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Similarities and Differences between Social Networking Services in Poland and Slovakia

Introduction

Social networking is a new global media phenomenon. A large number of sociologists investigate a wide range of aspects associated with it: its impact on young people and children (Spálová, 2006), new ways of expression emerging among some social groups (Satková, 2006), connection between social networking and the traditional media in political discourse (Gajdka, 2009), selected visual aspects of social media (Wojciechowski, Mikuláš, 2009) etc. In particular, the success and fast growth of social networking in some countries is closely connected with the impact of one service: Facebook. Sometimes the word 'Facebook' is used as a synonym for social networking (e.g. Kalamdani, 2009). The success story of Facebook has had a similar scenario in many countries all around the world. Globally, an important milestone in social networking was achieved in 2008, when (according to Google Trends) daily unique visitors of Facebook exceeded 40 million, with the service leaving the most important competitors far behind. At the beginning of 2008, the popularity of most important social networking sites was approximately similar but at the end of that year everything changed.

Picture 1 shows remarkable changes in the distribution of social networking users. It shows that, so far, Facebook is the global winner. However, what needs to be considered are local perspectives. Facebook as a global player fights on many fronts with smaller, local rivals, scattered all around the world. Consequently, a lot depends on national Internet markets. For example (see Figure 1), the Chinese market by itself is able to compete even with the global market – at least in terms of the number of the daily unique visitors. Of course, all other local markets are much smaller, dependent on the interest of their populations, accessibility of Internet and mobile technologies and the amount of advertising. Even relatively small European countries such as Slovakia,¹ are big enough to create the competitive environment for social networking. Recently, just like in many other countries, the market has been

¹ The Slovak Internet market consists of 4,063,600 users (74.3% of population), which amounts to 0.9% of all Internet users in Europe. The Polish Internet market consists of 22,450,600 users (58.4% of population), i.e. 4.7% of all European users. (Source: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm#europe>, date of access: October 2010.)

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reduced to two major competitors – one is global (Facebook) and the other local (Pokec.sk).



Fig. 1. Global statistics (trends) of social networking sites.² Source: Google Trends

Facebook is still a relatively new service, created only in 2004. It was founded by Mark Zuckerberg as internal university network for students. But the founder himself as well as his co-workers understood the growing global potential of social networking. Facebook was the first service which removed the limitations of social networking, hitherto just an anonymous playground, and made it into a substitution of real communication between real (never quite anonymous) people. In particular, its creators focused on off line friends who are still – some changes notwithstanding – the main participants of social communication.

Without a doubt, access for almost everyone in the world is the most powerful weapon in Facebook's hands. This has been achieved as a combination of offering unique communication possibilities and the emergence of new communication needs of computer users, which together created the snowball effect – high level of publicity in the mass media all around the world. Suddenly, almost every Internet user knew about Facebook, and soon it started to generate huge number of daily visitors. For many people Facebook has opened the door to their social lives and the question: "to be or not to be on Facebook" emerged, underlain by the fear of impending social communication gap (Šramová, 2007). Facebook was also very generous in the way it broke regional barriers, especially linguistic ones. It has opened itself (e.g. by launching the free application called "Translation") to the needs of its users by letting them use any language version they wanted, which can be seen as a regionalization tendency within the global medium.

² Figure 1 shows the most popular social networking sites in the world. However, qzone.qq.com is a Chinese website, so from the viewpoint of this paper it is considered to be a local one. Also, myspace.com is not easy to consider being a prototype of global network – it is much more popular in USA than elsewhere, however its global impact (especially in pre-Facebook era) is remarkable. Facebook is different, because it is known and popular all over the world.

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On the other hand, there are several advantages of local social networking sites over global ones. According to the research project “Global Faces and Network Places” (Nielsen research report, 2009), Facebook has played the global game only for the last two years, after three years of lower-level development. This launch helped local networks to reinforce their influence. Second reason for the success of local players could be the language barrier, as mentioned before. For example, Slovak language version is available only since 2009. As Nielsen report shows, there are many countries, like Japan, Brazil or Germany, where local networks are more popular than Facebook.

