

Glocal Netnography

What to Keep in Mind in Global Web Community-based Qualitative Research

by Thomas Schindlbeck | September 2010

Online-based qualitative research has established itself as a valid alternative and addition to the classic roster of explorative methodologies. Among the most relevant tools are web community platforms: based on the principle of blogging and interaction, in a way similar to online forums. It is because of these terms that web community-based qualitative research is frequently confused with crowd sourcing and data mining approaches, which focus on analysing individual blogs and open forums on the web. So to begin with, we should be precise about the methodological approach.

A web community, when used as a platform for qualitative research projects, is defined as a limited number of respondents recruited – mostly

offline – to fulfil the requirements of the target group criteria. This group of people is invited to participate in a moderated forum over a certain period of time, usually from between a week to a fortnight. Participants are encouraged to blog about a specific topic, to comment in threads, and to upload pictures, movies or music to illustrate their thoughts.

Due to the various possibilities of expression and interaction, this type of focus blogging has become an important research component, especially as part of international studies. In this context, the opportunity to observe and to supervise a project without extensive travel has a positive effect on time frames and cost structures.

This approach opens up a new dimension of consumer closeness. As such, it helps to create insight platforms for brand, product and communication strategy.

Glocalness of web communication

Web 2.0 is quite naturally regarded as a global phenomenon. This could lead to the assumption that web-based communication evens out cultural differences of expression and interaction. Even a qualified researcher might fall into this trap, so when getting involved in the world of online communities, it is best, as with all ethnographic research, to follow John Cage's advice: "What I am proposing, to myself and to other people, is what I often call the tourist attitude – that you act as though you've never been there before. So that you're not *supposed* to know anything about it. If you really get down to brass tacks, we have never been anywhere before."

Taking off the global hat when observing and analysing the output of community-based focus blogs leads us to a phenomenon not unfamiliar to qualitative researchers: while a deeper understanding of different markets and cultures should always question clichés, there is a reason why certain clichés have arisen. Everyone who is a member of an open web-based community, and participates in a forum frequented by members from different countries and cultural spheres, is probably aware of communication patterns strongly linked to what could be considered as stereotypes. This becomes obvious when analysing focus blogs conducted in

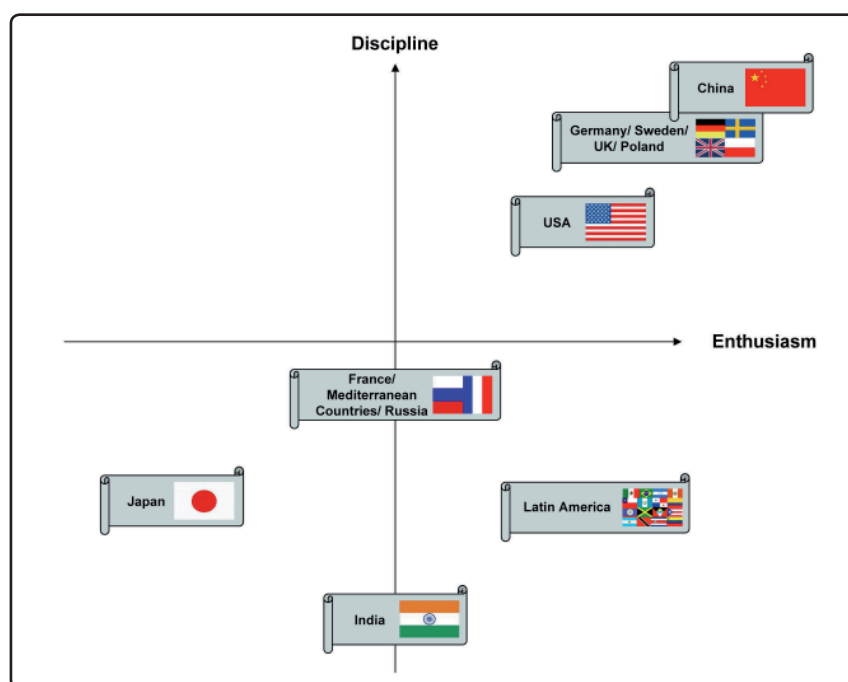


Fig. 1: Levels of discipline and enthusiasm in moderated blogs

varying markets and covering a wide spectrum of topics such as nutrition, snacking, personal hygiene, health, technology and trends in fashion and design. There are two clearly visible dimensions which help to characterise different ways of involvement and communication: discipline and enthusiasm.

Discipline in the sense of a basically serious and determined attitude about one's participation, and the tasks suggested by the moderator. Enthusiasm in the sense of emotional involvement and the fun aspect of getting together with other people. In an ideal focus blogging world, respondents would be just as enthusiastic about exchanging their views and thoughts as they would be disciplined when it comes to dealing with the actual topic and purpose of the research.

