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Abstract

The popularity and use of social media is increasing in Europe. It facilitates a new emerging international business communication culture, which can help in developing new business relations utilizing the wide range of online applications. However, there are no studies, which help, in particular, small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) to develop appropriate strategies.

This paper identifies and discusses the problems, which arose when administrating an online social media survey in 31 European countries, and gives a short preliminary insight into the results. The main finding indicates the existence of different social media etiquette rules both among countries, ages and types of use (personal or professional use). Results also show that in countries where no personal networks of the research team were present there was a complete lack of response, suggesting that there is a need to develop networks initially before meaningful information exchange can commence.

Keywords: international business culture, social media in Europe, online etiquette, survey administration

1.0   Need for research in European use of social media

The growth of the European Union (EU) in recent years has led inevitably to an increase in both opportunities and threats for businesses across the EU. Arguably, the

group most affected by this enlargement have been Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) who account for over 99% of businesses within the EU (Prah, 2011). However, while the enlargement of the EU has offered significant trade potential for all firms across Europe, only 8% of EU SMEs are involved in export, compared with 19% of larger firms (Lenihan, Andreosso-O'Callaghan, & Hart, 2010). Yet ironically, it is these SMEs that could benefit most significantly from the new opportunities that have arisen.

Over the last decade the use of social media for commercial networking purposes has increased (Griffiths, Heinze, Light, Kiveal, & Sethi, 2010). Social Networks have a number of benefits such as a better understanding of consumer needs (Ferneley, Heinze, & Child, 2009a, 2009b) and possibilities for fast and easy collaboration. The social relationships play active roles in the internationalization of firms as they serve as an effective means of generating knowledge about both the geographical and physical markets that the firm may be interested in exploiting (Prah, 2011). Social media is increasingly used by younger generations of students and workers (Bell & Heinze, 2004; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Sage Pay, 2013), who have grown up with the Internet and are using social networks as part of their daily routines. Therefore, they are also interested in integrating social media into their working practices (Barlow & Thomas, 2011). However, there are no current studies that provide a guide to social media etiquette in Europe.

This short paper is structured as follows: First a theoretical background on the use of social media etiquette for international business is outlined; this is followed by the description of the data collection process which used similar techniques that a business would adopt for developing opportunities. Preliminary conclusions and reflections on the online survey participation and the response rate are discussed.

2.0 Social media etiquette

Social media etiquette refers to the commonly shared codes of conduct within social media. It is closely related to the concept of Internet etiquette, also known as Netiquette. Human interaction over the net is based on the basic rules of human interaction, but the possibility to act anonymously, the lack of the support that your body language gives you, the large number of people who might receive your

message, as well as the fact that by writing your message, and sharing a picture (instead of speaking and showing it in a face-to-face situation) you'll leave a more permanent mark for others to see, make the issues of etiquette even more important in virtual interaction. Naturally, netiquette builds on the rules of face-to-face etiquette. Therefore, the core of it is very much the same. One should respect others, act unselfishly, and respect other people's privacy and human rights. But there are also some additional rules that one cannot really know without learning them, especially if you are a business dealing with people internationally.

The rules of social behaviour vary according to the cultural sub group that one belongs to. So too do the codes of conduct on social media. These rules also tend to change over time. There are different rules in different media and among different user groups. However, some common rules apply. The minimum requirement is of course that one should obey the law. One should not lie or distribute inaccurate information. One should not act aggressively. Acts of aggression include swearing or shouting and are expressed when writing using capital letters. One should respect others' opinions and their privacy. It is also advisable not to post while under the influence of alcohol, since the possibility of losing control or acting inappropriately is much higher (networketiquette.net, 2013).

2.1. Reciprocity and interconnectivity

The main difference between traditional media and social media is based on the social aspect of the "new" social media. Traditional media is like a one-way street. The sender sends a message and the recipients receive it – for example sending a company letter.

