How GL BAL
is Your Village?

Why You Should Do Online Qualitative Research in Your Corner of the World!

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The two graphs on the following page (Figure 1, page 20) provide a snapshot of worldwide internet penetration, according to the figures of internetworldstats.com (www.internetworldstats.com). It is well known that the continent of North America boasts the highest per capita internet-penetration rate (70 percent), and online qualitative research has been conducted in the U.S. and Canada for more than 12 years.

Outside of North America, online qualitative research is viewed rather skeptically and is conducted to a limited extent. Based on the statistics for other world regions, however, a strong case can be built for the potential of online qualitative research worldwide. Examples include:

- Although 55 percent of the total Oceania/Australasia region has access to internet, individual countries such as New Zealand (75 percent) and Australia (72 percent) actually boast higher per capita internet-penetration figures than the U.S. and Canada.
- In terms of numbers of internet users, Asia (459 million) and Europe (338 million) have more internet users than North America (235 million).

> The concept for Project Global Village was born out of our conviction that QRCs outside North America cannot afford to be left behind. We believe that QRCs should add online qualitative research to their services or toolbox in every corner of this world!

It is also very interesting to look at internet-usage growth in the period 2000-2007 (Figure 2, page 21). As can be expected, the developed countries/regions with the highest penetration have the lowest growth figures, while the developing countries displayed phenomenal growth in internet penetration in the past seven years.

This growth is dynamic, and it changed substantially during the months that we worked on Project Global Village, a worldwide volunteer project with bulletin boards among teenagers. As you read this article, these figures (Figure 2) could already be outdated. Please visit www.internetworldstats.com for the latest statistics and details with regard to individual countries.

The concept for Project Global Village was born out of our conviction that QRCs outside of North America cannot afford to be left behind. We believe that QRCs should add online qualitative research to their services or toolbox in every corner of this world!

We also believe that online qualitative research creates new possibilities for international research. As client projects are usually highly confidential and cannot be used for demonstration to other researchers, we decided to gather a team of colleagues from around the world and conduct a multicultural project that can be used for demonstration and publicity.

Methodology

Each moderator conducted one bulletin board (BB) focus group in his or her home country and native language, based on the same screening criteria and utilizing the same basic topic guide. Fieldwork took place from May to September 2007. The sequential approach to do only one or two countries at a time allowed for accumulated learning and improved methods during the process.

It was a volunteer project, and most of the team members financed the recruiting and incentives themselves. FocusForums generously sponsored the BB software platform for the entire project (11 BBs in 6 languages). This included translating the whole site in each of these languages (including Chinese), as well as providing ongoing help with troubleshooting, incorporating our ideas and suggestions, and proactively improving the site.

STEP 1: Moderator Pre-Planning for Own Online BB Discussion

Before even starting the project, all moderators were invited to discuss the approach in a private online forum. This showed various problematic areas that needed to be solved:

- Legal issues: Social topics (for example: parents/children relationship) cannot be included in China, as this is seen as social research and is not allowed for foreign organizations. Some countries (U.S., Canada, Russia, China) recommended not discussing any drug-related topics online!
- Cultural issues: Due to different school systems and cultures, it was important to find ways to describe corresponding age groups and educational levels. Also, the mix of girls and boys at this age needed to be considered.

