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BREAKTHROUGHS

WITHOUT BORDERS

Generating cross-cultural insights in multinational communities



CULTURAL DIFFERENCES: DRAW OR BARRIER TO ONLINE ENGAGEMENT?

With the rapid adoption of social networking worldwide, are local cultures being replaced by one homogenized global culture, or is national diversity still expressed in online environments? And if cultural differences are manifested in online communities, what are the implications for how to generate and interpret the insights derived there? These are crucial questions for marketers and market researchers as they develop their online marketing and research strategies.

Our research indicates that:

- A “culture of connection” transcends national boundaries, though cultural differences are also manifested online.
- Multinational communities are viable and vibrant sources of insights.
- Companies should consider and accommodate cultural differences in how they recruit and engage community members, ask questions, and interpret insights.

UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Data for this study were collected in February–March 2009. We surveyed members of 12 multinational communities to assess differences on cultural dimensions. We studied how members engaged and how they communicated online to assess qualitative differences in language and participation. All-in-all, over 1,000 global customers and consumers participated, representing 37 different countries.



EXPLORATION OF MULTINATIONAL ONLINE COMMUNITIES:

THREE LENSES

1. PARTICIPATION

How is social media being adopted worldwide?
How often and how much do members of non-U.S. private online communities participate?

2. CULTURE

Are cultural differences manifested online?
Where are cultural expectations validated or overturned?

3. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

What does it mean for how you recruit members, ask questions, and interpret what you're hearing?

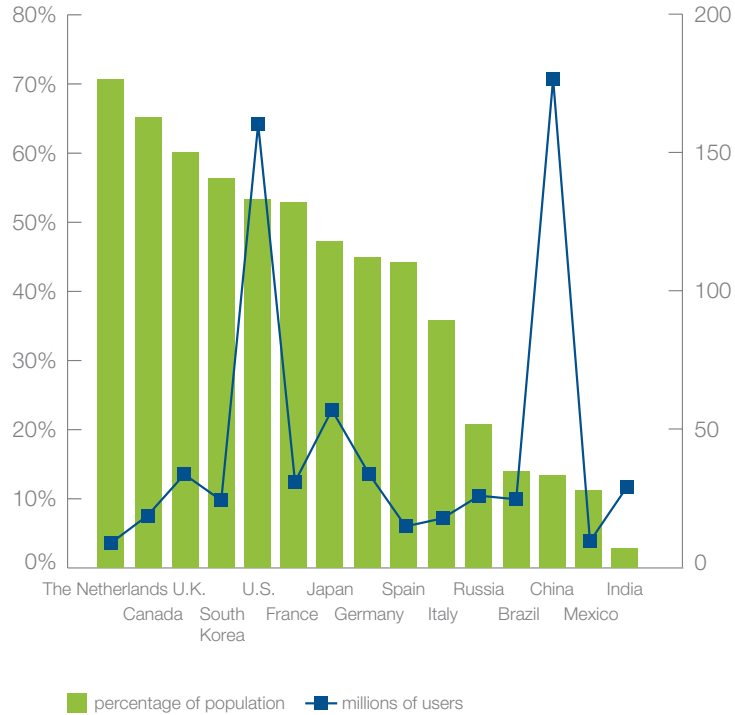




MEMBER COMMUNITY SITES HAVE ECLIPSED EMAIL IN THEIR GLOBAL REACH

Facebook now takes up 4.1 percent of European's total Internet browsing time. (COMSCORE.COM, APRIL 2009)

INTERNET PENETRATION BY COUNTRY
Top 15 Countries With Greatest Number of Users





PARTICIPATION

“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.”



– COMMUNISPACE GLOBAL FACILITATOR

PARTICIPATION

Single and multinational communities are vibrant.

The value of online communities as a tool for generating insights can be assessed through multiple lenses. Member participation—how often international community members log-on, contribute, and start conversations—tells one story. We looked across 2008 and benchmarked participation in 16 multinational and non-U.S. communities.