Social media is more like two-way street. Everyone is active and everyone's actions influence the others. Therefore, the logic of social network usage is based more on engagement, reciprocity and giving than direct selling or promoting of your ideas or products.

The other characteristic of social media is interconnectivity. The more you link the posts on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, blogs and other social media services across

different media, the more visibility you will gain. Each media has its own characteristics and it's wise to combine and use each medium for the purpose for which it is best suited. For example, someone can link an interesting YouTube video to their blog and then promote the blog in a tweet (micro blog).

3.0 Methodology

The partnership brings together a multidisciplinary team of organisations from eight European countries: Bulgaria, Romania, Czech Republic, Finland, Greece, Germany, Italy and the UK. The team represents both universities as well as SMEs. As a multinational team, data was collected in all countries through a literature review, focus groups with at least six SMEs in each of the eight countries, which led to the development of an online survey. The online survey was administered in 31 countries, which includes the current EU member states and Bulgaria, Croatia, Turkey, Iceland, Romania and Estonia.

3.1. Survey

The primary target audience of the survey were SMEs and students, although responses from other institutions were also encouraged. The survey of students aimed to investigate uses of social media for non-professional purposes by younger generations of future managers. A target of at least 50 responses per country was set for all 31 countries. In order to limit the complexity of organizing and performing this activity, the survey was developed and distributed in English. Since all participants were not expected to speak English at an advanced level, the survey was short and designed with simplicity in mind. Two separate questionnaires were administered - one for SMEs and another for students. Both questionnaires included questions regarding the use of social media, but also a number of questions that helped to identify the respondent. Specifically,

- o in the case of the SME questionnaire, questions asked their role in the company (owner-employee-SME supporting organization), the country of location and industry sector. Social media usage was questioned in respect of a) use of social media, purpose of use, most popular networks and existence of social media policy; b) by identifying etiquette patterns among SMEs and c) by examining the level of interest in acquiring training on social media.
- o in the case of the questionnaire targeted to students, questions for identifying the respondent referred to the nationality and country of permanent residence

of the respondent, country of study, current status (studying at present or former student) and age. Also in this case, questions regarding social media included the identification of most popular networks, etiquette patterns in their use, as well as interest in acquiring training on social media.

The questionnaires were released in mid 2012 for 18 weeks. Dissemination of the surveys was based on three pillars – a European mailing list database, which was developed through the project, social networks and personal/professional contacts from people/organizations belonging to the partners' networks. More than 1500 e-mails have been sent to six categories of organizations for each of the 31 targeted countries. These categories included:

- o National and Regional Development Agencies and organisations,
- o SMEs associations (including chambers and sectorial/regional associations),
- o Business development and Consultant Companies (marketing, human resources, trade promotion companies etc),
- o University research centres/institutes on SMEs,
- o University career, placement and Erasmus officers,
- o Employment institutions.