Cultural Differences

Looking at the blogs, however, shows that even a high correlation of these two dimensions can lead to different types of output. Chinese respondents usually have a both highly determined and motivated attitude when participating in focus blogs (see figure 1). They clearly want to *do well* even when the moderator puts an emphasis on a casual, easy-going atmosphere, often more helpful when it comes to ethnographic approaches. As a consequence, Chinese blogs benefit from a short rhythm of tasks. It is even recommendable to split a more holistic task into several sub-tasks to keep the momentum going.

However, not everything posted in Chinese blogs might be an expression of an individual thought. Chinese

respondents are the masters of copy and paste which helps them to come up with a multitude of thoughts and answers. It is a challenge for both the moderator and the analyst to differentiate between the different sources of these qualitative data and, as with other multi-cultural blogging projects, it is crucial to have local moderators and analysts involved.

Focus blogs involving Northern and continental European countries such as UK, Germany, Sweden or Poland usually show a harmonious balance between discipline and enthusiasm. Especially in Germany, where the initial mood and expectations can be quite sceptical, particularly when it comes to getting in touch with the other participants and the willingness to open up to each other. In a well-moderated focus blog, however, this often leads to an effect of *positive surprise*. Respondents tend to look forward to their time on the blog, bond with each other and enjoy the frame of a manageable number of participants dealing with specific topics. As a consequence, the rhythm of tasks should be consistent – but not too fast – to enable a non-directive, in-depth approach of qualitative data collection.

Basically similar in their approach, but with a slightly more casual attitude, US-based focus blogs reflect a more long-standing tradition of Web 2.0 communication. It is of note that, in this market, especially well-educated or leading edge target groups often react enthusiastically to the information of taking part in an international research. While the majority of focus blog studies do not feature multi-national get-togethers, this option is

frequently applied in trend research settings, where participants function as trend scouts. In such a study design, US respondents can be considered as a driving force of motivation.

Moderators are facing more demanding challenges in markets with a higher level of fluctuation, with regards to both discipline and enthusiasm. French respondents, for example, often dive into a focus blog with a high level of expectation in terms of creativity and entertainment value. If tasks become too obvious or turn into chores, they quickly lose interest and for that reason the drop-out rate is comparatively high. To benefit from the opportunities of this methodology, it is extremely important to stay away from too obvious question and answer patterns, and to allow instead a wide spectrum of expression. It is helpful to implement a sufficient number of creative tasks, such as collages or projective imaginary techniques, and to encourage uploads of individual stimuli such as pictures and short movies which then can be commented on as part of the group experience.

In a predominantly community-oriented cultural setting, such as India, enthusiasm is often focused on the experience of getting together with other people from the same social group, and to the outlook of making new friends. While the introduction and get-together phases are lively and highly motivated, it is a real challenge to keep participants motivated to contribute to more specific tasks – as in the respondent's view, these tasks seem to distract from his or her initial expectations. Designing a focus blog in India has to take this into account when it comes to both



Fig. 2a: Visual introduction: Western style



Fig. 2b: Visual introduction: Japanese style

Abstract:

Moderated online community tools have established themselves as a tempting alternative to traditional international qualitative research. The global image of the internet could lead to the assumption that it is an ideal platform for homogenous cross-cultural studies. Experience, however, indicates that local communication patterns vary online just as much as they do offline, and have to be taken into account in order to benefit from new possibilities.

timing and individual encouragement. Here moderators have to take on a role as continuously-active and motivating community members keeping the spirit alive – for example through a constant flow of interesting threads combining tasks with the possibility to exchange thoughts on a personal level. Without a social fabric to belong to, or a social purpose for which to get involved in a topic, the whole task seems pointless.

Probably the most demanding challenge is to set up an efficient focus blog in the Japanese market. It is worth the effort, though. If the structure of tasks and the skills of the moderator manage to get things going, the narrative *storytelling nature* of Japanese communication patterns and the confident attitude of the respondents to deal with multimedia uploads can lead to some inspiring observations.

However, it's imperative that the blog's design takes into consideration that Japanese target groups find it difficult to open up to people they do not know, and are concerned about privacy issues. During the introduction phase, unlike in other markets, personal portraits are frequently replaced by symbolic items such as plants, cartoon or manga characters – which can be a good source of semiotic analysis (see figure 2a and 2b). On the other hand, in this phase, not yet visible to the other participants, respondents tend to be quite open about their values and visions. You can easily come across an initial statement such as "I would like my breasts to become a little bigger" while the same person acts more introverted and reluctant as soon as interaction begins with other focus bloggers.