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In non-U.S. and multinational communities, about **one-quarter of all members participated each week.**

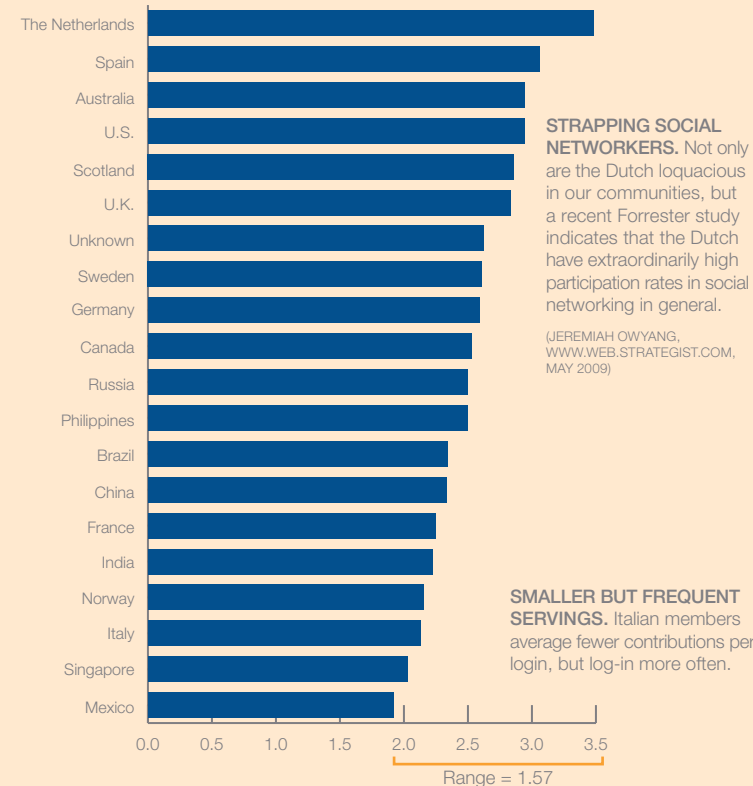
22%

Almost everyone who logged-in participated; only 22% “lurked.”

3.1

Participating members averaged **over three contributions per week.**

UNDERSTANDING PARTICIPATION BY COUNTRY



National diversity is more of a draw than a barrier.

“I always love to be surprised by other cultures. I’m full with clichés and want to change something about that. So I’m eager to get to know them.” –GERMANY, FEMALE, 18–29

Contributions are rich, reflecting cultural diversity and nuance.

“I love ducks. Chickens too, but ducks primarily. They’re so adorable to cuddle. I think a life has not been lived, if you haven’t ever cuddled a duck.” –SINGAPORE, FEMALE, 18–29

An intimate environment yields specific and personal disclosure.

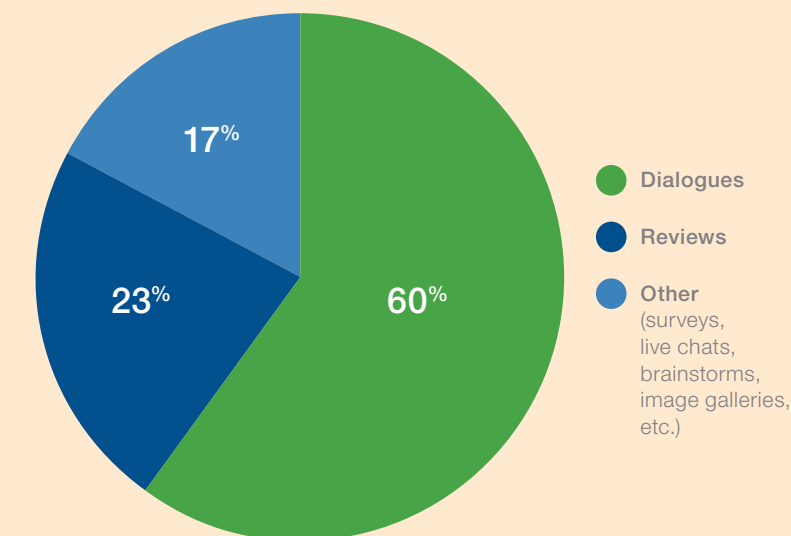
“I put my toiletries on the wash cloth without laying them directly on the counter. I guess the OCD from me and my husband goes an extra mile of always putting out the ‘do not disturb’ sign if we are staying multiple nights as some housekeepers do rearrange my toiletries and we generally do not want them to be touched...think toilet-cleaning hands grabbing your toothbrush...” –U.K., FEMALE, 18–29