4.0. Preliminary results and conclusions

There were 248 SME and 1356 student responses. This relatively limited number was mainly due to the disbelief/suspicion of the SMEs on research programs and surveys.
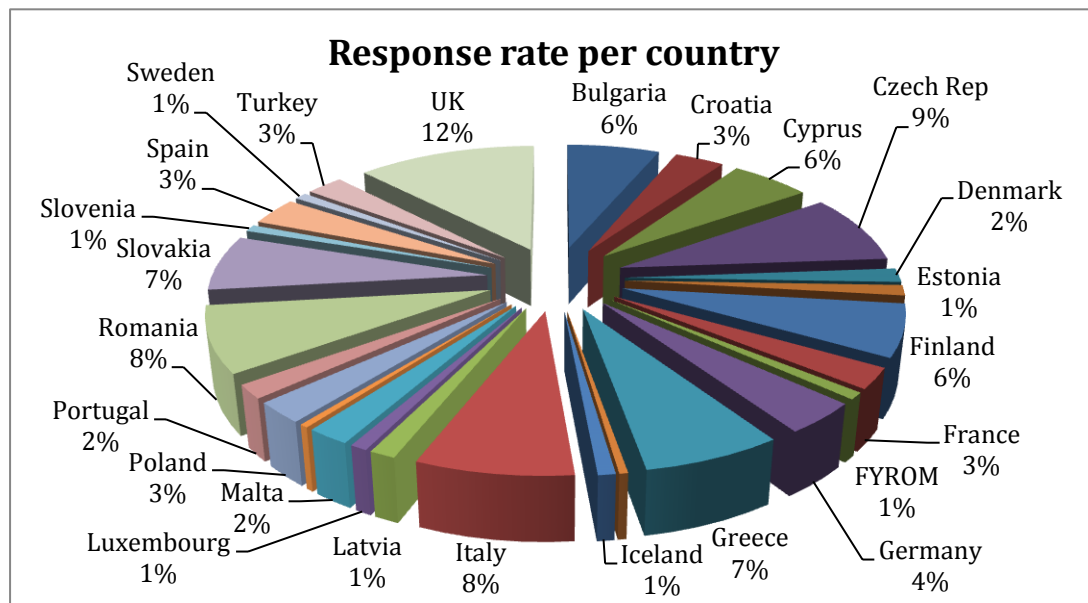

Figure 1. Location of respondents' organization/company

The distribution of responses among countries is not very consistent (Figure 1); countries that have a relatively adequate number of responses – and for which recommendations could be provided are the UK, Czech Republic, Romania, Italy, Greece, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Finland and Germany – essentially these represent the countries of the consortium partners.

More than half of the SMEs who responded (60.92%) use social media for business purposes; this use primarily aims to increase exposure for the business (82.57%), generate leads (54.13%) and develop business partnerships (50.46%), although in most cases it is conducted in a circumstantial or less organised way, given that only 27.11% have a social media policy. Some of the most popular social media among businesses are Facebook (51.15%), LinkedIn (33.33%) and Twitter (29.89%), followed by YouTube (20.69%) and Google+ (16.67%).

International differences in the use of social media were made by developing country clusters, which grouped the results as follows:

o Group 1: Former Soviet Union Countries and allies, such as Poland, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Czech, Slovakia etc.,
o Group 2: Mediterranean countries with Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece, Cyprus etc.,
o Groups 3: Scandinavian countries including Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Netherlands,
o Group 4: Central and north European countries including UK, Germany, France, Belgium etc.
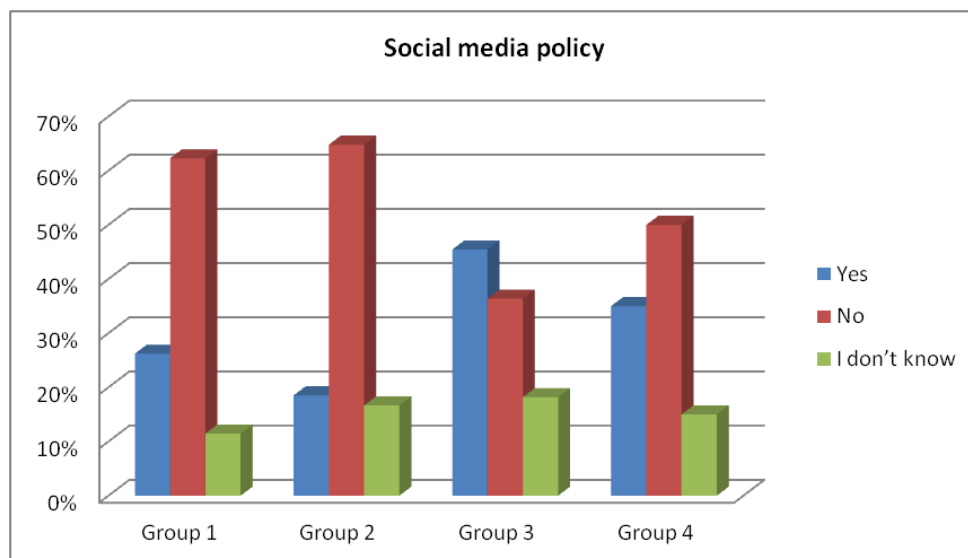

