



Cultural and Geographic Proximity in SNS. A Comparison between Estonian, Russian-Estonian and German SNS Users

Ulrike ROHN

Institute of Journalism and Communication
University of Tartu, Estonia
ulrike@rohn.as

Abstract. Social networking sites (SNS) are an emerging social phenomenon across Europe. As in many other European countries, the US-owned network Facebook has taken the lead over domestic and local SNS amongst German and Estonian SNS users. Members of the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia, however, prefer SNS that originate in Russia. Based on a new model of proximity in SNS as well as on the theory of network effects, this paper aims at contributing to an understanding of the role that cultural and geographic proximity play in the choice and usage of SNS as well as of the attraction of SNS that cross cultural and geographic boundaries. Focus group interviews with German, Estonian and Russian-Estonian SNS users suggested many similarities across these groups in terms of the comparative importance of various areas of cultural and geographic proximity in SNS that the proposed model of proximity introduces. Furthermore, they suggested the attraction of SNS that have an international membership. Despite these similarities across groups, the Russian-Estonian group exhibited many differences compared to the other two groups as the Russian-speaking interviewees expressed the greatest need for cultural proximity but the lowest need for geographic proximity in SNS. The article discusses the results of the focus group interviews especially in terms of the suggested diaspora-like attitudes and behavior of the interviewed Russian-Estonians and the implied separation between the ethnic Estonians and Russian-Estonians in SNS. Understanding this inter-ethnic connectivity in SNS is more important than ever in the light of the increasing role that social media play in people's lives.

Keywords: Social Networking Sites, Cultural Proximity, Estonia, Russian-Estonians

Introduction

Social networking sites (SNS) are an emerging social phenomenon across Europe. According to a study conducted by Comscore (2011), SNS were used by 84.4 % of the Internet users in Europe in 2010. In many European countries, US-owned social network Facebook has taken the lead over domestic and local networks in terms of numbers of members. By the end of 2010, Facebook reached more Internet users in 15 European markets than any other SNS (Comscore, 2011). Also in the former Soviet-Union country Estonia, Facebook has been very successful as the statistics show (e.g. Turu-uuringute AS 2011). This, however, does not account for the Russian-language minority in Estonia who are mainly post-war immigrants, accounting for 27% of the total population (ES 2011). A survey conducted by the author in 2010 revealed that the three most successful SNS amongst the ethnic Estonians were Facebook, Orkut and Rate, whereas the three most successful SNS amongst the Russian-speaking population in Estonia were Odnoklassniki, VKontakte, and Livejournal, which all originate in Russia.¹ This suggests a need for cultural proximity in their choice of SNS.

Although SNS as digital networks have the potential capacity to connect people across various cultures and geographies, they are only the means for such a 'global network society' (Castells, 2009) or 'global connectivity' (Tomlinson, 1999), and they "enact the trends described in the social structure" (Castells, 2009: 24). In fact, studies have shown that the probability of friendships and communication via SNS decreases with decreasing physical and relational distance to SNS members (e.g. Liben-Nowell, Novak, Kumar, Raghavan and Tomkins, 2005; Tillema, Dijst and Schwanen, 2010). As such, people are most likely to connect with people from their own geographic and cultural environment, somewhat negating the theory of a global connectivity through SNS.

The aim of this article is to provide a better understanding of how different cultures express a need for cultural and geographic proximity in their choice and usage of SNS. For this, the paper puts forward a new model of proximity in SNS, which introduces various areas of cultural and geographic proximity in SNS.

¹ The online survey was conducted in fall 2010 among Estonian (N = 461), Russian-Estonian (N = 299) and German (N = 704) SNS users. The samples of participants were representative for the Internet population in Germany and Estonia in terms of age, gender and place of living according to data from the MA 2009 Online II conducted by the *Informationsdienstes der Arbeitsgemeinschaft Media-Analyse e.V. ag.ma.* in the case of Germany and the population survey *Mina, Meedia, Maailm* in the case of Estonia, which was conducted by the Institute of Journalism and Communication at the University of Tartu, Estonia, in fall 2008. Asked in which SNS they had a profile, the three most popular SNS amongst the Estonians were Facebook (42%), Orkut (25%) and Rate (13%). Amongst the Russian-language respondents it was Odnoklassniki (59%), VKontakte (33%), and Livejournal 9%.

In order to understand cultural and geographic proximity in SNS, this paper also looks at the attraction of SNS, whose existing membership crosses cultural and geographic boundaries. Whereas some SNS only target users in specific countries, others, such as Facebook, for instance, have an international membership base. Similarly, the SNS Odnoklassniki is very popular amongst Russian-language SNS users in post-Soviet states.² Due to geographical and/or cultural openness, they have the potential to reach a membership base that is larger than any local or domestic SNS could potentially reach. With their size, these SNS attract users through network effects, as a large network is more valuable to any user than a small one. This paper will further elaborate on the idea of network effects of large SNS that cross cultural and/or geographic boundaries.

For both the proposed model of proximity in SNS, as well as the theory of network effects, this paper will introduce an operationalization, which was applied in focus group interviews with Estonian, Russian-speaking Estonian, and German SNS users. The paper will report on the results of these interviews, which aimed at retrieving an initial understanding of the comparative importance of various areas of the suggested model of proximity, as well as elements of the attraction of network effects of SNS that cross cultural and/or geographic boundaries. This developed both an understanding of possible similarities across these different cultures, which may indicate a general attitude towards proximity in SNS by users, as well as a first understanding of differences across the three cultural groups that were part of the study.