COMMUNITY COMPOSITION*

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

*N = 8,410

MEMBER INITIATED ACTIVITIES IN MULTI-COUNTRY COMMUNITIES



Participation in English language multi-country communities was lower than in single-country communities, suggesting that there may be fewer barriers to engagement when members share a geographical region or native language.

But members of global communities initiate a greater percentage of activities than do members of U.S.-only communities (the majority of which are discussions). This suggests that consumer-generated content—members’ ability to start their *own* conversations—is crucial to engagement and valued regardless of community composition.

National diversity is more of a draw than a barrier. This high level of member ownership—that is, the percentage of activities generated by members rather than by us on behalf of our clients—suggests that national diversity in communities is a good thing despite the language challenges. As we’ve seen in communities where members are offering each other tourism tips, comparing pop culture icons, and sharing photos of their hometowns, this diversity is actually a stimulus to member ownership.

And past research indicates that the more member ownership there is, the higher the participation rate in brand-generated research activities.



“I remember in the beginning we asked members to create their dream [product]. Members from Europe and the U.S. really got into it, but 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



CULTURE

With the dawning of the Internet, many predicted that the local cultures of the world would eventually be replaced by one homogenized global culture. But this theory has given way to what's known as the **Global-Local Nexus, which means that instead of a global culture replacing local cultures, global and local cultures often exist together and people tend to be affected by both.**

GLOBAL-LOCAL NEXUS



Our qualitative analyses reinforced this concept of a global-local nexus, where the global culture is increasingly one of connection and where local cultures continue to thrive and find expression. For example, looking at some of the most popular television programs in Singapore, we see that both “Eastern” and “Western” shows are viewed.



Grey's Anatomy – a program that focuses on the interpersonal relationships among a group of medical interns.



Madame White Snake – a TV version of a classic folk tale about a love affair between a man and the spirit of a snake.



Friday Night Lights – a drama about a Texas high school football team.



The Unforgettable Memory – Taiwan's longest running program—526 episodes.



Good Morning Singapore – a news program that airs at 7 a.m.

GEERT HOFSTEDE APPROACH

“My approach is to make [culture] ‘discussable,’ beyond simple parroting of stereotypes...Through making such differences discussable, we can identify areas of international co-operation where it is possible to respect the feelings and the convictions of the various parties. The cultural dimensions I describe are very much a way of making culture discussable. They are completely neutral and there is no disadvantage in being on one side or the other of any one of the dimensions, e.g. being collectivist is no better or worse than being an individualist. For perfectly good historical reasons, some cultures veer towards one type and others towards the other. Once we determine cultural predispositions, we try to use the information to promote recognition and acceptance of these differences between the various cultures.”

PROF. GEERT HOFSTEDE, EMERITUS, PROFESSOR, MAASTRICHT UNIVERSITY
2006, *Human Resource Management, International Digest*, (14)3 pp. 12–15

HOFSTEDE'S CULTURE DIMENSIONS

What role might culture play in driving participation in online communities?

To understand if and how cultural differences are manifested in online communities, we conducted a study with 1,285 members from 37 different countries across 12 of our non-U.S. communities. We administered a survey developed by Geert Hofstede which measures cultural differences across seven dimensions.