Figure 2. Social Media policy

SMEs operating in the first two country groups tend to use social media as a marketing tool (in order to increase exposure), without having formed a clear social media policy (Figure 2). In other words, they try to take advantage of the great potential of social media in reaching their customers (Figure 3). On the other hand, SMEs operating in Scandinavian countries (Group 3) seem to have a more sophisticated view of the way they can exploit social media, and for this they have defined (at least a higher percentage of them) a social media policy targeted to the needs of their business. For them, social media is not only a means of exposure but also a tool for creating business partnerships and also of creating marketing intelligence. Closer to the characteristics of this group comes the last group of Central and Northern European countries.
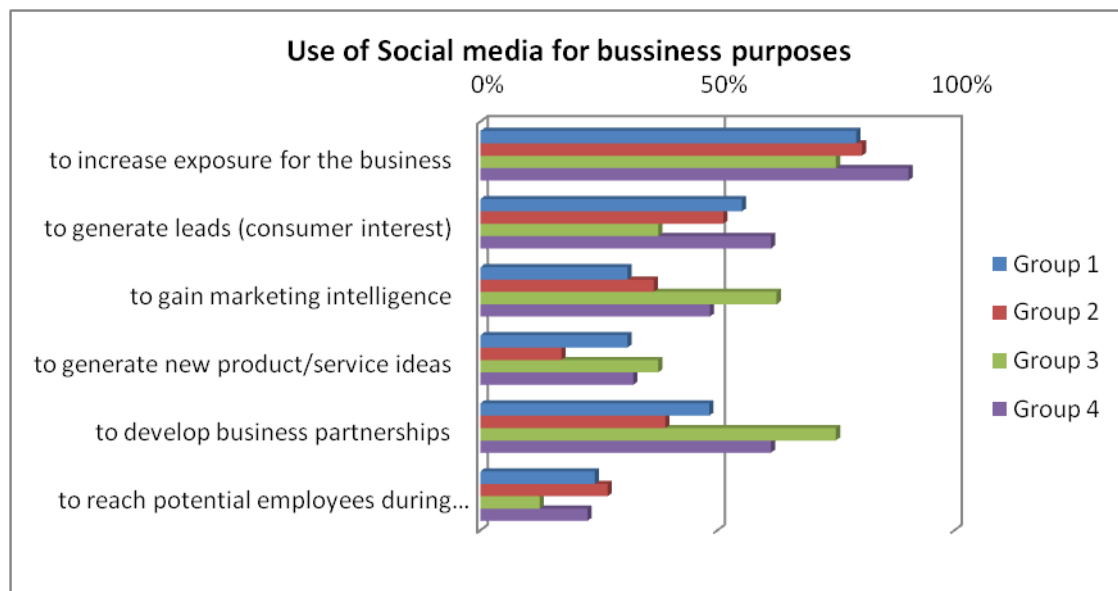

Figure 3. Use of social media for business purposes

The variety of social media used by businesses is reflected on the way in which it is used: according to the descriptive responses of SMEs, LinkedIn is mainly used for networking, developing partnerships and disseminating job openings, Facebook is for engaging with consumers, Twitter industry updates and receiving immediate information.