Internet Penetration by World Region
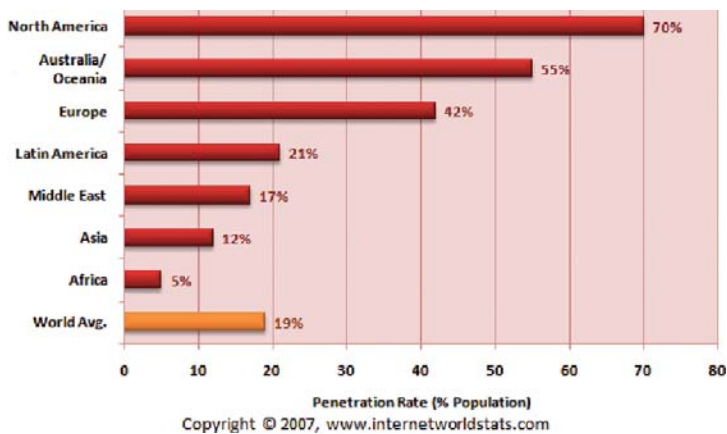
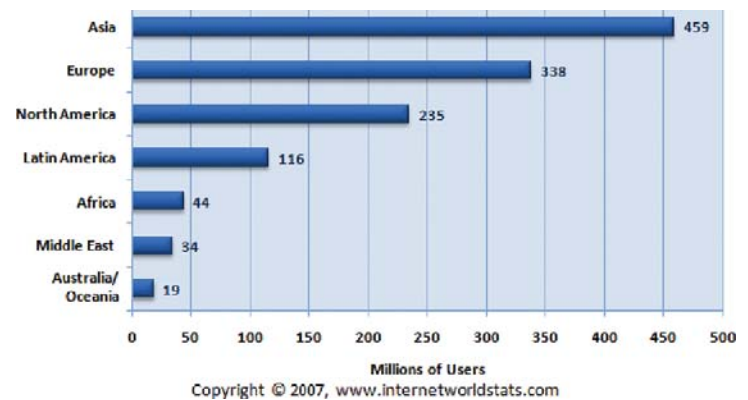**Internet Usage by World Region**

Figure 1.

- Timing issues: Different cultures deal differently with school vacation and exams. In Germany, the research needed to be finished before the summer vacation started (teenagers leave with their families for vacation), while other countries preferred to conduct fieldwork during the vacation. In Germany, there was a window period after finishing exams and before the start of the holiday, whereas in other countries, exams are written until the last day of school.
- General issue: The proposed discussion guide contained too many topics for one single bulletin board! There was a need to reduce the amount of topics and allow for slightly different approaches per country.

STEP 2: Recruiting

As mentioned earlier, teenage respondents were recruited according to the same criteria. We aimed for 10 girls and 10 boys in each country. They were 15 to 16 years old, of a similar educational level and owned a cell phone for personal use. We also included some criteria to ensure medium-to-heavy internet usage. With this age group, we felt that it would be ethical to obtain parental permission up-front.

With regard to the recruiting process, we followed "traditional" recruiting practices. Most countries used a combination of professional recruiters, as well as our own personal contacts. Our North American colleagues used a combination of online panels and professional recruiters.

Our main learning with regard to recruiting teens was that it can be more time intensive than one would expect. Often, parents' email addresses had to be used to reach the kids, and we needed to call or SMS (short message service) the kids to alert them to retrieve and read email messages. We also found that it is important, at the recruiting stage, to create realistic expectations of the time commitment involved, in order to avoid a drop in their level of participation towards the end of the bulletin board. Based on our experience, we also recommend over-recruiting to compensate for wrong email

addresses, respondents who do not react to email or SMS messages and general dropout.

In fact, not only the recruiting, but also all up-front and ongoing communication with teen respondents is time intensive. In some countries, we found the need to communicate by phone or SMS (i.e., not rely only on emails) to send logins and daily reminders about new questions and/or follow-up probes, as well as to provide general motivation to keep up their levels of participation. Sending the parent permission letter and chasing the replies was, in itself, an additional communication exercise.

We learned that teens are more high maintenance than adults, and we recommend that you plan your time and budget accordingly.

STEP 3: Moderating

With regard to moderating, we learned the importance of visiting the discussion on a regular basis. This enables the moderator to stay on top of the discussion in order to intervene if things do not work out as planned.

We also found that being inundated with too many questions discouraged respondents and led them to give shorter answers so that they could work through the bulk of questions quicker. We recommend that moderators resist the temptation to ask too many questions; instead, follow up with more probes if an aspect is not mentioned spontaneously.

We found that mixing methodologies and using different techniques increased our respondents' interest and captured their attention more effectively. We would like to share the challenges and our learning in these regards in more detail.

Challenge: Use of the Qualitative Toolbox — Online

This privately sponsored project was also used to test the different qualitative tools and techniques in an online environment and to help show how deep and rich insights can be gathered online.

Blogging

Blogging was tried as a task for the first day. Respondents had to describe the "life of a teenager in _____ country," pointing out what they think makes their life in their country special and how they would describe their lives to teenagers from other places in the world.