Power Distance: The degree to which less powerful members of society are accepting of power hierarchies.

Individualism: Ties between individuals are loose and obligations extend to self or immediate family. (Collectivist societies have stronger ties and greater obligations to extended family.)

Masculine: Where traditional gender-based roles are embraced; in Feminine societies both men and women are expected to be modest, tender, and non-assertive.

Uncertainty Avoidance: The degree to which people feel threatened by uncertain, ambiguous, or unstructured situations.

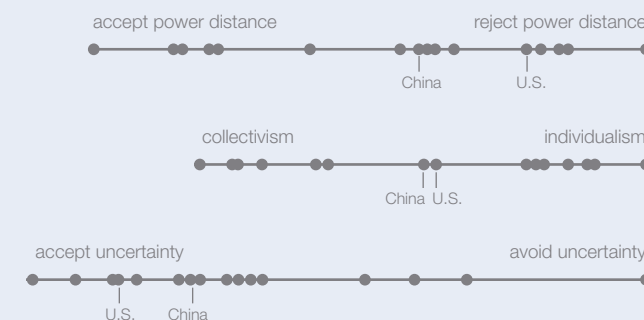
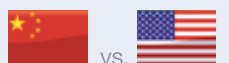
Long-Term Orientation: Cultures valuing future rewards such as adaptation, perseverance, and thrift (vs. valuing preserving face, and fulfilling social obligations in the short-term).

Indulgence: Allowing relatively free gratification of sensory, spending, and sexual desires (vs. placing tighter limits on gratifying those desires).

Monumentalism: Rewarding people who are proud and unchangeable. Self-Effacing societies reward those who are humble and flexible.

COMPARING CHINA AND THE U.S.

Closer culturally than you might think:



Cultural differences do exist, but vary across dimensions. The range of differences between countries was greater on some dimensions, such as power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and indulgence vs. restraint, than on others. And which countries fell where didn't necessarily correspond to our expectations.

CULTURE

While cultural differences are real and should be considered, we are increasingly seeing them become less pronounced as more people migrate to the online and wireless worlds.



Connectivity tools ranked 1st or 2nd in almost every country.



Nature ranked high in countries where nature plays a prominent role in the aesthetic tradition and were, until recently, still very agrarian.



Books and reading figured much more prominently in the responses of Western Europeans than in those from the Americas.



Cars, cameras, and appliances were almost exclusively mentioned by respondents from Western countries—especially the U.S. and U.K.



THREE THINGS I COULDN'T LIVE WITHOUT?

In a multinational community of athletic women, we asked “What are the three things you can’t live without?” When we view the results in rank order by country, we see that “connectivity tools”—laptops, smartphones, Internet, Facebook, and so on—were ranked first or second in almost every country. Yet cultural differences are apparent in the lower ranking items on members’ lists.

	CHINA	INDIA	BRAZIL	MEXICO	RUSSIA	FRANCE	U.K.	U.S.
Family	Connectivity tools	Food/beverage	Connectivity tools	Friends	Connectivity tools	Connectivity tools	Connectivity tools	Food/beverage
Connectivity tools	Clothes	Comfort/personal care	Food/beverage	Connectivity tools	Family	Food/beverage	Connectivity tools	
Music/iPod	Music/iPod	Clothes	Music/iPod	Books/writing	Clothes	Comfort/personal care	Comfort/personal care	
Entertainment/TV	Food/beverage	Connectivity tools	Entertainment/TV	Food/beverage	Entertainment/TV	Family	Family	
Food/beverage	Books/writing	Friends	Car	Exercise	Comfort/personal care	Clothes	Clothes	
Personal attribute	Family	Books/writing	Love	Work/job	Music/iPod	Music/iPod	Music/iPod	
Books/writing	Nature	Family			Books/writing	Entertainment/TV	Entertainment/TV	
Nature		Pets/animals			Food/beverage	Exercise	Pets/animals	
Pets/animals					Friends	Friends	Exercise	
Love					Pets/animals	Books/writing	Friends	
Work/job					Car	Camera	Books/writing	
						Personal attribute	Car	
						Love	Camera	
						Religion	Personal attribute	
						Appliances	Love	
							Religion	
							Appliances	



PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

“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

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

In multinational or multicultural communities where the common language may not be everyone's native language, **be attentive to finding and strengthening the social glue.** Recruit people for multinational communities not just to meet company objectives, but based on members' potential for shared experience, values, and interests.