There is a strong competition between Facebook and older local social services at the regional level. In Slovakia, the most important local network is Pokec.sk.³ This service was launched in 1999 and as it was the first one of its kind in the country, it accumulated a large number of users. At the beginning, Pokec.sk was a chat for teenagers fascinated by the possibilities of the Internet, but from the start it had the potential to create a social community. As most pre-Facebook sites, it was anonymous, as befitting its informal and entertaining character. Nowadays Pokec.sk tries to become more serious with support of its users, who grew up using the service. According to “Pokec.sk mediated information”, more than 83% of the users are 18 years old and over and an average user is logged on the service for 77 minutes every day. Pokec.sk is most popular among people between 18–30 years of age.

Pokec.sk is a part of Azet.sk, the biggest domestic player on the Slovak Internet market. Facebook launch was a challenge for local social networking sites all around the world. The question is how to react to “facebookization” of the Internet. Many things depend on the pre-Facebook positions of particular social networking providers. And there are big differences locally – for example, there is no equal competitor to Facebook in the Czech Republic – domestic services are usually focused only on the domestic market and do not adopt the most recent technological inventions. The situation is different in Slovakia. Pokec.sk was well known and popular already before Facebook, especially amongst young people looking for fun, friendship, relationships etc.

It is difficult to say whether Pokec.sk still dominates in Slovakia or whether Facebook has already become more popular. There are some measurement tools but the authors of the present article have not managed to find any research comparing the two services specifically. Because of different methodologies, the results of various studies are very difficult to compare. Therefore, instead of the official chart of daily unique visitors of both services, we present Facebook daily unique visitor statistics for Slovakia according to Google Trends,⁴ which shows a huge increase in the number of Facebook users, in parallel with the global scenario. However, on the basis of all available statistics and some anecdotal evidence gathered by the authors amongst their students, a similar level of popularity of both websites can be

³ *Pokec* is Slovak word that could be translated into English as a “chat” or a “talk”.

⁴ We have decided not to include Pokec.sk, because there is a significant difference between official reporting (AIMonitor) on daily unique visitors and Google Trends data (more than 300%). Also, data for Facebook are illustrative rather than exact, which is sufficient for the purpose of this paper.

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assumed. Quantitative research – the main part of this paper – fully supports this assumption.

In the Polish context, the most important competitor to Facebook is a service called Nasza-klasa.pl.⁵ For illustrative purposes, the current interest in local social networking services as compared to Facebook is presented.

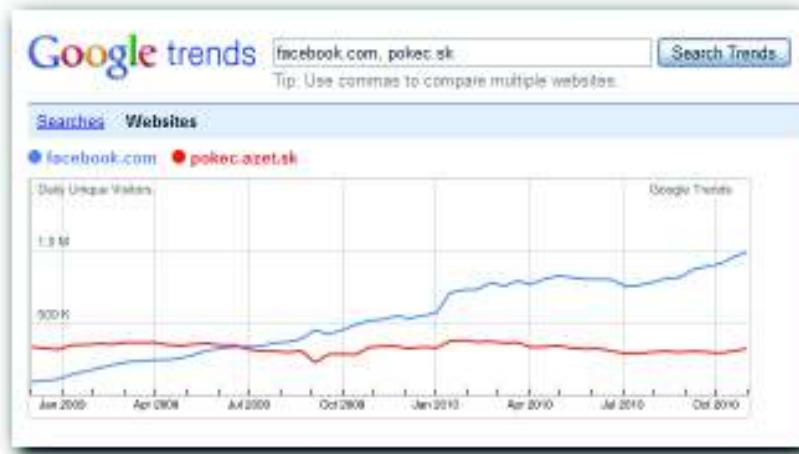


Fig. 2. Daily unique visitors statistics (trends) of social networking sites in Slovakia. Source: Google Trends