Regarding students, the results were significantly better. The distribution of responses among countries resemble that of the SME companies (Figure 4) – countries where a project partner organisation was present are well represented. Additionally, it is not

very consistent as there are countries, which have many responses (e.g. Finland holds 37 % of responses) and others with none (such as Iceland).
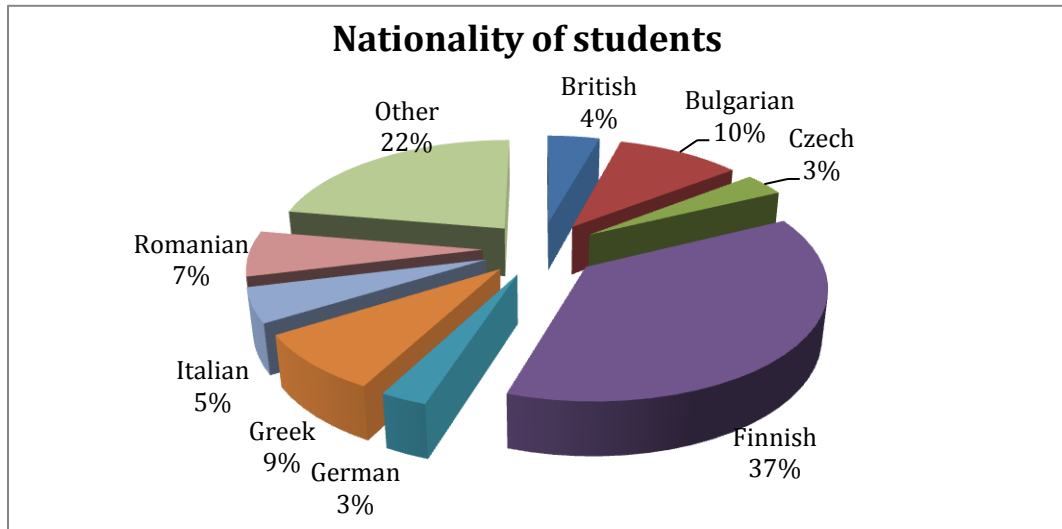