Provide ample means for members to initiate their own activities and discussions. Let them explore and celebrate their differences and commonalities on their own terms, not just yours.

Enable members to participate through multiple modes (e.g., images, text, and video) **and forms** (e.g., surveys, brainstorming, and discussions). Let them share through pictures as well as words, in anonymous as well as named ways, and in open-ended as well as closed-ended ways.

Keep cultural differences and nuances in mind in terms of spelling, word choices, symbols, and humor. When running multinational communities, we routinely use anglicized spellings, display time in 24-hour clock format, enable localized time zones, and display currency symbols in multiple forms. These are all matters of basic etiquette, but a failure to abide by them can have serious consequences in eroding members' sense of mutual respect and trust.

LESSONS LEARNED IN RECRUITMENT

- ★ When screening prospective community members from Vietnam, Cambodia, and other Southeast Asian countries, we were losing many on the question that asked, **“Do you or anyone in your household...”** work in specific industries—not because these countries had a disproportionate number of people working in the industries in question, but rather, because their households were larger and more generationally diverse than the typical American nuclear family household.
- ★ **“Customers in control!”** or **“Have a voice and influence major corporations”**—is a less resonant invitation in countries with a higher acceptance of power difference or a more Collectivist orientation. In these countries, people tend to speak the language of the greater good, of duties, and obligations.
- ★ Respondents from more Self-Effacing and Feminine cultures are much less likely to describe themselves as **experts**, or **influential**, or as sought after for their knowledge, even when we know they are. As a result, we had to lower our threshold on some rating scales related to this, as people from these countries were self-disqualifying in unusually high numbers.