As a consequence, it is recommendable to extend the private, individual phase at the beginning of a Japanese blog, while during the interactive phase moderators should come up with concrete examples of statements indicating the level of openness expected and acceptable.

To close the circle: In both China and Japan, as different as the actual communication patterns in a focus blog are, there is the well-known reluctance to express a clear opinion – as it might be incorrect, inappropriate or insulting. To get a better overall picture of the direction of attitudes, state-of-the art platforms also allow the implementation of sets of closed questions or rating scales. They offer a quick and efficient possibility to gauge the general mood of opinions, and subsequently enable them to be explored in more specific detail in the blog.

Linking practice to theory

What have we learnt from these observations? To assume that Web 2.0, as a global platform of creation and exchange, is set to even out cultural differences of communication is a misjudgement, especially when it comes to the majority of target groups not heavily involved in the active blogging circuit. On the contrary, the wide range of possibilities to express oneself even tends to enhance these differences. As a consequence, a focus blog is as culturally specific as any traditional media platform such as print and TV – the same technological background is shaped according to cultural values and communication patterns.

This has to be kept in mind when setting up a focus blog design, and above all when it comes to moderation. Generally speaking, the task of a focus blog moderator requires specific skills differing from offline-moderation. His role can be defined as a modern interpretation of the host or hostess of a classic salon whose job is mainly to make the guests feel at ease to communicate with each other and to

express themselves openly. To fulfil these requirements he obviously has to share the same cultural background as his community.

Therefore a multinational team of skilled moderators, under the guidance of a lead moderator, is essential to transfer the objectives of a specific research into a creative and productive atmosphere. Skilled in this context also means having a solid individual Web 2.0 background, preferably as a moderator or active member of forums, and a good feeling for the essentially non-directive techniques of handling web-based community into action. Anything too pushy or too obviously explorative cannot be outbalanced with facial expression or gestures and endangers the casual *anything* goes mood, that usually produces great insights.

At the same time, comments and discussions need to be basically focused and linked to the research topic. Only a moderator who looks at himself as part of the community and is able to convey this role credibly through his way to act and to post is in a position to cope with the high wire act of fuelling enthusiasm while keeping a certain level of discipline.

In terms of instructing and supervising the moderators and a valid synthesis of results, it is useful to dig a little deeper into frameworks of cultural assessment. Dutch sociologist Geert Hofstede has attracted some criticism due to his somewhat static approach of cultural conceptualisation. But some of his *dimensions of culture* are quite helpful to structure findings from international focus blog research, and can be linked to recommendations for moderation and application of research techniques.

A useful dimension is small vs. large power distance. The smaller the perception of power distance the more relevant it is for the moderator to identify with the community and to direct the blog as subtly as possible. Otherwise respondents will quickly

Kurzzusammenfassung:

Moderierte Online Community-Ansätze auf Web-Basis haben sich international als reizvolle Alternative zu klassischen qualitativen Forschungsmethoden etabliert. Der globale Charakter des Internets könnte zu der Annahme führen, dass es sich als ideale Plattform für homogene interkulturelle Studien anbietet. Die Erfahrung zeigt aber, dass regionale Kommunikationsstile online so stark variieren wie offline. Dies muss mit einbezogen werden, um von den neuen Möglichkeiten, die diese Methode eröffnet, auch wirklich profitieren zu können.

lose their enthusiasm and feel as if part of just any ordinary research, which can lead to a high drop-out rate. In small power distance markets such as Europe or USA, funnel-shaped exploration structures are best suited to benefit from a focus blog's opportunities – starting with big themes and a wide frame of open comments which then can be used as community-generated springboards for more in-depth exploration.

In cultures with a larger power distance (for example China, Japan), questions and tasks need to be more precise – even in the initial stage of research – to enable the respondent to deliver. Projective techniques can be helpful to overcome barriers of personal judgment and the risks of making a mistake or being considered as impolite, however, they need to be comprehensible and down-to-earth. Participants might shy away from a journey to the planet of brand X, but will eagerly respond to a simple but effective projective approach, like “If you think of other people (like you, for example young people, women working in an office etc., in your country)/ your colleagues/ friends, how do you think they might react?” This lowers the pressure of responsibility.

Uncertainty avoidance plays an important role

The power distance dimension strongly correlates with the dimension of uncertainty avoidance. In terms of moderation and techniques applied,

procedures of Web 2.0), it is important to make sure that tasks and processes give the impression of *making sense* regarding the objective of the study. Too much creativity – especially when not explicitly connected to a comprehensible topic – is intimidating, and will be a potential participation barrier. However, insecurity can be balanced out by implementing tools with which respondents feel especially skilled. For example, enabling direct uploads from mobile phones in a country such as Japan is a clear motivation booster.