Figure 4. Nationality of students

While examining social media etiquette (Figure 5 and 6), results show significant similarities in the perception among the two target groups in the use of social media. A relative difference is regarding the openness of younger people in speaking to people they do not know; behaviour which is less acceptable by SMEs, despite the fact that their target group of connections is/or at least should be broader.
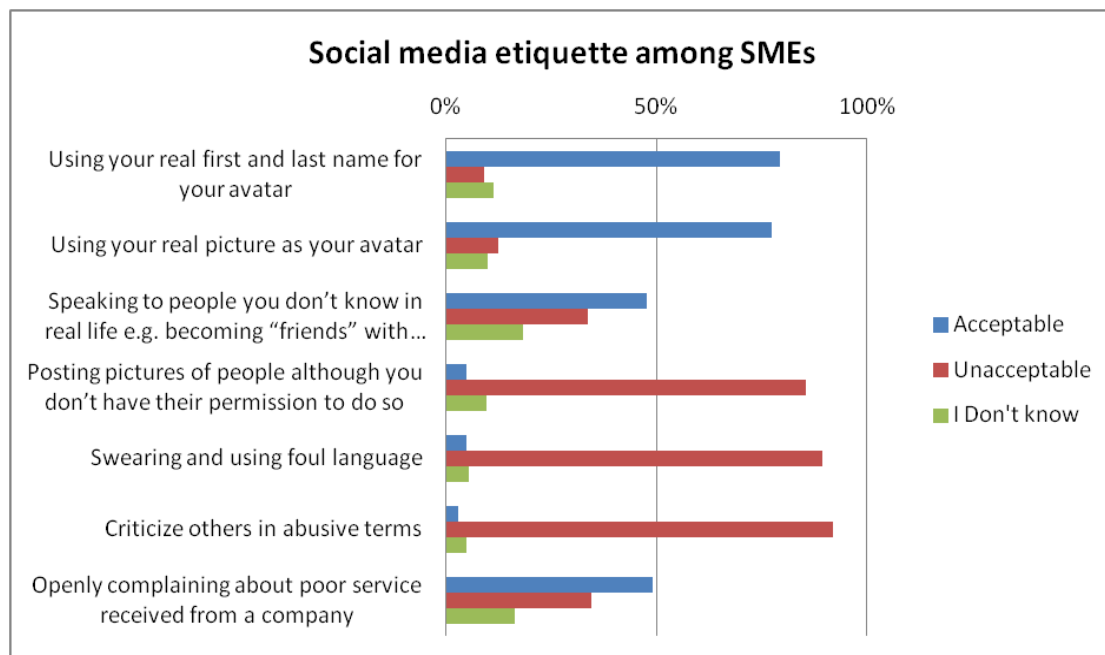
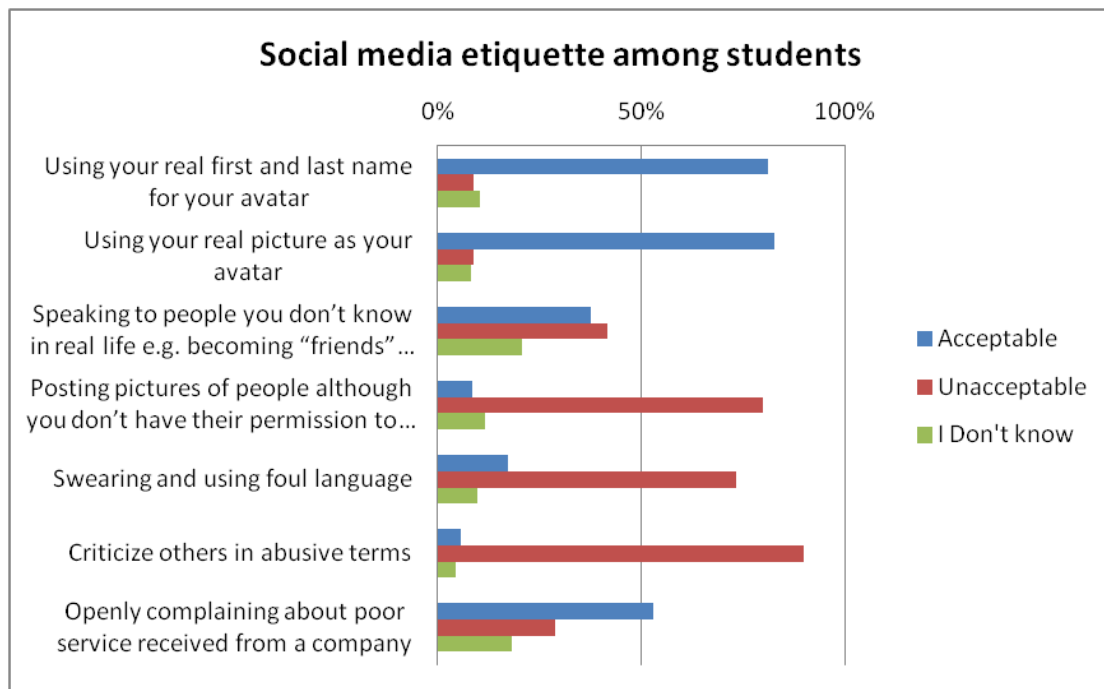**Figure 5. Social Media Etiquette amongst SMEs**

Figure 6. Social Media etiquette among students

Preliminary analysis shows that there is a significant effort of SMEs to take advantage of the potential of social media and, for this, more resources should be dedicated to training. There is broad range of social media that can be used for business purposes; and for each a different type of usage is adopted. Unlike businesses, personal use of social media is more directly linked to the popularity of the network among friends, people of the same age etc.

The main highlights of the survey indicate that the most effective data collections were in the countries where business contacts were able to recommend participation in the survey. In countries where little presence of networks was available, methods such as email and telephone calls were used but these were not effective. From an international trade perspective, we can conclude that if you don't have a personal network, you are less likely to be able to penetrate a certain country and therefore the importance of social networking for international business increases.

Acknowledgements

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