

Generating Customer Insights from the Global Village

In the past year, social media use grew 25% year over year worldwide. There is a Babel of voices online, and a more pressing need than ever to make meaning out of the noise. And while technology may be the great unifier or the great democratizer, it is not the great homogenizer—at least not yet. It may be that “the world is flat,” but cultural differences remain.

Sharing and deepening our experience

Since 1999, Communispace has been a leader in generating insights through private customer communities, the kind of deep understanding that drives innovation, improvement, and brand loyalty. To do our job well, it is critical that we understand if and how national and cultural differences are manifested online. Having recruited over 10,000 members from 80+ countries across all six continents to participate in our communities, we’ve acquired considerable data and expertise in recruiting consumers, discovering their needs, habits, and preferences, and both generating and delivering insights in culturally appropriate ways.

About this paper

In this brief paper, we will share some of what we have learned from a study of 8,416 members of 16 non-U.S. and multinational communities, as well as what we are partnering with our clients to learn through our ongoing research and exploration.

“Members from the U.S. and other countries talk about the economy differently. Americans tend to talk about what they are personally doing to overcome their current financial situation. Members in other countries tend to talk more about what their family is doing or what their country needs to do.”

– Communispace global facilitator

Countries Represented by Members of Communispace Global Communities

-  United Kingdom
 -  United States
 -  The Netherlands
 -  Germany
 -  Australia
 -  France
 -  Spain
 -  Canada
 -  China
 -  Sweden
 -  Norway
 -  Scotland
 -  Mexico
 -  Brazil
 -  Italy
 -  India
 -  Russia
 -  Singapore
 -  Philippines
- And others...

Drivers of Participation

Exploring community composition and dynamics

Of the 16 non-U.S. communities we analysed, 4 were single country and 12 were multinational (and facilitated in English). In addition to exploring differences by country, we looked at how diversity of nationalities within communities might affect community vibrancy.

Single country and multinational communities are vibrant...

What we found is that member participation was strong in non-U.S. communities. Combined, over one quarter (26%) of communities participated weekly; participating members averaged over three contributions per week; and 80% of the members who logged-in also made a contribution, while only 20% lurked.

...Yet cultural differences appear to be present

Members of global communities start a greater percentage of activities than do members of U.S.-only communities. This suggests that **consumer-generated content—members’ ability to start and contribute to their own discussions—is crucial to engaging members and valued regardless of community composition.**

Participation in multi-country communities was lower than in single-country communities. Given that all of our multinational communities are facilitated in English, it’s logical to assume this might be a bit of an impediment to participating for non-native English speakers. Thus there **may be fewer barriers to engagement when members share a geographical region or native language.**

Community Composition

Metric	U.S. only	Single country (non-U.S.)	Multi-country
1. % Weekly Participation	33%	28%	24%
2. Contributions	3.85	3.74	3.12
3. Lurker Rate	14%	15%	22%
4. Ownership Score	44%	59%	48%

Participation Metrics by Community

In order to analyze differences by community, we analyzed participation at the group, or community, level:

1. % of community membership participating every week
2. Average number of contributions made per member in a given community and week
3. % of community's membership that “lurks” every week (i.e., logs-on but does not contribute)
4. % of member-initiated activities relative to all activities in the community, or “ownership”

“I remember in the beginning we asked members to create their dream [product]. Members from the Europe and the U.S. really got into it, a lot of the members from Asia and the Pacific Islands didn't and asked us why we were asking them to do this.”

– Communispace global facilitator

Getting “Underneath” the Numbers

Creating connections that bridge cultures

We took a closer look at our multi-country communities to better understand how to engage and connect consumers when they don't share a common culture or native language. Specifically we looked at multi-country communities to:

- Identify the kinds of activities members initiated
- Discover traits that high-participation communities shared
- Learn from 13 Communispace facilitators who have managed global communities

Traits of engagement

The majority (60%) of activities multi-country members initiated were dialogues; discussions about topics that were relevant for them. They also initiated reviews of products and services in line with the community focus (e.g., travel reviews in hospitality communities).