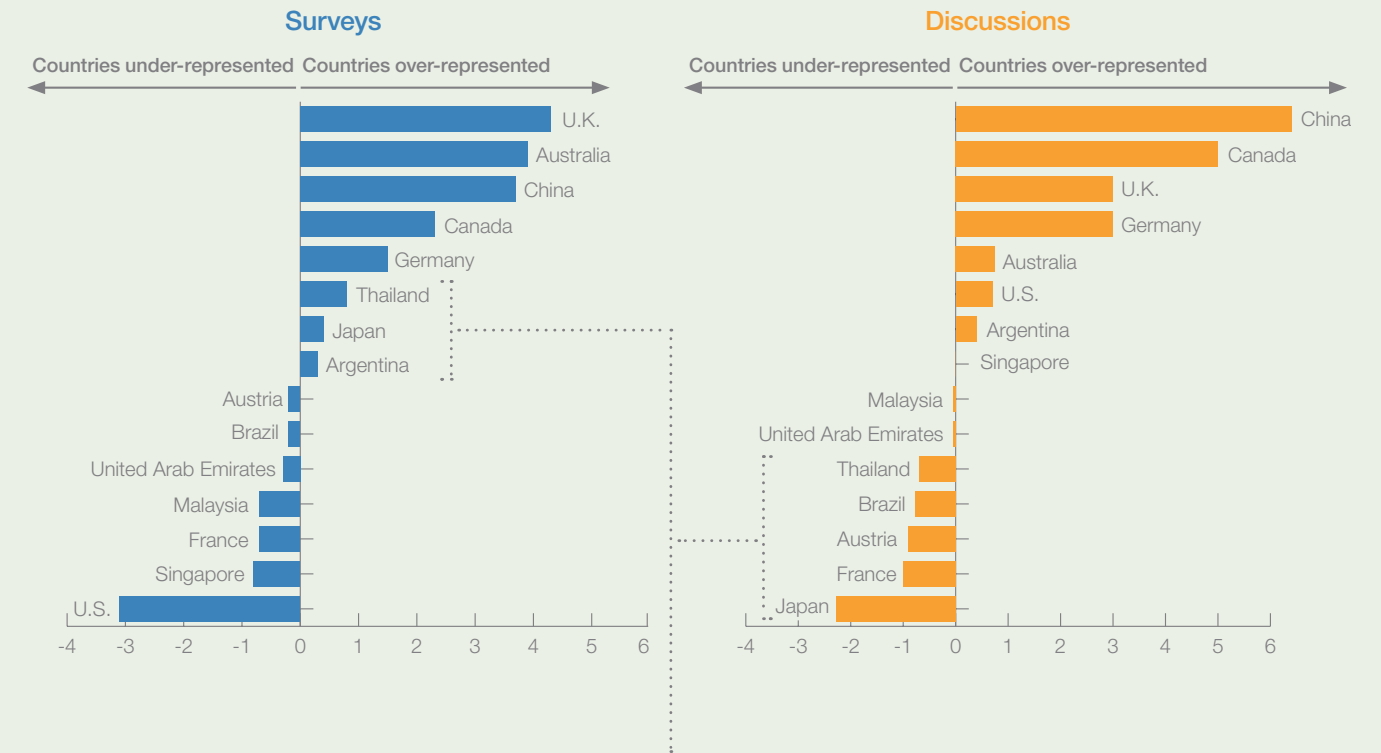
RECRUITMENT RULES OF THUMB

1. When asking questions about the “household,” consider that the size and composition of households still may vary tremendously from country to country.
2. When seeking to engage members, recognize that messages of empowerment and being heard may not be as compelling as messages of helping others or fulfilling one's responsibility to help companies improve.
3. If seeking Influentials, recognize that people from more Monumentalist and Masculine cultures are going to feel more comfortable describing themselves as expert and knowledgeable than are people from more Self-Effacing and Feminine cultures.

PARTICIPATION IN SURVEYS VS. DISCUSSIONS

5 months of activity, 1 multinational community:

Percentage over- or under-represented by country



*Thai and Japanese members preferred structured surveys over open-ended discussion, whereas United States and Singapore members showed the opposite pattern.

TAILOR YOUR METHODS TO BE CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE

When your mission is to generate insights, cultural differences may also have implications for how you ask questions and design activities.

For example, wide-open, and free-form activities such as discussions or ideation projects may be more appealing to those cultures with a high acceptance of uncertainty, while a more closed-ended set of choices may resonate more with people from cultures who are uncomfortable with uncertainty and more accepting of power differences.

And if you're trying to understand your customers' insecurities and anxieties, you may not be best served by asking directly if they are from very Masculine cultures. Instead, projective techniques or asking them to tell stories about their wives' or their friends' worries or insecurities may yield better results.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Just as important as knowing how to engage and talk to people online across cultures, is knowing how to *listen* in culturally appropriate ways.

RECOGNIZE THAT DIVERSITY IS A DRAW AND A WELLSPRING OF INSIGHTS

Interactions between a diverse group of members (and a trained facilitator) can help to reveal unique insights into the language and traditions of specific cultures. As members get to know each other, they naturally explore these differences and bring unsought but relevant cultural insights to the surface through organic conversation. In the example below a Filipino woman explains the term “food tripping,” several members join the conversation and the sponsoring company gets exposure to a phenomenon that they had not thought to ask about themselves...



Philippines: I love food tripping...

Facilitator (U.S.): I have to ask...what is food tripping?

Germany: Never heard of it...

Philippines: Hi everyone! Sorry for the new term. In the Philippines, we use this term to describe the interest in exploring new food and new restaurant. Example, if I say I want to go food tripping today, it means that I’m going to explore for a new restaurant with good food...it’s like when you like to listen to music, you go ‘sound tripping’...