User statistics suggest differences between the Estonian SNS users and the Russian-Estonian³ SNS users in terms of the role that geographic and cultural proximity play in their choice of SNS. With the increasing role that SNS play in people's lives, such different tendencies may become increasingly important in the future and they indicate that Estonia may, in fact, be one country with two societies (Maimone, 2004).

Additionally, German SNS users were included into the study as a reference group. As with Estonian SNS users, but differently from Russian-speaking SNS users in Estonia, German SNS users have increasingly started to set up profiles with Facebook at the cost of domestic SNS, resulting in Facebook becoming the preferred network among these users.⁴ This suggests similar tendencies amongst

² This article underlies the idea that language and culture are very closely connected (Whorf, 1964), and that language is the most clearly recognized part of culture (Agar, 1994).

³ Though not all members of the Russian-speaking community in Estonia have an Estonian citizenship, this paper uses the term Russian-Estonian as a convenient way to distinguish between the ethnic Estonians and the members of the Russian-language minority in Estonia.

⁴ The above mentioned survey conducted by the author in fall 2010 proved that the three most popular SNS amongst German SNS users were Facebook, in which 49% of the participants of the survey had a profile, StudiVZ (26%) and Xing (25%). An earlier study by The Nielsen Company in summer

German and Estonian SNS users, of which the latter have undergone a ‘return to Europe discourse’ and see themselves part of the West. Furthermore, it represents a contrast to the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia, which are seen as part of the East by ethnic Estonians (Aalto, 2003).

Introducing a new model of proximity in SNS

‘Proximity’ is a term widely used in the context of cross-cultural media trade where the concept of ‘cultural proximity’, first put forward by Straubhaar (1991), argues that audiences prefer media that has been produced in their own cultural environment over media that has been produced elsewhere.⁵ According to the concept of cultural proximity, media content is culturally proximate to the audience when it, for instance, portrays people that look, speak and behave the same as the target audience, depicting similar cultural values and attitudes.

This article puts forward a modification of the concept of cultural proximity to be applied in the context of SNS. It suggests two main adaptations. Firstly, SNS that aim to attract people across cultures and countries differ greatly from media content that travels across cultures and countries inasmuch as the content in SNS is generated by the users themselves. Hence, a model of proximity in SNS needs to take this into consideration. Secondly, this article suggests considering both cultural and geographic proximity in SNS. Such a differentiation between cultural and geographic proximity becomes clear when one looks at SNS users in Estonia where members of the Russian-language minority may express a need for cultural proximity in their choice of SNS from Russia but express a need for geographic proximity by having many contacts in their networks that live in Estonia.

With these two adaptations, the model of proximity in SNS sees both cultural and geographic proximity in two parts of a SNS: one which it offers to its users, and the other one which users self-create. Part one of a SNS is the ‘framework’ of a SNS, i.e. what is being offered to its users, and here proximity may be offered. Proximity to a user’s cultural or geographic belonging is offered, 1) when the SNS carries a brand image associated with the user’s culture or geographic region; 2) when it is owned by a company from the user’s culture or geographic region; 3) when the layout design resembles the style of the culture or region; 4) when the usability of the SNS is what people in a culture or geographic region are used to or like, 5) when it offers the user to use the SNS in his or her own language; 6) when its membership base consists of a large number of people from the user’s culture or

2010 (Nielsen 2010) found that the three most popular networks were Facebook, VZNetzwerke (StudiVZ, meinVZ, schülerVZ) and wer-kennt-wen.

⁵ Later works (e.g. Olson, 1999; Iwabuchi, 2002; Straubhaar, 2007; Rohn, 2010, 2011) have taken the concept of cultural proximity further in order to do justice to the complexity of the audience demand that also sees a great amount of internationally successful media.

geographic region; and 7) when the advertising that is being shown in the SNS is in the user's language and offers products and services from the user's cultural and economic environment.

Part two of SNS is the 'filling' of such 'framework' by its members, i.e. it is the user-generated content. Whereas a SNS may or may not offer proximity to a user's cultural and geographic belonging through its 'framework', the 'filling' of the framework by the user is where the user him- or herself may express a need for proximity. Here, a user may express a need for proximity 1) when he or she uses the SNS in the language version of his own language, 2) when he or she communicates with his or her contacts in his or her own language, 3) when he or she is connected with people from his or her geographic and cultural environment, and 4) when he or she forwards links to online media content from his or her geographic or cultural environment.

In addition to these two parts of a SNS, in which proximity may be offered to or self-created by users, users may also express a need for proximity through their choice of SNS. A SNS user of the Russian minority in Estonia may, for instance, express a need for cultural proximity in SNS by choosing a SNS from Russia; and a German SNS user who lives in Berlin may, for instance, express a need for geographic proximity in SNS by choosing a SNS from Berlin.

SNS and the attraction of network effects

The theory of network effects stems from economic theory, and it means that the value of a network depends upon the number of its users. The more users a network has, the higher its value is to each user (Rohlf's, 1974). The theory of network effects has been widely applied to the context of the development of network infrastructure (e.g. Katz and Shapiro, 1986; David and Greenstein, 1990; DiMaggio and Cohen, 2005). The classic example of network effects is that of a fax machine. With an increasing number of people who have a fax machine, having a fax machine becomes increasingly valuable to any person.