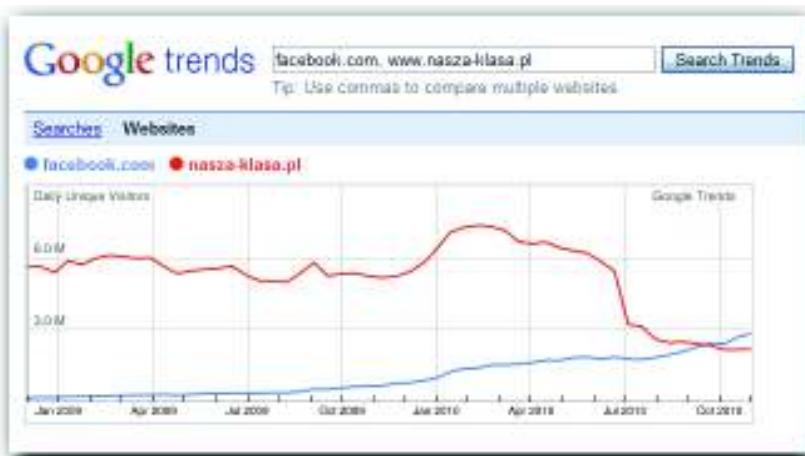


Fig. 3. Daily unique visitors statistics (trends) of social networking sites in Poland. Source: Google Trends

⁵ Nasza-klasa – Eng.: our (school) class.

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Research report

Problem questions

1. Which social networking sites are known and which are used by university students in Slovakia and Poland? Is there any difference between these two groups in terms of familiarity with networking services?
2. What is a level of usage of social networking services in Slovakia and Poland?
3. What are the sources of information about social networking sites among university students? Is there any difference between Slovak and Polish students?
4. What are the most frequent reasons for using social networking sites by students? Are there any differences in the reasons given for using the services between Slovak and Polish students?
5. Are university students in Slovakia and Poland focused more on local or on global social networking sites?
6. Are there any differences between the sources of information about social networking sites used by Polish and Slovak students?
7. Are there any differences between Polish and Slovak students in terms of their motives for using social networking sites?
8. What are the differences between Polish and Slovak students in terms of identity profile used online?

Methods and methodology

To answer the questions, the explorative method has been chosen: a combined questionnaire containing items of dual character, scalar items (Likert scale), as well as one open question. A Polish translation of the questionnaire was made by a native speaker. All items were discussed and tested on a sample group of Polish university students. Data obtained through the questionnaire were processed using descriptive statistical methods (arithmetic mean, modus, median, max. and min. values and standard deviation), some data were processed using comparative statistics (two-sample T-test).

Research participants

The research has been conducted on a group of university students in Slovakia (full-time students). 222 students took part; the average age was 22.5. Male/ female ratio was not balanced, reflecting gender imbalances of university population (40 males and 142 females in Slovakia, 78% of females in Poland).

Results

Familiarity with and the level of usage of particular social networking services is shown in Figure 1. It shows that the most favorite social networking sites among Slovak students is Facebook.com. The data obtained suggest that almost all university students know Facebook (only 3.2% respondents are not familiar with this service) and use it several times a week. The standard deviation indicates that the research group was sufficiently homogeneous. According to the data, Pokec.sk is also very popular. However, the research shows individual differences at level of usage

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among respondents, indicated by a higher standard deviation. Some respondents mentioned they used the service several times a month. Other social networking sites are used very rarely or are completely unknown. The following networking sites were least familiar to the participants: www.linkedin.com and www.Tagged.com. The respondents also had a possibility of indicating any other networking sites and were not limited to the ones included on the list. Some wrote down the sites such as www.myvip.hu (8.2% respondents), www.ivip.hu (4.3%), and even mentioned www.icq.com (6% respondents) classifying it as a social network.

The results obtained from Polish students are different. Familiarity with Facebook seems to be significantly lower among Slovak than among Polish students, whereas the opposite is the case with MySpace. Polish students use social networking sites less frequently than their Slovak peers, both the global and the local ones. The sites such as SecondLife or Twitter are better known and more used by Polish than by Slovak students.