We found that this did not really work in the environment of a bulletin-board discussion. The respondents had to go to a different area of the BB and use a different style than the chatting that they are used to. There was zero interaction and only a few valuable posts.

We came to the conclusion that blogging would need more time than anticipated or a completely different approach such as immersive research.

Collages

The teenagers were asked to send in photos for a collage. The photos had to represent what they think is special about being a

Internet Usage Growth by World Region (2000-2007)
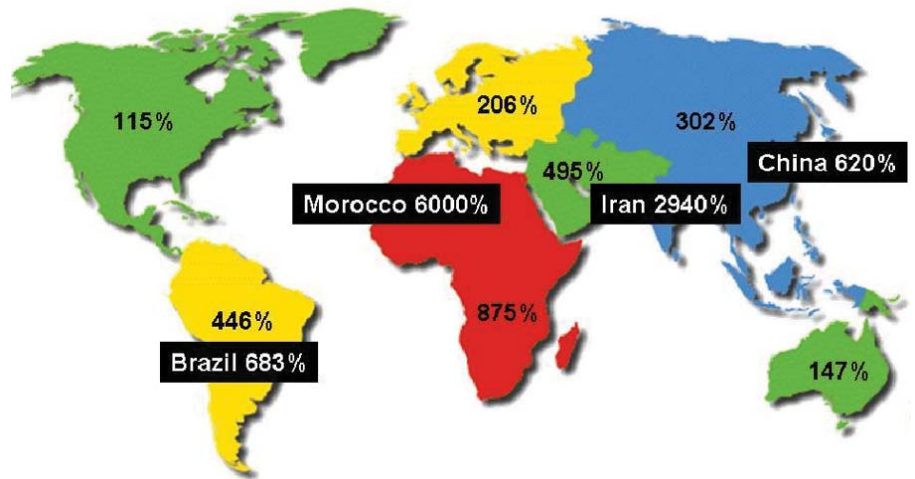
Figure 2.

teenager in their home country. This worked very well in some countries (South Africa, Brazil, U.K.), but not that well in others (Germany).

We experimented with the following requests, and each moderator could then create the collage based on the photos received and/or source suitable visuals according to the descriptions.

- Send in favorite photos via email or cell phone (but make sure there is no identifiable content, in order to protect respondent anonymity and avoid data-protection issues).
- Describe the photo that you would have liked to send in.
- Imagine flipping through a newspaper or magazine, and describe the words, sentences and/or pictures that you would have cut out.

Picture Sorting

Picture decks that are usually used for face-to-face groups were scanned and uploaded, and respondents could drag and drop the picture of their choice and describe: "What picture best represents your feelings for your cell phone?"

Interestingly, teenagers from different countries, different cultures and with different languages chose the same pictures in order to express the same feelings (Figure 3, below left): connection, friendship, love, "it connects me with my friends."

Color Association

The range of colors available for formatting text/ fonts was used as a "paint deck." Respondents were asked to type the word COMPUTER in the color that would best represent their feelings when they had to be without their computer.

This method also created rich and meaningful responses:

- Stress was expressed in black ("because my life would be so sad") or in red ("warning, warning!").
- A change of colors in the same word COMPUTER was used to illustrate the changing feelings ("at first

dark colors for boredom, then more and more lively because we get used to living without it and are even very happy about it").

- Bright colors (light blue, pink) were chosen when it was OK to be without the computer ("… because it is quiet and peaceful without computer, no msn, no crazy games").

Analogies

We experimented with analogy by asking our teens to compare internet search engines with animals. They enjoyed this activity very much and generated great input and clear positioning. Interestingly, the respondents from different parts of the world again chose similar animals as analogies!

Google as an animal was described as fast, superior and smart. It was compared to a cheetah ("damned fast, intelligent, effective and gets it right most of the time"), a lion ("the king of the net"), an owl, a chameleon and a fox.

A further variation of this technique was used by some of the moderators by asking respondents to liken their current computer vs. their ideal future computer with animals (Figure 4). The results clearly indicated a wish for a faster, smaller and unique device (from turtle to squirrel monkey: "it'd be a turtle because its soooo slow… hahaa. i'd like my next computer to be unique so i'd choose a squirrel monkey since they're small").