In contrast to the concept of cultural proximity, the theory of network effects originates from the context of networks and, therefore, needed no modification for the purpose of this study. Due to network effects, the more members a SNS has, the more attractive it is for potential new members.

Any SNS that attracts an international membership base can attract large numbers of users, more than any local or domestic one can. Although, not all members of a SNS may be relevant to a user, according to Reed's Law (Reed, 2001), the utility of a social network scales exponentially with the size of the network, even if the direct number of contacts is very small.

Since the focus of the focus group interviews was on network effects of SNS that attract users across cultures and places, elements of network effects were seen

in 1) a large, international membership base, and 2) international language version offered by the SNS. Latter serves as an indication that a network has the ambition to reach large numbers of international users.

Previous research on proximity and network effects in the context of SNS

The model of proximity in SNS, as it is suggested in this article, is new in its kind and, therefore, has not been applied to research projects. Yet, there are previous studies that have looked at the cross-cultural or international aspects with regard to SNS choice and usage. Studies have, for instance, dealt with cross-cultural differences in the use of and the motivations for using SNS (e.g. Kim, Dongyoung and Sejung, 2011), or the role of SNS in the context of negotiating cultural belonging (e.g. Takashi, 2010). Some studies have even looked at individual areas of the proposed model of proximity in SNS. Many of these have looked at users' contact lists and the use of language in SNS. Liben-Nowell et al. (2005) for instance, showed that only one third of the friendships in SNS are independent of geography. Herring et al. (2007) found that the larger a language community is, the more its members also use their own language in SNS. Other studies have looked into cultural differences in the preferences towards web design elements, though here the results are very contradicting. While Gevorgyan and Manucharova (2009) and Baack and Singh (2007) found that there, indeed, were differences in how people from different cultures perceive the same web design, other studies, such as by Hermans and Shanahan (2002) and Dou, Yoo and Liangyu (2003), found that cultural factors did not impact Internet user's perception of web sites.

What has been missing in terms of research on proximity in SNS is research that has looked at all of the suggested areas of cultural and geographic proximity in a single research project. Such a study also allows for identifying the relative importance of these areas in the choice and usage of SNS.

In terms of research that has looked at network effects of SNS, this is manifold. There has been research that has referred to the power of network effects of large, international SNS (e.g. Ahn, 2009; Kwon, 2011). Cusumano (2011), for instance, argues that because of network effects, a small number of SNS will attract most of the users. However, there has not been research as of now that has put the power of network effects of international SNS in relation to a possible need for cultural and geographic proximity by SNS users.

By looking at both a possible demand for cultural and geographic proximity, as well as the power of network effects of SNS that cross cultural and/or geographic borders and by applying these two forces that may influence SNS choice and usage to focus group interviews with users of a post-communist

country, this article aims at understanding the role that cultural and geographic proximity plays in the context of today's international phenomenon of SNS. Applying the idea of cultural and geographic proximity to three very different groups of SNS users in Europe promises to contribute to the understanding of social reality in Europe in terms of SNS usage.

Methodology

The research project, which this paper reports about, included focus group interviews with German and Estonian SNS users as well as with SNS of the Russian-language minority in Estonia that were conducted in April and May 2010. The aim of these interviews was to identify possible attitudes towards the various areas of the proposed model of proximity in SNS and the suggested elements of network effects of SNS that cross cultural and/or geographic boundaries and to gain an understanding of possible differences between the groups, in terms of their need for cultural or geographic proximity in SNS.

The Estonian group consisted of eight participants and the Russian-language group of seven participants. The participants of both groups were recruited through random selection from participants who in a previous study⁶ had answered that they had a profile in a SNS. The eight German participants were recruited through announcements in local newspapers in the state of Thuringia.

The groups were nearly balanced in terms of gender, with 10 female and 13 male participants. The age of all 23 participants ranged from 19-39, and their occupations were very diverse, ranging from high school and university students, a marketing consultant to a stay-home mother, suggesting a great diversity of attitudes and behaviour in regard to SNS. All three interviews were conducted in the participants' mother tongues,⁷ they were recorded, transcribed and then analyzed by identifying participants' statements regarding the various suggested areas of proximity and elements of network effects.

The interviews were conducted through structured protocol, in which the participants were asked about their choice of SNS and their thoughts about the various suggested areas of proximity in SNS as well as the suggested elements of network effects. Thus, the questions regarding a possible need for proximity included questions why the focus group interview subjects had chosen to use a particular SNS over another and whether their choice was influenced by a need for

⁶ The representative population survey *Mina, Meedia, Maailm* (Me, the Media, the World), which served as a basis for recruitment, was conducted in fall 2008. It is a study on the media usage in Estonia that is conducted every four years by the Institute of Journalism and Communication at the University of Tartu, Estonia.

⁷ The author thanks Valeria Jakobson for moderating the Russian-language focus group and Indrek Ibrus for moderating the Estonian-language focus group.

cultural or geographic proximity that the SNS offered in its 'framework', i.e. through its brand image, ownership, layout and usability, language versions, existing membership base, or advertising. In terms of the 'filling' of the 'framework', the interviewees were asked which language versions they used when browsing their chosen SNS, how culturally and geographically diverse their lists of contacts in their SNS were, what language they communicated in with their contacts in their SNS, and how culturally and geographically proximate online media content was which they had referred to their SNS contacts by posting links to such content in the network. Regarding the possible attraction of the network effects of SNS that cross cultural and geographic borders, the participants were asked whether they thought that if a SNS offered international language versions and had an international membership base that this would make this SNS more attractive to them.

