural bias or practices.

Data Analysis and Findings

Several results were found on the use of Internet. Gender disparity in the frequency of internet usage was almost equal with as much as 51% of females being found to be using the internet to listen to entertainment more often than males 49% (World Bank, 2005). Among females, the study found that many females from the Middle East preferred using the internet while at educational institutions than while at home (Borgmann 39). In fact, only 23% use internet while at home. The remaining 77 % have never used internet at home and when they did, they were studying or downloading an academic material (Dmitri, Weiguo and Robles, 71). More males than females recorded the longest time in browsing internet to be in their dormitories (55% to 45%) (World Bank, 2005). The study also found that many female international students from Asia and Latin America were okay with browsing the internet anywhere to research on their study topics.

More males than females were found to be chatting online at a figure of 58% to 42% among those with origin from South Africa, the rest of Africa, Latin America and Asian countries (World Bank, 2005). Age and academic level were a factor in the internet usage. More young people in lower levels such as freshmen and sophomores used the internet for chatting than their senior counterparts (Dmitri, Weiguo and Robles, 63). The survey corresponded to a previous research finding in which adolescents were found to be heavy users of the internet than any other group (Gross 640).

Graph of percentage hours spent online (out of 24hours)



A= Freshman

C= Junior

B= Sophomore

D= Senior

Discussion

From the time when the internet emerged as a means of communication, it has become a challenge to the society. Cultural differences result into different views of the internet. At one end, we find those who only perceive great benefits and equate it to an avenue leading to great emancipation (Dmitri, Weiguo and Robles, 67). At the other end, one finds those who lament the ills and demerits of the internet, and those that view it as a threat to human social establishments. Between these divergent ends, one also finds those who hold moderate opinion about the merits and demerits of the internet.

It can be deduced that the impact of cultural influence on internet usage is beginning to decline with time. This can be attributed to the fact that with time, more and more people get used to the internet (Dmitri, Weiguo and Robles, 75). Some cultural beliefs still play a major part in deciding whether it is safe to use the internet. From the research finding, many

international students from the Middle East are still not comfortable browsing the internet at home. This may insinuate that Islamic culture still views internet as a source of corruption to the soul and mind especially for women (Solberg 40). Nevertheless, the fact that one can now hear of internet in Arabic countries is a breakthrough. It appears that societies have realized that everything is a matter of making choice. The internet has its good side and its bad side. It is up to an individual to make a moral choice and decision that he/she will only use the internet for the right purpose (Solberg 47).

Cases of ideological challenges when it comes to internet have not been as evident as they were in the past. Most countries are beginning to accept new technologies without letting ideological differences hold them back from benefiting from such innovations. In the case study in which Ye Jiali (56) found a trend that the use of internet by international students from Asian countries was not affected by any ideology would point out that indeed there are some cultural tolerance or maturity. This is because many countries that adopted socialism as a political ideology related with capitalist economies with suspicion and distrust (Borgmann 43).

To talk about students from different regions but in the same academic level, we may find graduate and senior students using the internet to look for jobs (Borgmann 46). Having access to a computer that is connected to the internet helps in making this possible and easy to work from home. In many cases, freshmen and sophomore do not use the internet to start looking for employment. Most of them use the internet to chat with their friends or simply just surf the net for fun (World Bank, 2005).

Watching news from the internet is another way through which international students spend their time on the internet. These are normally short but catching news. Most importantly, international students use the internet to connect to those at home. They do this just to reassure

the family at large that they are very okay indeed. At times they use the internet to give back information at home of the challenges they face or the good times they are having (Borgmann 54).

Conclusion

Having seen the purposes for which international students use the internet, we cannot fail to underscore the importance of the internet to the general society. The internet has remained relevant and important since it offers access to information; makes it easy for people to share the information they have by posting them; enables an unlimited communication between two or many parties; and helps people to form and maintain relations. Besides, it was also found that some of the positive reasons for using the internet are that it acts as a social forum where people get to meet, though virtually, and interact; facilitates trade; acts as a source of entertainment; and facilitates cultural appreciation.

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Biography

Gabriel Hudson Nkotagu is an MBA student from the United Republic of Tanzania at Arkansas State University. His research interests fall mainly in the fields of Management Information Systems, Internet Applications and Information & Data Security. He has a Bachelor's degree in Computer Science and Information Technology from Arkansas State University. He currently works as a Graduate Teaching Assistant at the same university. He is active in a variety of professional organizations and honor societies including Beta Gamma Sigma and the Association of Information Technology Professionals (AITP). Gabriel currently resides in Jonesboro, Arkansas. He can be found on Twitter at @gabe_hudson.