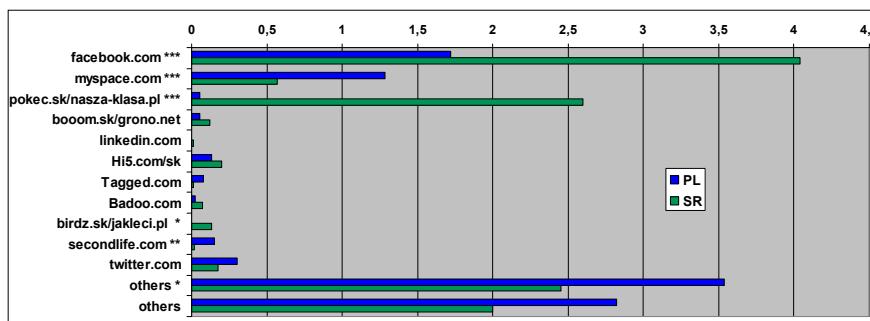
Tab. 1. Results illustrating the level of familiarity with social networking sites among the participants of the research as well as a statistical comparison of the two groups

	Slovakia		Poland		Significance of T-test
	AM	sd	AM	sd	
www.facebook.com	4.04	1.32	1.719	1.49	4.796E-16
www.myspace.com	0.57	0.80	1.286	1.23	9.549E-05
pokec.sk/www.nasza-klasa.pl	2.60	1.66	0.056	0.33	1.413E-16
booom.sk/www.grono.net	0.12	0.52	0.054	0.33	0.4614755
www.linkedin.com	0.01	0.11	0	0	0.5071851
www.Hi5.com/sk/	0.20	0.56	0.135	0.42	0.5194288
www.Tagged.com	0.01	0.11	0.079	0.49	0.1157352
www.Badoo.com	0.07	0.31	0.027	0.16	0.3794217
www.birdz.sk/www.jakleci.pl	0.14	0.41	0	0	0.0445102
www.secondlife.com	0.02	0.14	0.152	0.44	0.0026303
www.twitter.com	0.17	0.65	0.303	0.77	0.3273835
Other (write down):...	2.45	1.63	3.538	1.9	0.0146338
Other (write down):...	2.00	1.76	2.824	2.07	0.2060155

Only a small percentage of respondents know most of the networks, as shown by the data above. In Graph 2 the sources of information about the existence of Facebook are presented. Graph 2 includes only those respondents who declared familiarity with the network. The Graph shows that the majority of Slovak students learnt about Facebook from friends during offline exchanges (up to 77%), against 61% of Polish students having learnt in this way. Another important source of information about the existence of this network is the e-mail (15% of Slovak students) and the online advertisement (9% of Poles). Online ads and other ads are a relatively insignificant source of information for Slovak users.

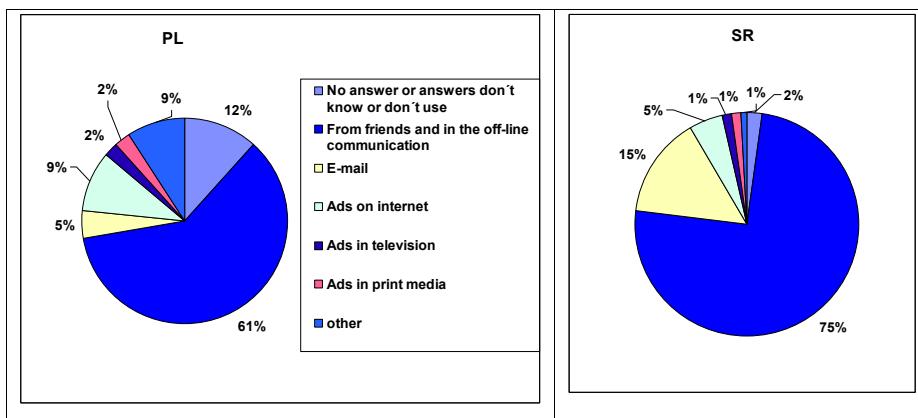
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Graph 1: Results illustrating the level of familiarity with social networking services and the level of their use among Slovak and Polish research participants as well as a statistical comparison of the two groups. Legend: Graph 1 also shows the frequency of one or two other networks. Stars show the degree of statistically significant differences between the groups of Slovak and Polish students (level of error probability: 0,001 =***; 0,01 =**; 0,05 =*)

Similar results as to the sources of information are obtained for other networks, although they are not well-known among the respondents. Even for the second most popular and most widely used network of Slovak university students: www.pokec.sk, the most important sources of information are friends (in total 74.51%), advertising on the Internet (10%), advertising on TV (6.7%) and the e-mail (5.2%). MySpace users sought information from friends (64.34%), online advertising (14.68%) and the e-mail (6.99%). Polish students are much more familiar with Myspace network than Slovak ones, despite the fact that both groups found out about its existence from the same source.



