Offline social networks influence online behaviour: observations of a digital anthropologist

By Marcela Ospina

Here are some trends of offline behaviour that I have gathered in my most recent fieldwork, which relate to the practice of sharing computers identified in Angola.

Marcela Ospina

This piece is based on findings gathered over the past three years of doing research in the digital field in South Africa and other African and South American countries. Some of the contents are based on my research for the Digital Media and Marketing Association (DMMA), and Unitel in Angola. The findings for the research were released recently by the above-mentioned association.

"I have a laptop, but I can't show it to you right now, because my sister has it .[Do you share it?] Sometimes, we share it but not always. She has it now though. When I don't have it I go to the Cyber café, at least three times a week" (Jose, DJ, 24 years, Angola).

If Jose's statement is true, his use of the Internet prompts questions that for me go beyond his use of technology and mobile platforms. As an anthropologist, for instance, I would look at the circumstances surrounding his life, his offline relationships which prompt patterns of consumption, and the main factors influencing his relationship with technology.

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Internet cafes: offline and online socialisation hubs

I spent some time at various shops in diverse areas observing offline social dynamics, and talking to frequent Internet users. While I asked questions about people's online behaviour, I observed how they actually interacted with each other in real life. This was very helpful in understanding what drove their online behaviour.

The main observations are as follows:

- Internet users' interaction with digital platforms and social networks is in line with their offline behaviours. Socialisation at Internet cafes, for instance, and practices such as sharing computers influence the contents people search for;

- The more information individuals exchange with each other offline, the more online activity becomes social, as opposed to being exclusively individual;

- Consequently, Internet users are not only communicating with each other via online platforms (instant messaging or social networks), but they socialise primarily offline. In other words, they mimic the offline behaviour in the online world;

- As a result of the above, following, tracking, understanding and paying special attention to practices surrounding technology users' offline behaviours will be key when developing customised strategies for potential technology users.

- A shared online experience goes beyond functionality. While individuals usually have a pre-conceived idea of what to look for when online, couples recommend each other which website they should visit.

- In general, Internet's individual use is quite structured, due to budget constrains mainly. Internet access in South Africa is expensive, thus users need to consume information in a period of an hour (approximately), which costs them between R5 and R10. This model varies, provided people are accompanied.

- Couples of friends advise each other which websites they should go on to. In this case offline interaction seems to be enhanced by the time they (the friends) share while online. The contents they access, therefore, are influenced by their mutual opinions.

Practical implications: media for tight social networks

The feeding into mutual online activities at Internet cafes, I argue, makes digital social networks stronger. Couples of friends consulting contents with one another is an example of how socialisation patterns apply to online social networks, similar to the way in which they do in the real world. In Africa, the social model is communal, as families rely heavily on their members for survival. When talking about technology, they help each other by sharing computers and modems.

Digital interactions among people with an Internet connection (wireless or ADSL), though, presented different socialisation trends. The users became more absorbed in their online activities, while offline interaction was kept to a minimum.

Generating content

Understanding the difference between individual and social Internet users is crucial in terms of generating content that is relevant in each of these scenarios. For those who connect from a café, personal encounters enrich their online experience; for users who connect individually, it is likely that socialisation is exclusive to the online/mobile space.

A media strategy that addresses a person who only has R5 a day to spend online, who shares content with a friend or a partner, and who probably discusses such a content with someone else, must be different from that developed for an individual whose points of connection with friends, and the rest of the world are multiple.

In SA and other African countries, such as Angola, in which the communities' survival depends on how tight they are, online strategies must find channels that strengthen existent offline connections. Only by getting a good understanding of how offline social networks operate it is possible to increase the adoption of some digital and mobile platforms that require high levels of engagement.

These findings indicate that offline social networks, depending on their strength, can influence online activities through

sharing and exchanging contents. This information exchange reinforces new ways of socialising (online and offline), which must be taken into consideration when generating online content.

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Anthropologist Marcela Ospina Salcedo specialises in gathering cultural insights, specifically applied to product testing, brand positioning and innovation processes. She has a MA in sociology from Wits University and seven years of experience doing ethnography and qualitative research in South Africa, South America and other African countries. In 2009 she founded I for Instinct, a cultural intelligence and innovation agency for understanding the cultural differences amongst consumers, and how their use of products affects their lives to a bigger extent. Email her at me@marcelaospina.com, follow her on Twitter at @marcela_ospina, and read more at www.marcelaospina.com.
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