The groups of interviewees were not representative for SNS users in the three cultural groups, and the small number of focus group participants does not allow for general statements about SNS users in Estonia and Germany. However, it was not the research project's intention to derive such universal statements. Instead, the aim was to introduce the concepts of proximity and network effects in the context of the international success of SNS and to provide an initial understanding, through the focus group interviews, about the relative importance of the various areas of proximity and elements of network effects; findings that may be applied in future cross-cultural studies on SNS usage.

Although the focus groups included three different cultural groups, and although participants were diverse in terms of socio-demographic criteria, the results of the interviews showed many similarities in terms of the participants' attitudes towards the various areas of proximity and elements of network effects both across and within groups. The differences, however, were greatest between the Russian-language group, on one hand, and the other two groups, on the other hand.

Estonia and Germany as case countries

Estonia and Germany were chosen as case countries because of their differences, which increases the probability that findings in both countries may have universal character. Germany with a population of nearly 82 million and Estonia with 1.3 million people provide for very different environments, which suggested a diversity of attitudes towards proximity and network effects. Whereas German users can choose from a great number of domestic and local SNS, there are only very few SNS of Estonian origin. Yet, statistics show similarities between the Estonian and German SNS users as Facebook has become more popular than any domestic network with users in both cultures. This suggests the power of network effects of a SNS that crosses cultural and geographic boundaries.

Estonia is, furthermore, interesting for a study on cultural differences in the choice and usage of SNS as it allows the study of two different cultures within one country. The large Russian-language community in Estonia allows for a good differentiation between cultural proximity and geographic proximity. In fact, the lack of connectivity between the Russian-language community and the Estonian community has been of great concern in recent years, and the division between Estonians and Russian-Estonians has been studied intensively (e.g. Lauristin, Vihalemm, Rosengren and Weibull, 1997; Lauristin and Heidmets, 2000). The situation between the ethnic Estonians and Russian-Estonians has a complicated historical background. The period of the Soviet control (1944–1991) can be seen as an imperial colonization by the ethnic Estonians and most Russian-Estonians settled in Estonia in the course of coerced immigration by Soviet authorities during this time (Vihalemm and Kalmus, 2009). Studies have shown that many Estonians fear that including Russian-Estonians as full members of the Estonian society may threaten Estonian independence or weaken Estonian culture (Kruusvall, 2000; Hallik, 2000). Russian-Estonians, on the other hand, experience objective and subjective social exclusion and feel that ethnic Estonians have better opportunities for education and employment, and for participating in local and political community life (Vihalemm and Kalmus, 2009). On the other hand, the strong identification with the Russian culture among the Russian-language community is reflected in, for instance, their having their own Russian-language schools and media in Estonia. Furthermore, the majority of Russian Estonians are oriented to Russian media (Vihalemm, 2006). The preference for Russian SNS by the Russian-language SNS users in Estonia suggests that, for the Russian minority in Estonia, cultural proximity in SNS plays a greater role than geographic proximity.

The comparison between the results of the interviews with the Estonian and the Russian-Estonian SNS users promises to provide an insight into a possible relationship between the two main strata in Estonian society as a country of the former Soviet Union. The comparison with the findings of the German focus group interview, on the other hand, promises to provide an insight into how the SNS preferences of the Estonian and Russian-Estonian SNS users may compare to the preferences of SNS users in a central European country. This, again, promises to provide for a further understanding of the two main strata in Estonian society.

Results

Offered proximity in the 'framework' of SNS

Although both the statistics and the focus group interviews have shown that the choice of SNS differs across the three cultural groups, which is most obvious between the Russian-Estonian SNS users on one hand, and the Estonian and

German SNS on the other hand, the focus group interviews suggested that hardly any of the proposed areas of proximity in the 'framework' of the SNS play a role in the users' choice for a SNS.

In all three focus group interviews, the participants agreed that the brand image of the SNS, its layout and usability, or the visible advertising did not play a role in their choice of SNS, and they did not express a preference for SNS that reflected a cultural or geographic proximity in these areas.

In terms of a possible brand image that reflected the users' culture or country, participants in all three groups agreed that they did not think that any SNS carried any brand image. A German interviewee, for instance, said: "This is not like McDonald's and Burger King where one may say: 'I only eat at Burger King.' It is not like that ... It is not a quality or a commodity in itself, which is sold to you... One can stay in touch with a person and write a message. And the meaning and importance of this message is still upon oneself."

Regarding the design and usability of a SNS, the interviewees in the Estonian group agreed with one of the participants who stated that the Estonian SNS Rate was very childish compared to Facebook, which was seen as something negative. The German group suggested that the preference for a design or usability did not even influence the choice. Thus, many in the group stated that they preferred the design of the German SNS StudiVZ over that of Facebook, though they had left this network in favor of Facebook as this was where an increasing number of their friends moved to. One German interviewee stated that she liked US-owned network MySpace best because she could design her own profile, altering the layout to her tastes.

In terms of advertisements that appear in the networks, all three focus group interviews suggested that users do not pay much attention to them and that such advertisements did not represent an area where proximity was wished for. As an Estonian participant said, "I do not notice ads there. This is not what I focus on when I am in a SNS. When you go to a network, then you focus on your people, on the communication with them."