Cultures and target groups with weak uncertainty avoidance respond more positively to implicit or flexible tasks, and feel restricted as soon as threads and questions are corresponding too predictably with questions that would be best kept for more quantitative online approaches.

Another dimension of relevance is individualism vs. collectivism. Both poles are part of any functioning web-based community research, regardless of the culture, as individuals are motivated to express their personal thoughts as well as becoming part of an interacting community. Challenges for the blog moderator differ strongly depending on the orientation of a specific culture.

In individualist cultures, with France as a spearhead example, it is important to give sufficient room for personal presentations and characterisations to enable everyone to get noticed. Topic-specific tasks and questions should not be too narrow, so that

quickly decrease. For example a collage exercise might work better if it is not based on a fixed set of stimulus material but allows individual additions such as own photographs or pictures copied from the internet. Another technique working best in individual cultures is the application of a star system which enables other participants to mark great ideas or comments coming up in the blog – as long as it does not turn the blog into a competitive environment. These star systems are also quite efficient to encourage the upload of pictures and movies (for example through a movie of the day award decided upon by the participants).

Collectivist cultures, on the other hand, where participants strongly identify with the community as a group they now belong to, require extra-motivation to deal with the actual tasks. India, as described above, would be a typical example, as well as Latin American markets such as Brazil. Here blog involvement is often characterised by zig-zag patterns highly depending on whether the group as a whole gets engaged into a specific topic or task (see figure 3). As a consequence, the tonality of moderators should adapt a community-oriented approach, encouraging participants to get into the task together as a team, with lots of opportunities of interaction and exchange. A close to 24/7 involvement from moderators is key to keep the momentum going.

Focus Blogging - completing the free section of qualitative research

When community-shaped online research was introduced into the world of qualitative research, motivation and involvement of participants were quite often regarded as guaranteed, based on the fascination of Web 2.0 opportunities. However, the more web-based communication turns into an everyday phenomenon, the less likely it is that respondents will be enthusiastic solely based on the fact that they become part of a state-of-the-art research tool. Due to the comparatively long period of time during which an on-going commitment by everyone involved is required, designing and moderating a focus blog has proved as one of the most sophisticated challenges of qualitative research, incorporating a variety of methodological approaches to be

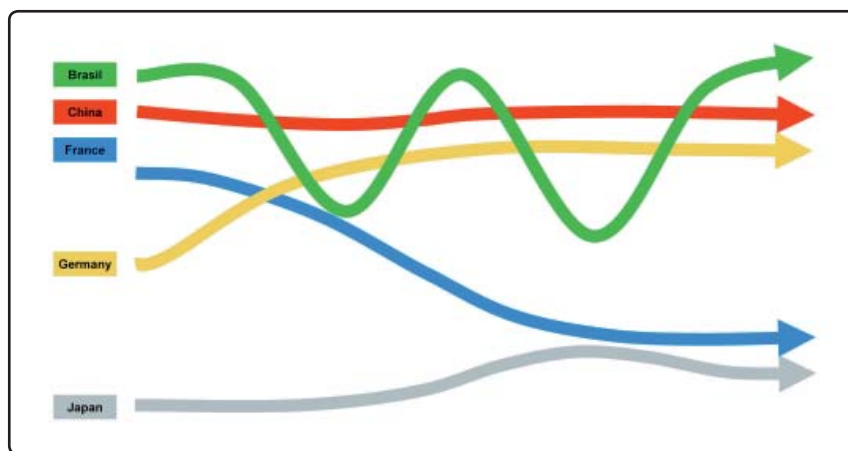


Fig. 3: Typical patterns of involvement in moderated blogs

the underlying rule is: in societies, but also within target groups who are more anxious about the unknown (in the context of focus blogs these are mostly groups less experienced with the

the individual handwriting – which is as well a major source for analysis – can shine through. Creative potential has to be addressed and exploited, otherwise motivation will

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transferred from offline qualitative research to online requirements.

It is worth the effort. When it comes to establishing open dialogues within or in between different target groups, to the creation of interactive diaries or a blueprint of moods and feelings,

to real life stories or to an intimate way of self-expression, or just a real-time documentation of everyday life in the sense of a qualitative usage & attitude study, the output of blog-based qualitative online research seems hard to beat in terms of authenticity and richness of verbal and visual data.

Understanding the semiotics of global cultural communication patterns, however, is crucial to make a true knowledge profit from these still comparatively new resources, and to be able to synthesise results on an international level. Not all that glitters in Web 2.0 may be gold, but the more polished the skills and the

more sensitive the adaptation to the specific research markets needs, the shinier the insights and inspiration are.

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