Indeed, **some of the highest participating multi-country communities were organized around customer loyalty programs, like hotel chains, or very strong consumer brands.**

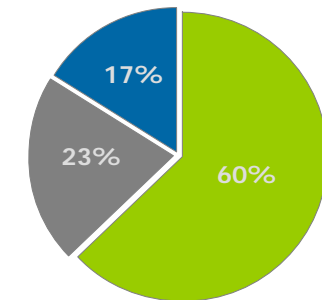
Creating bonds to connect across cultures

National identity is *not* the strongest bond between subgroups of members within global communities. Rather, our facilitators have found that **members form bonds in multi-country communities around common life experiences**. Previous research we have conducted has demonstrated a relationship between “social glue” and more robust participation¹. This finding may hold true across cultures as well. In some cases, cultural differences themselves, can become the community's center of gravity. As one facilitator noted:

“I think cultural differences are what is most appealing to these members because they are young and enjoy hearing the opinions of people from other countries. This was really apparent to me when our client had to completely shift their research agenda, which can really affect participation, but in this community they were okay with it. They kept their own conversations going and still responded to our client's new focus.”

Whether it is around travel, consumer electronics, hair care, or fashion, vibrant (and insight-rich) conversation can emerge as members find common ground with one another.

Member-initiated Activities
in Multi-country Communities



- Dialogues
- Reviews
- Other (surveys, live chats, brainstorms, image galleries, etc.)

“I think what brings people together in these communities is their love for travel. They enjoy talking about the different types of food they eat around the world and are exposed to other cultures offline, so when they come online and interact with members from other countries it's a little more familiar.”

– Communispace
global facilitator

What's Next?

Implications and directions for future research...

Culture is not synonymous with country

Although the focus of these analyses has defined “culture” along national boundaries, it is important to consider regional—or sub-cultural—differences. For example, our experience facilitating Spanish-language communities of Hispanics with varying levels of acculturation taught us to expect cultural differences within a single national group². In this case, these members had cultural backgrounds that emphasized family relationships, so they sought to form especially close bonds with each other and with facilitators.

The role of language

Most of the communities in this sample were facilitated in English. And although language is only 10% of culture (the other 90% deals with values and common experiences), it remains to be seen how fluency in language affects online participation and engagement. Future research efforts will explore the extent to which community members engage or not—with others who share their native tongue.

Other ways cultural differences manifest online

Culture shapes how we understand our needs, what we expect in relationships, our values, and how we behave at work and in other contexts. Cultural differences have been studied extensively: Geert Hofstede³, for example, has identified 4–7 cultural dimensions (such as individualism and collectivism, femininity and masculinity, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance) which are used extensively in business and the social science disciplines. Yet research has just begun to explore how culture affects consumer behavior online. Our next step in extending this research is to determine how Hofstede’s model describes members’ online behavior across cultures, and then to explore how it could inform efforts to engage consumers and facilitate communities more effectively.

Best practices for cross-cultural engagement

Although this research is still preliminary (and more best practices will surely emerge as we extend this research beyond participation), findings do suggest that:

1. Members for multi-country communities should be recruited, not just to meet company objectives, but according to members’ potential for shared experience, values, and interests.
2. Multi-country community providers should supply ample means for members to initiate their own activities and discussions.

Questions for future research:

What motivates people from different cultures to participate in communities?
And how should that influence recruitment?

Once members are recruited, what are the best ways to elicit insights based on culture?

We put a premium on a safe and intimate environment, what does that mean for different cultures?

Methodology

About communities, this research, and Communispace

Community as a methodology

Communispace communities are private, invitation-only, online gathering places hosted on behalf of sponsoring companies. In general, they are branded and have a membership ranging between 300–500 customers or consumers. Community composition is customized according to the company's purposes, and members participate in discussions, surveys, brainstorming, and other activities an average of thirty minutes a week. Conversations are frank and open, and conducted to create connection and engender respect. They provide ongoing and immediate access to the thoughts and feelings of key consumers or customer groups to generate insights and drive innovation for companies.

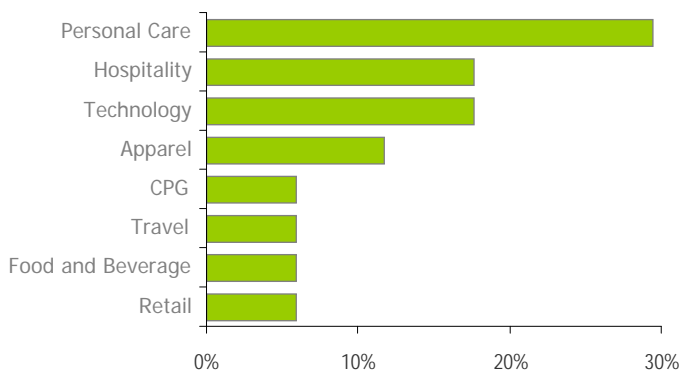
Data collection

We collected and analyzed data from the 2008 calendar year to benchmark member participation in Communispace run, non-U.S.-based communities. We also interviewed 16 Communispace facilitators of non-U.S. communities to better understand how they observe culture affecting community dynamics.