Philippines (different member): Also, in the Philippines, food tripping is also the term used when we want to eat different foods or foods of different cooking. Like if I say let’s go food tripping, I’ll just buy whatever I see or whatever I want: pizza, then cake, then barbecue, any sweets, all in one day!

India: A lovely word that...as a member of the club of those who love eating out, I welcome all of you to Chandigarh in India... you will enjoy all the different types of Indian food that is available out here...in addition to the international varieties...You are also invited to any home made Indian food that you might like to eat at my residence...I assure you that I am not all that bad of a cook.



BE COGNIZANT OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN INTERPRETING WHAT YOU HEAR

As an ice-breaking activity when we launch a community, we ask members to introduce themselves through a “5 (or 10) Things About Me” discussion.

Some tend to focus on personal characteristics (e.g., their love of pets or Radiohead), while others describe themselves in terms of connections (to cities, countries, family, or traditions). These differences often correlate to differences between countries on the Individualism/Collectivism dimension.

Focuses on personal characteristics:

1. **I love pets** especially dogs, and I speak to every dog I see around;
2. **I love tennis** and Roger Federer is my favorite;
3. **I love reading** and my favorite writer is G.G. Marquez;
4. **I love Radiohead**, U2, Pink Floyd;
5. Sometimes I can be really serious and sometimes I can be quite crazy!
6. When I was younger people told me I looked like John Lennon and I like it very much;
7. I love to spend time with my friends;
8. I spend too much time on my PC...

Describes self in terms of connections:

1. I was born in Hong Kong. Came to Vancouver, B.C. for kindergarten and first 2 years of elementary school. **Then return to Hong Kong for 10 years to learn Chinese (daddy said Chinese people must know Chinese).** Then return to Vancouver for last year of high school and university...
2. If counting unique cities, I moved 6 places over 3 countries in last 10 years... I know native level of English, high school level Cantonese (Chinese) and kindergarten level Japanese.
3. **I visit Hong Kong twice a year to pay my tribute to grandparents (cultural thing).** I visit Japan twice a year to see how my students are improving with their English...



METHOD AND RATIONALE

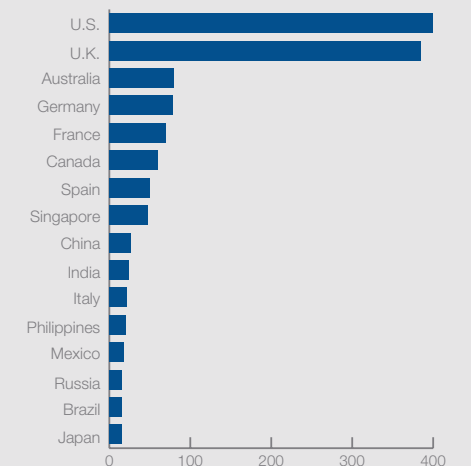
Data for this study were collected in January, February, and March of 2009. We administered Hofstede’s cultural values survey (VSM 08) in 12 of our non-U.S. communities. It should be noted that our sample sizes for some countries were not large enough and our members not demographically similar enough to calculate a score according to the VSM 08 manual. In all the Hofstede analyses we have only reported results for those countries that were represented by at least 5 members; even so, we have constrained our analyses to examining the general range of scores (as opposed to staking our findings on precise comparisons country-by-country).

Our goal was to develop some best practices about how to do a better job of recruiting and engaging members from different cultures, generating insights from them, and having a more nuanced context for interpreting those insights. Thus we supplemented the quantitative Hofstede method with qualitative analyses of member behavior across non-U.S. communities.

SAMPLE

The cultural difference analyses include data from 12 communities; 1,285 members across 37 countries.

BREAKDOWN BY COUNTRY





communispace™



Since 1999, Communispace Corporation has created and managed more than 300 online customer communities to help our Fortune 1000 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 and analysis reporting.