In contrast to brand image, design and usability, as well as advertisements, the focus groups' responses to a possible need for proximity in terms of the company that owned the SNS they used were not that uniform. Though most of the interviewees in all three groups stated that they did not care where the company came from that owned the SNS they used, and that it did not make a SNS more attractive to them if it was owned by a company that originated in their country or from their culture, two participants in the Estonian group stated they would not set up a profile in a Russian SNS as they did not like anything Russian. Though this response may not represent the attitude of the majority of Estonian SNS, it does suggest some sort of resentment towards the Russian culture due to the Russian occupation, which may be reflected in users' choices. However, it was not

suggested within the interviews that SNS users preferred to use SNS that were owned by companies from their own country or culture only.

Whereas brand image, usability and layout, advertising, and ownership of a SNS did not appear to present areas for a demand for proximity in SNS, the interviews suggested that the existing membership base that a SNS offered to its users did. In all three groups, participants agreed that if there were many people from their own culture or place in a SNS that this would make the SNS more attractive to them. After all, they all wanted to connect with people from their own cultural and geographic environment in the SNS.

Another area for which the focus group interviews suggested that proximity was needed was the language version that a SNS offered to its users. In contrast to the existing membership base, however, this appeared to be the case only for the Russian-language participants. The German and Estonian interviewees stated that it did not make a SNS more attractive to them if it offered its service in their native tongues, as one German interviewee said: “As long as the network offers a language I know, it is fine with me, so German or English.” All of the Russian-language interviewees, on the other hand, agreed with one of the participants who said: “Of course, we use SNS that are in Russian.”

Expressed proximity in the ‘filling’ of the SNS

Whereas the interviews suggested that users in all three case cultures did not value SNS higher if they offered proximity through their ‘framework’ – with the exception of the existing membership base – the interviews proposed that the users through the ‘filling’ of such ‘frameworks’ do, in fact, express a high degree of cultural and geographic proximity, though the amount to which such proximity was expressed differed across the focus groups as well as for the suggested areas of proximity in the ‘filling’ of SNS.

In terms of the language versions the interviewees reported to use, for instance, the Russian-language participants expressed the highest proximity to their culture, as they all stated to use their SNS in the Russian language only. Some of the Estonian as well as German interviewees, on the other hand, said that they used their favorite SNS, Facebook, in its English-language version. The reason for this was, as they said, that the Estonian and German versions of Facebook were poorly translated and that they wanted to use the original language of the network in which it was developed. As the Russian-language participants all used networks that originated in Russia, this was not an issue to them.

In terms of the contact lists they maintained in the SNS, many of the Estonian and German interviewees said that they were connected with a lot of people from different countries but that the extent of how international their contact lists were depended on the particular SNS. In fact, they used different SNS for different

degrees of cross-cultural and cross-geographic openness of their contact lists. Many of the Germans said that they used local networks for staying in touch with people from their home town and the German national network SNS for staying in touch with people with whom they studied. With their international friends, they were connected in Facebook. The focus group interviews suggested a similar division of networks by the Estonians where many stated that they used Orkut and Rate for Estonian contacts and Facebook for staying in touch with international contacts, though they did not have local SNS for regional friends due to the small size of the country. Both German and Estonian interviewees argued that the amount of time they spent on Facebook had been increasing at the cost of the amount of time that they spent in other networks, as more and more of their national friends had also joined Facebook. The Russian-language group suggested for a quite different proximity in their lists of contacts. Thus, they did not report about the same division of networks in terms of the proximity of their contacts. They mainly used the Russian networks, in which they reported to have mostly Russian-language contacts, though many of them lived outside of Estonia. The reported connectivity with other Russian Diasporas around the world suggested for a great extent of cultural proximity but a lower extent of geographic proximity in their list of contacts. Indeed, the focus group interviews suggested a very low connectivity between the Estonian and Russian-Estonian population in SNS, for which language barriers were reported to be the main reason.

Unsurprisingly, the more connected participants were from across different cultures, the more they said they used the English language when communicating in their SNS, which was by far more common among the Estonian and German participants than the Russian-language participants. In fact, the only Russian-language focus group participant who reported to also use English when communicating in a SNS said that he sometimes wrote in English to a Russian friend who lived in the USA as a way of learning the language. Another Russian-Estonian interviewee said: "I would like to use other languages. But as Russian is the mother tongue of all the people I communicate with in my networks, I only use Russian." When posting on their own profiles, both Estonians and Germans participants reported that they posted in their mother tongue only if they wanted only people from their country to understand the message. As an Estonian participant stated, "When I want information to go out just for Estonians, then I post in Estonian. Otherwise, I post in English."

Almost all of the participants of the interviews had recommended online media content to their contacts in their SNS through posting links to such content before. When doing this, they almost entirely posted links to media in their own language and from the country they lived in. Such geographic proximity in the forwarded media seemed to be especially obvious with news media that the participants said to have forwarded, and it was even common among the Russian-

speaking participants who reported to often forward news articles by Russian-language, Estonian media in order to inform their contacts outside of the country on current issues in Estonia. None of the Russian-language interviewees said they had ever forwarded Estonian-language media in their SNS, and one participant said: “Estonian-language media is really not part of our lives.” In contrast to their Estonian and Russian-language counterparts, many of the German interviewees stated that they sometimes forwarded links to local or regional newspapers, which can be explained with the more prominent role of local and regional newspapers in Germany compared to Estonia, where national newspapers play a more important role. Although the interviewees suggested a great extent of cultural as well as geographic proximity in the practice of forwarding online media content in SNS, one Estonian interviewee said that he did not post links to Estonian media, and especially not to Estonian newspapers, because he did not want to bore his Estonian contacts with content they had already read themselves. Referring to the rather small media landscape in Estonia he said, “Estonia media is in some ways boring to share because we have all read it anyways.”