Graph 2: Sources of information about the existence of Facebook available to Slovak and Polish university students (respondents could indicate more than one source). Legend: figure includes only those respondents who replied; 2.74% of the respondents did not supply information, most of those did not know about Facebook

Among the reasons for using social networking sites reported by Slovak students, the willingness to stay in contact with people whom they meet regularly offline is frequently quoted. This response is given by a homogeneous and uniform group ($sd = 0.8$). The responses of Polish students were consistent with Slovak ones, however, the group who have given this response is much less homogeneous, which suggests dissenting opinions. On the basis of the results obtained, it is also possible to ascertain that respondents from Slovakia maintain contacts with people with whom they do not meet offline (online friends). Again, this group is relatively homogeneous. Polish students are once again less interested in maintaining this type of contacts. Differences between the two groups have also been found regarding the search for contacts abroad. Slovak students are not very interested in this type of contacts, while Polish students do not exclude this possibility, although it is not their priority.

Tab. 2. Reasons for using the social networking sites given by Slovak and Polish students – the data from descriptive and comparative statistics

	Slovakia		Poland		Significancy of T-test
	AM	sd	AM	sd	
I am looking for friends	-0.29	1.21	-0.42	1.22	0.54991479
I want to maintain contact with people whom I also meet on a regular basis	1.52	0.85	0.29	1.41	2.2277E-11
I want to maintain contact with people whom I don't otherwise meet or I have met them only few times	1.14	0.97	0.43	1.46	0.0003267
I am searching for friends abroad	-1.02	1.08	-0.49	1.26	0.00897392
I do not have any expectations. Everyone uses them, so I do it as well	-0.85	1.21	-1.11	1.12	0.24424919
Other	1.14	1.57	1.67	0.71	0.38561124

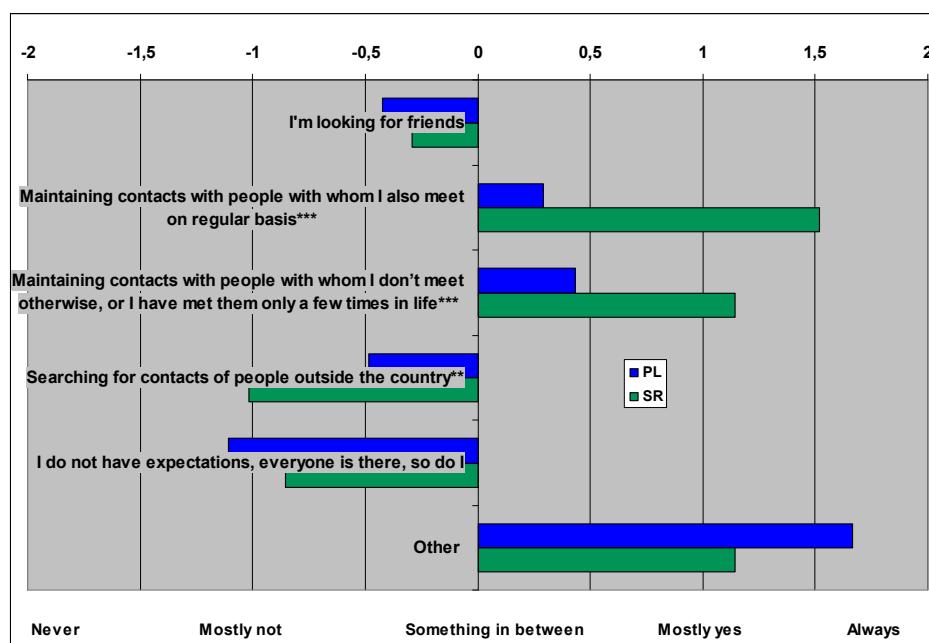
Only 6% of Slovak respondents (11) mentioned other reasons, whilst 10 of them gave concrete answers, namely:

- I want to keep up to date with recent events;
- I often use them instead of a phone or ICQ because many of my friends are there;
- I can get information about various activities and events;
- I can present my portfolio;
- I use it to e-mail;
- Many of my friends there – it is easy to reach them;
- I learn new information;
- I can inform others about various events;
- I use them for fun and games.