Storytelling

Respondents were asked to tell the story of "a day in the life of my cell phone." This task seemed to be difficult, and only a few teenagers got this right. The younger ones, especially, and the boys had difficulty with this, and we came to the conclusion that the quality of output related to the age and personality type of the respondent. We found that it worked better in countries where the moderator gave very clear instructions and a good example. However, when it worked, it delivered deep insights!

Challenge: Question Stratagem — Blinded Questions

We also monitored the effect of blinding some questions (i.e., respondents see the answers of fellow respondents only after they have posted their reply). Clearly, some questions need blinding to allow for uninfluenced, spontaneous and unbiased answers (sentence completion, picture sorting, etc.).

Teenagers loved the blinded questions, as "it was fun to think and then compare with the others." Nevertheless, blinding takes out spontaneity and willingness to comment on other respondents' posts. So, it is recommended to use blinding only when really needed.

Figure 3.

Challenge: Follow-Up Probing

Most of the moderators were frustrated by the effort involved in persuading the teenage respondents to go back to previous sections to answer follow-up probing questions. Moderators experimented with multiple methods:

- Sending out daily emails: Communicating enthusiasm and appreciation, while instructing respondents to come back to the BB and answer the probing questions of the previous day before starting to answer the new questions. This can be done via group emails, but also with individual emails addressing specific questions for specific respondents. This can also be done via text messages to respondents' cell phones.
- Changing the "Welcome" message on the board at least twice per day. This was done to enhance the feeling of interacting with a live, responsive person and to make it more interesting. It also enabled the posting of individual, specific messages to address respondents directly.

In order to guarantee utmost comparability over all the countries involved, there is a tendency among international researchers to create a detailed topic guide with many single questions. Thus, it is done to:

- Apply the same methodology in all countries.
- Cover all relevant topics in all countries.
- Check and synchronize translations up front.
- Make cross-reading of the different boards easier.

Nevertheless, this structured approach gives no flexibility to the individual moderators, and it can create redundancy if a discussion comes up at an earlier point than anticipated. Such a highly structured and detailed topic guide creates a feeling among respondents of a higher workload and leads to less discussion/interaction and failure to answer the moderator's follow-up probes.

So, an alternative approach was tested that led to more effective achievement of the objective: namely, to leave space in future days to pick up on themes that need to be revisited, rather than forcing respondents to go back to earlier sections of the discussion. Current platforms make going back to locate and answer follow-up probes time consuming and can drain the energy of the group.

It was also felt that too many follow-ups can take the onus off the group to converse with each other (i.e., follow-ups can become a serial dialogue with the moderator). When using this approach, it is important that the moderator should demonstrate his/her presence, sending signs that he/she is reading along and listening.

Challenge: Respondent Interaction

Most moderators found it challenging to avoid serial dialogues (referred to above) and to encourage the teenagers to interact and discuss with each other.
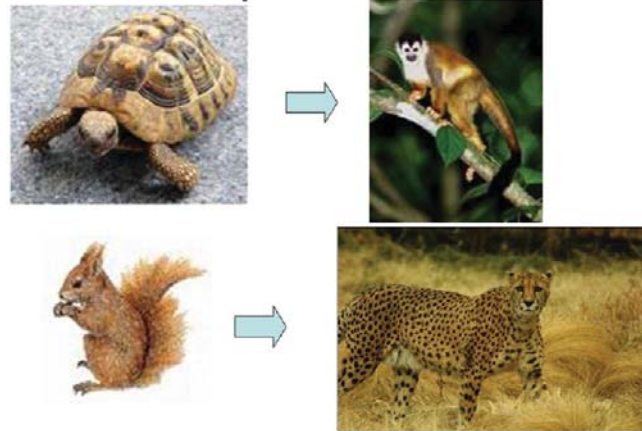

Example 2: Current vs. Future Computer as Animal

Figure 4.

This age group is used to interacting online, but in "real time." They see a group discussion as "work" (in order to earn the incentive) and believe their job is done by simply answering the moderator's questions. The teens displayed reluctance to openly disagree, and they probably still lack the social skills to know how to do so politely and diplomatically.