The power of network effects of SNS that attract users across cultures and countries

As statistics show (e.g. Turu-uuringute AS, 2011, Nielsen, 2010), most of the German, Estonian and Russian-Estonian SNS use large SNS that originate outside of their country, such as Facebook from the US and Odnoklassniki from Russia. These SNS attract a membership base across countries and they potentially reach more people than any SNS could that only targets within national boundaries. Thus, the increasing success of Facebook among Germans and Estonians, which has overtaken domestic networks, such as StudiVZ and Rate, and the popularity of Odnoklassniki among Russian-Estonians suggest the power of network effects of SNS with an international membership base.

In fact, in all three focus group interviews, participants reported that if a SNS had people from other countries amongst its users, this would make the SNS more attractive to them. An Estonian participant, for instance, said: “What prevents me from having an account in Rate is its pure Estonian environment.” Likewise, many Estonian interviewees reported that they had left US-owned Orkut in favor of Facebook, because within Europe, Orkut was only popular in Estonia. In the German focus group, many reported that the reason why they had left the German SNS StudiVZ in favor of Facebook was because StudiVZ offered its service only in the German language, making it difficult for non-German speakers to join. As one interviewee said, “Sooner or later, you meet someone from another country with whom you want to stay in touch with. Or your friends do. Then you switch to Facebook, because it is international.”

The big differences among the three focus group interviews were, however, that Estonian and German SNS users regarded the fact that a SNS offered different language versions, or at least an English language version, as a prerequisite for an international membership base, whereas the interviewees in the Russian-language group found it sufficient if the network offered its service in Russian as their international contacts were most of all, if not exclusively, Russian native speakers across countries.

Conclusions and Discussion

This article was aimed at contributing to an understanding of how different cultures express a need for cultural and geographic proximity in their choice and usage of SNS. For this, the article put forward a new model of proximity in SNS that includes various areas of cultural and geographic proximity in the ‘framework’ that the SNS offers to its users (brand image, ownership, layout and usability, language versions offered, existing membership base, advertising shown) and in the ‘filling’ of such ‘framework’ by the users themselves (choice of language version offered, use of language in communication with other SNS members, contact lists, practice of forwarding media content). Furthermore, the article put the need for cultural and geographic proximity in contrast to the attraction of international SNS that cross cultural and/or geographic boundaries.

The article applied the ideas of cultural and geographic proximity as well as network effects of international SNS to focus group interviews with Estonian, Russian-Estonian and Germans SNS users whose aim was to get a first understanding of the role that proximity and network effects play in the choice and usage of SNS.

The participants of the focus group interviews were small in number and not representative for SNS users in the three cultures. However, they were very diverse in terms of socio-democratic criteria and the fact that the research project included SNS users from three different cultures suggested a great diversity in terms of attitudes towards and behavior in SNS. Yet, the interviews showed many similarities across the three groups.

Thus, the focus groups suggested that cultural and geographic proximity in the offered ‘framework’ of a SNS is not very important to its users, with the exception of the existing membership base a SNS offers. In contrast, the interviews suggested that users across cultures express cultural and geographic proximity in the ‘filling’ of the SNS. This was most obvious in terms of the content participants reported to have recommended to their SNS contacts.

The interviews also suggested that a large, international membership base in a SNS makes this network more attractive to potential users compared to local and domestic ones. For this reason, German and Estonian interviewees reported to prefer

Facebook over StudiVZ and Rate, respectively, and the Russian Estonian interviewees used Russian SNS with an international, Russian-speaking membership. An international membership provides for a reassurance that no change of network is required, if a user or his or her friends, whom s/he would want to follow to a new SNS, ever wanted to connect with people from different countries. This reassurance is important as it can be assumed that users are very reluctant to leave years of accumulated connections and content behind.

Findings that SNS users are much more likely to connect with users from their cultural and geographic environment (e.g. Liben-Nowell et al., 2005) are no contradiction to the attraction of SNS that cross cultural and geographic boundaries since it lies in the nature of SNS that they allow users to self-create as much proximity as they wish, no matter how culturally and/or geographically open the networks are.

Despite these similarities of attitudes regarding cultural and geographic proximity and the power of network effects that were expressed both within and across groups, the three focus groups made obvious differences across groups. Whilst the German and Estonian groups showed many similarities, the Russian-Estonian group exhibited many differences to the other two groups, which is in line with recent concerns of a division of the population of Estonia (see also Vihalemm and Kalmus, 2009).

The Russian-Estonian interviewees expressed the greatest need for cultural proximity but the lowest need for geographic proximity in SNS, which was indicated by their choice of Russian-language SNS, that originate from Russia, and their strong connectivity with Russian-speaking SNS users outside of Estonia.