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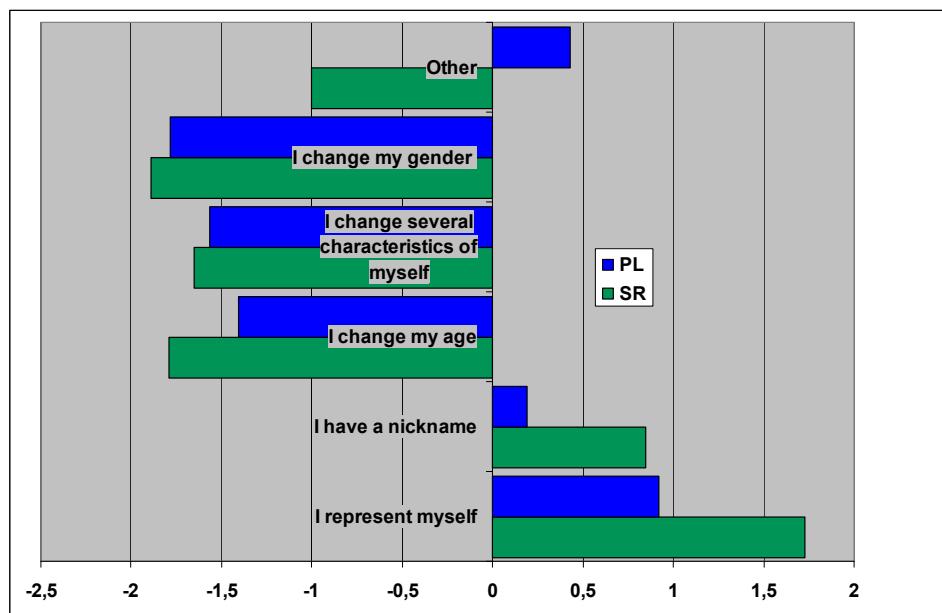
Polish students gave similar reasons (information, entertainment, events), but up to 23% of them gave different answers. A group of Slovak students do not take the opportunity of looking for new friends outside Slovakia, although the Internet allows for it (detailed results are presented in Figure 2 and illustrated in Graph 3). On the other hand, Polish students do not entirely exclude this possibility. Respondents from both groups tend to reject the notion of the so-called mainstreaming, whereby it is claimed that they register on these sites because “everyone is there, so I am there as well...,” (objections to it are much stronger among Polish students). Neither group considers social networking sites to be good places to look for friends, although the high standard deviation ($sd_{SR}=1.21$, $sd_{PL}=1.22$) indicates that at least some are of a different view.



Graph 3: Reasons for using the social networking sites among Slovak and Polish students – the average score

Social networking sites create a platform and give opportunities to experiment with one's identity. In the questionnaire this has also been addressed, although it would be more appropriate to ask a projective type of question incorporating it into the scaling of the questionnaire with direct questions.

The results indicate that both Slovak and Polish university students (dominant answers: “always” from Slovak students, “mostly yes” from Polish ones) use their true identities. Both groups responded in a substantially identical way ($sd_{SR}=0.63$). Slovak respondents very often use aliases (nicknames used by up to 47.8% of the respondents), but this group is not uniform (high sd – compare Figure 3). The majority of them answered that they enjoyed using nicknames (22.53%); only 15.38% do not use them on a regular basis, and just over 4% do not do it at all (Graph 5). Polish



Graph 4: Identity used on social networking sites – Slovak and Polish students

Tab. 3. Identity used on social networking sites – Slovak and Polish students

	Slovakia		Poland		Significancy of T-test
	AM	sd	AM	sd	
I represent myself	1.73	0.63	0.919	1.14	8.105E-09
I use a nickname, but otherwise I represent myself	0.84	1.51	0.189	1.43	0.0161966
Apart from using a nickname, I change my age	-1.79	0.64	-1.405	1.09	0.0044936
I change several of my features, interests and other things	-1.65	0.74	-1.568	0.69	0.5169563
I change my gender	-1.89	0.45	-1.784	0.53	0.208993
Other	-1.00	2.00	0.429	1.81	0.255581

students sometimes use nicknames and sometimes not. A significant difference between Slovak and Polish students can be observed in this respect.