Sample

This research includes data from 8,410 members participating in global communities: 4 communities were single country (facilitated in native language); 12 were multinational (facilitated in English and comprising members from multiple countries).

Sample Composition by Industry



About Communispace

Since 1999, [Communispace](#) has created and managed more than 300 online customer communities to help our clients deeply engage with, and listen to customers in ways that deliver extraordinary insights, generating phenomenal business results. We enable companies to operationalize what it really means to be close to the customer throughout their organization by offering full-service community capabilities—from strategic planning and design to member recruitment, to expert facilitation and customer insights & analysis reporting.

End Notes

1. Katrina Lerman and Manila Austin (2006). [The Fifth 'P' of Marketing: Participation](#). Communispace Whitepaper.
2. Katrina Lerman and Julie Wittes Schlack (2008). [Hispanic and Latino Participation in Private Online Communities](#). Communispace Whitepaper
3. Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, Michael Minkov and Henk Vinken (2008), [Values Survey Module 2008 Manual](#). www.geerthofstede.nl



Participation by Country

Benchmarking participation across our non-U.S. communities

Online participation patterns vary by country

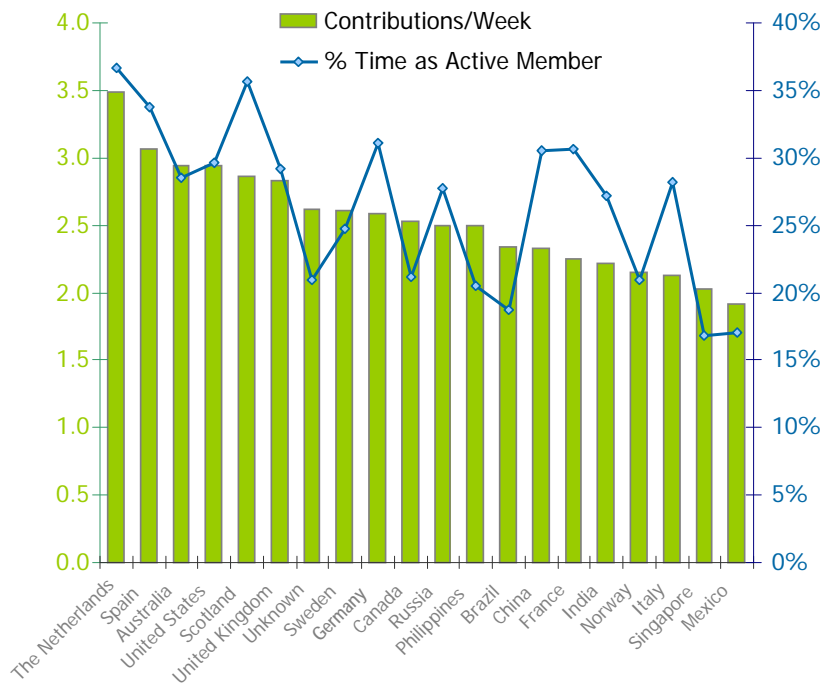
We grouped members of our non-U.S. communities by country to describe and compare participation according to two metrics:

- How “active” members were in general (frequency)
- And specifically, how many contributions they made on a weekly basis

We observed a range of participation levels by country.

In general, those countries where members contributed the most amount of posts per week also showed members engaging more frequently. There were a few exceptions however (e.g., China, France, India, and Italy), where members appeared to frequently engage despite fewer weekly contributions on average.

Participation by Country (N = 8,410 members)



Participation Metrics by Country

In order to analyze differences in participation patterns by country, we calculated metrics at the individual member level.

What is the **average number of contributions** (posts, surveys, images uploaded, etc.) individual members make each week?

$$\text{Contributions/Week} = \frac{\text{total contributions}}{\text{weeks in which member made a contribution}}$$

How **frequently** do members contribute?

$$\text{Frequency (\% Time Active)} = \frac{\text{weeks in which member contributed}}{\text{weeks member has been in the community}}$$

For example, Dutch members tend to post the most content every week (making over three contributions on average). While Italian members tend to make just over two posts each week. However, analyses indicate that Italians tend to actively participate on a more frequent basis.