Whereas many German and Estonian interviewees were also happy to use SNS that provided their services in English only, and they even all agreed that if a SNS only offered its service in their mother tongue then this was a disadvantage of this particular SNS, it was much more important to the Russian-speaking interviewees that the SNS they used offered a Russian-language version. Furthermore, most of the interviewees said they used only Russian when communicating with their contacts in SNS. This is in line with previous studies (e.g. Herring, 2007) that suggest that the larger a language community is, the more its members use its own language in SNS. The expressed preference for the Russian language by the Russian-Estonian participants – especially compared to the lack of such strong preference for their mother tongue expressed by the German interviewees who also have a rather large language community – suggests that the Russian culture is very important to the Russian-speaking SNS users in Estonia.

It may be debated whether the Russian-Estonians are a true diaspora, though they exhibit the basic features of a diaspora that most scholars agree upon. Thus, there is also a Russian diaspora in other countries other than Estonia, there is some relationship to a homeland, they are self-aware of their group's identity, and they

have lived outside Russia for at least two generations (Butler, 2001: 192). However, Russian-Estonians have their own media and schools in Estonia. Furthermore, it is possible to organize one's life in Estonia with the knowledge of the Russian language only. Thus, Russian-Estonians are, despite their subjective and objective feeling of social exclusion, in a situation not many diaspora enjoy. No matter if one regards the Russian-language population in Estonia as a diaspora or not, the great need for cultural proximity but lower need for geographic proximity in SNS that the interviewees indicated, suggests diaspora-like attitudes and behavior, which, if further studied may contribute to existing elaborations on cultural identity of the diaspora and communicative networks (e.g. Brinkerhoff, 2009; Hepp, Bozdag and Suna, 2011).

The differences between the Russian-Estonians and ethnic Estonians in terms of SNS choice and usage that the focus group interviews suggested, seem to show a division of post-communist Estonia. This calls for further investigation especially in the light of studies that have shown that younger Russian-Estonians, in fact, do identify themselves more often with the Estonian state and with other Russian-Estonians than with Russia as well as with Russians from Russia (Vihalemm and Masso, 2000; Kirch, Kirch, Rimm and Tuisk, 1997). After all, it is mainly the younger generation that uses SNS. However, the separation in SNS and the increasing identification with Estonia by Russian-Estonians may not represent a contradiction. But with the increasing role that SNS play in people's lives, a separation between ethnic Estonians and Russian-Estonians in their use of SNS may indicate that the division between these two strata of the Estonian society may strengthen and persist in the future and that the challenges for an inter-ethnic integration may grow. This article aims to be an impetus for future research on this topic.

Acknowledgement

The preparation of this article was supported by the European Union through the European Social Fund (program Mobilitas – MJD18) and Estonian Science Foundation (SF018002s07).

References

- Aalto, Pami (2003). *Constructing Post-Soviet Geopolitics in Estonia*. London: Frank Cass.
- Agar, Michael (1994). *Language Shock: The Culture of Conversation*. New York: William Morrow and Company.
- Ahn, Dae-Yong (2009). *A Dynamic Model of Usage Behavior and Network Effects in Social Network Sites*. PhD dissertation. University of Texas at Austin.
- Baack, Daniel W. and Nitish, Singh (2007). Culture and web communications. *Journal of Business Research*, 60: 181-188.
- Brinkerhoff, Jennifer M. (2009). *Digital Diasporas: Identity and Transnational Engagement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Butler, Kim D. (2001). Defining diaspora, refining a discourse. *Diaspora* 10 (2): 189-219.
- Castells, Manuel (1996). *The Rise of the Network Society. The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*. Vol.1. Cambridge, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Castells, Manuel (2009). *Communication Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Comscore (2011). Europe Digital Year in Review – 2010.
(http://www.comscore.com/Press_Events-/Presentations_Whitepapers/2011/2010_Europe_Digital_Year_in_Review - last visit on August 6, 2011)
- Cusumano, Michael A. (2011). Platform wars come to social media. *Communications of the ACM*, 54: 31-33.
- David, Paul and Greenstein, Shane (1990). The economics of compatibility standards: An introduction to recent research. *Economics of Innovation and New Technology*, 1: 3-41.
- DiMaggio, Paul J. and Cohen, Joseph Nathan (2005). Information inequality and network externalities: A comparative study of the diffusion of television and the internet. In Nee, Victor and Swedberg, Richard (eds.), *Economic Sociology of Capitalism*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, pp. 227-267.
- Dou, Wenyu, Yoo, Boonghee and Liangyu, Ma (2003). Consumer patronage of ethnic portals. *International Marketing Review*, 20 (6): 661-67.
- ES (2011). Minifacts about Estonia 2011. *Eesti Statistikaamt*.
(http://www.stat.ee/publication-download-pdf?publication_id=25643 – last visit August 1, 2011.)
- Gevorgyan, Gennadi and Manucharova, Naira (2009). Does culturally adapted online communication work? A study of American and Chinese internet users' attitudes and preferences toward culturally customized web design elements. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 14: 393-413.
- Hallik, Klara (2000). Nationalising policies and integration challenges. In: Lauristin, Marju and Heidmets, Mati (eds.), *The Challenge of the Russian Minority: Emerging Multicultural Democracy in Estonia*. Tartu: Tartu University Press, pp. 65-88.
- Hepp, Andreas, Bozdag, Cigdem and Suna, Laura (2011, forthcoming). Mediatized migrants: Media cultures and communicative networking in the diaspora. In: Fortunati, Leopoldina, Pertierra, Raul and Vincent, Jane (eds.), *Migration, Diaspora, and Information Technology in Global Societies*. London: Routledge.