Among the university students participating in the research, 84.07% of Slovak and 62.5% Polish declared that they give their real age on social networking sites and never fake any characteristics. Figure 3 shows that Slovak students have given very similar responses and their group is very homogeneous. The Polish group is more diverse, which is statistically significant. Similarly, Slovak and Polish students do not change other information about themselves such as individual characteristics e.g. personality traits, interests and others (74.18% of Slovak and 62.5% of Polish students responded "never", 14.84% of Slovak and 20% of Polish students "mostly not"). Only 1.1% of Slovak respondents and none of Poles admitted to changing their

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age and/ or personal characteristics (including gender), while this question was unanswered by 3.85% of Slovak and 7.5% of Polish respondents. The results also show that 1.65% of Slovak and 5% of Polish sometimes do change their traits. Up to 89.56% of Slovak and 77.5% of Polish respondents declared never having changed any of their features. There are no statistically significant differences between the two groups.

Conclusions

The answers to the problem questions presented above are as follows:

- Slovak and Polish students differ in the way they use social networking sites. They also tend to use different networking services.
- Slovak university students are familiar with several social networking sites. However, there are big individual differences in this area. Slovak students use mainly www.facebook.com and www.pokec.sk.
- Polish students are more familiar with www.twitter.com and www.myspace.com and use them more often.
- The basic sources of information about social networking sites for both groups of respondents are (in order of importance) their offline friends, the e-mail and the advertising.
- The most frequent reasons given for using the social networking sites is to communicate with offline friends with whom the respondents also meet on a regular basis but also to stay in touch with offline friends who are difficult or impossible to reach for a variety of reasons (not relevant to the Polish group)
- Slovak university students do not use social networking sites to look for friends abroad, even though they could do so (detailed results presented in Figure 2 and illustrated in Graph 3). However, Polish students do not entirely exclude this possibility.
- Both groups of respondents disagree with the concept of herd instinct as a reason for using social networking sites.
- Slovak students agree with the statement that they present their true identity while on social networking sites (this result is statistically more significant than in the group of Polish students). Sometimes, however, the protection of one's identity can be reasonable and justified so Slovak students could be considered as naive Internet users.

On the basis of the findings above, the authors have concluded that despite many opportunities that social networking sites provide, especially in what regards contacts with people abroad, the students participating in the study tend to use them for 'domestic' purposes, as an extension or substitution of the offline communication. This trend is more significant among Slovak students. Students are aware of the potential of social networking services (Wojciechowski and Mikuláš, 2009), some are even fascinated with them but others are critical and seem to be afraid that direct contacts might get replaced with online, alienating communication. The authors believe that online communication can be both enriching and detrimental for the society.

Translated from the Slovakian language by Peter Mikuláš

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Podobieństwa i różnice pomiędzy serwisami społecznościowymi w Polsce i na Słowacji

Streszczenie

Artykuł koncentruje się na rozwoju serwisów społecznościowych w dwóch krajach: na Słowacji i w Polsce, i ma charakter badania empirycznego z perspektywy porównawczej. Główna część artykułu obejmuje szerokie badanie wykonane wśród studentów słowackich i polskich uczelni. Na wstępie autorzy starają się krótko zanalizować rolę serwisu społecznościowego Facebook.com – jako najważniejszego gracza globalnego w dziedzinie serwisów społecznościowych. Korzystając z danych statystycznych, prezentują aktualny rozwój tego serwisu i porównując go z najpopularniejszymi serwisami lokalnymi, zarówno na Słowacji (z usługą o nazwie Pokec.sk), jak i w Polsce (Nasza-klassa.pl).