-
- Hermans, Charles M. and Shanahan, Kevin J. (2002). The reification of Levitt. Advertising preferences for Mexican and American online consumers. *Developments in Marketing Science*, 25: 147.
- Herring, Susan C., Paolillo, John C., Ramos-Vielba, Irene, Kouper, Inna, Wright, Elijah, Stoerger, Sharon, Scheidt, Lois Ann and Clark, Benjamin (2007). *Language Networks on LiveJournal*. Paper read at the Fortieth Hawai'i International Conference on System Sciences, at Los Alamitos, January 2007. IEEE Press.
- Iwabuchi, Koichi (2002). *Recentring Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*. Durham, XC: Duke University Press.
- Katz, Michael L. and Shapiro, Carl (1986). Technology adoption in the presence of network externalities. *Journal of Political Economy*, 94: 822-841.
- Kim, Yoojung, Dongyoung, Sohn and Choi Sejung, Marina (2011). Cultural differences in motivations for using Social Network Sites: A comparative study of American and Korean college students. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 27: 365-372.
- Kirch, Marika, Kirch, Aksel, Rimm, Ilvi and Tuisk, Tarmo (1997). Integration processes in Estonia 1993-1996. In: Kirch, Aksel (ed.), *The Integration of Non-Estonians into Estonian Society: History, Problems, and Trends*. Tallinn: Estonian Academy Publishers, pp. 25-73.
- Kruusvall, Jüri (2000). Social perception and individual resources of the integration process. In: Lauristin, Marju and Heidmets, Mati (eds.), *The Challenge of the Russian Minority: Emerging Multicultural Democracy in Estonia*. Tartu: Tartu University Press, pp. 117-162.
- Kwon, Kyounghee (2011). *A Network Approach to Web 2.0 Social Influence: The Influentials, Word-of-Mouth (WOM) Effect, and the Emergence of Social Network on Facebook*. PhD dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo.
- Lauristin, Marju and Heidmets, Mati (2000). *The Challenge of the Russian Minority: Emerging Multicultural Democracy in Estonia*. Tartu: Tartu University Press.
- Lauristin, Marju, Vihalemm, Peeter, Rosengren, Karl Erik and Weibull, Lennart (1997). *Return to the Western World: Cultural and Political Perspectives on the Estonian Post-Communist Transition*. Tartu: Tartu University Press.
- Liben-Nowell, David, Novak, Jasmine, Kumar, Ravi, Raghavan, Prabhakar and Tomkins, Andrew (2005). Geographic routing in social networks. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 102 (33): 11623-11628.
- Maimone, Christina (2004). *The Estonian Russian Divide: Examining Social Diversity in Estonia with Cross-National Survey Data*. Paper read at the Society for Comparative Research, 2004 Graduate Student Retreat, May 14-5, at University of California, San Diego.
- Nielsen (2010). *Top 10 Social Network Sites*. Study conducted by The Nielsen Company in July 2010.
- Olson, Scott Robert (1999). *Hollywood Planet. Global Media and the Competitive Advantage of Narrative Transparency*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Reed, David P. (2001). The law of the pack. *Harvard Business Review*, 79 (2): 23-24.
- Rohlf, Jeffrey (1974). A theory of interdependent demand for a communication service. *Bell Journal of Economics*, 5: 16-37.

-
- Rohn, Ulrike (2010). *Cultural barriers to the success of foreign media content - Western media in China, India, and Japan*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Rohn, Ulrike (2011). Lacuna or universal? Introducing a new model for understanding cross-cultural audience demand. *Media, Culture & Society*, 33 (4): 631-641.
- Straubhaar, Joseph (1991). Beyond media imperialism: Asymmetrical interdependence and cultural proximity. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 8: 1-11.
- Straubhaar, Joseph (2007). *World Television: From Global to Local*. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore: Sage Publications.
- Takashi, Toshie (2010). MySpace or Mixi? Japanese engagement with SNS (Social Network Sites) in the global age. *New Media & Society*, 12 (3): 453-475.
- Tillema, Taede, Dijst, Martin and Schwanen, Tim (2010). Face-to-face and electronic communications in maintaining social networks: The influence of geographical and relational distance and of information content. *New Media & Society*, 12 (6): 965-984.
- Tomlinson, John (1999). *Globalization and Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Turu-uuringute AS (2011). *Eestimaalaste Sotsiaalmeedia Kasutamine* (The Use of Social Media amongst the Estonian population). Study commissioned by Taevas Ogilvy and conducted by Turu-uuringute.
- Vihalemm, Peeter (2006). Media use in Estonia: Trends and patterns. *Nordicom Review* 27 (1): 17-29.
- Vihalemm, Peeter and Kalmus, Veronika (2009). Cultural differentiation of the Russian minority. *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 40 (1): 95-119.
- Vihalemm, Triin and Masso, Anu (2000). Patterns of self-identification among the younger generation of Estonian Russians. In: Lauristin, Marju and Vetik, Raivo (eds.), *Integration of Estonian Society: Monitoring 2000*. Tallinn: Institute of International and Social Studies, pp. 185-198.
- Whorf, Benjamin L. (1964). *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. Cambridge: MIT Press.