So, additional stimuli are needed to get an interactive discussion flowing. Here are ways to do so:

- Build in a dummy respondent who starts commenting (obviously, without biasing the outcome).
- Ask respondents to comment on the post of at least one other respondent.
- Use an additional incentive to motivate them to revisit the discussion and comment on a specified number of topics or questions.
- Focus — ask fewer questions so it looks like less work.

Some of our moderators found that more interaction happened automatically when useful tips (websites, gadgets, etc.) are shared or when there is shared enthusiasm (favorite store, product, etc.), rather than when asking for a response to a question or an opinion.

Challenge: Language Issues

Of course, one of the biggest challenges in undertaking a multinational, multilingual study is following the languages! In our project, language was a factor in the following examples:

- Our bulletin-board software provider, Focus Forums, translated the whole platform into Chinese. Observing a Chinese bulletin board is impossible for most non-Asian QRCs, as most of us cannot even read Chinese!
- Another challenge were the abbreviations, slang, phonetics and other weird spelling that our esteemed

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target market has developed into their own language. This was particularly entertaining in India, where this example comes from…
"HEY PPL HWS YAA M AXL ROSE BY MY NAME ITSELF U LL CUM 2 KNW HW BIG A FAM M I OF ROCK ND G N R I LOVE ROCK ACTIVITIES…"

- European languages like Italian, French and German use the second and third person, which has implications in how you address the teens and phrase your questions.
- In India, any online discussion is called blogging.
- Instant messaging is called by many names, like chat or texting. In Germany, teens have created the verb "msnen." South African teens spend hours chatting to each other on MXit, an instant-messaging service for cell phones, allowing users to send and receive text messages at a fraction of the cost of an SMS.

Our experience highlighted the need to work with native-speaking, bilingual local moderators when doing international research.

Challenge: Ongoing Team Communication and Coordination

For a multinational study, ongoing communication among the team members was vital. We used our Moderator Bulletin Board up front to agree on the approach, criteria and guide. We used it again afterwards to share feedback and compare notes. We observed each other's BBs as far as our language abilities allowed. This helped new online moderators to get familiar with the technology and to get moderating tips from others. We incorporated changes and improvements as we went along. We also used Skype extensively to talk with one another during the process.

Our Moderator BB and all the individual country BBs were done on the same BB provider account. Therefore, we accessed all the BBs with the same set of log-in details. To facilitate more efficient ongoing communication and the ability to

observe each other's BBs seamlessly, we recommend consolidating the whole project on one provider's platform.

The Global Village Team

We would like to end this article by sharing with you some quotes from the Global Village team, highlighting the most salient finding(s) in their country.

Betsy Leichliter (U.S.)

"To the U.S. teens, a phone is so much more than a phone for real-time voice calls — it's a communications-control device that they use to decide if/when/how to communicate with friends and family. Their phones are also their first line of defense against information overload, since the phones do such a good job of collecting and organizing contact databases and managing voice/text/IM/photo/video messages that the teens can stay on

Figure 5.

top of enormous amounts of communication without too much stress."

Susan Abbott (Canada)
"On two separate occasions, teens referred to their cell phone as 'myself phone,' a phrase that captures the essence of their phone relationship. Teens stand ready to be amazed and delighted by the new technology they imagine is in store in their futures. As a moderator, I was glad to have the software needed to send SMS reminders, a learning from early in the project."

> This age group is used to interacting online, but in "real time." They see a group discussion as "work" (in order to earn the incentive) and believe their job is done by simply answering the moderator's questions.

Julia Gartside Spink (U.K.)
"The depth of the relationship between our teens and their mobile phones was phenomenal: they truly share their life with this device. It is their personal friend, providing company, reassurance, entertainment and contact to the outside world, sharing their secrets, providing security... the list is endless! In comparison, the computer is 'just' a mechanical device!"

Piyul Mukherjee (India)
"In a collective culture like India, the cell phone means much more than just a speaking device; it helps them flaunt their creativity and innovativeness within their own close groups, as well as to strangers — such as having the latest ring tones. These are often taped from an audio player (saves the expense of 'subscribing'). Usage of Bluetooth was quite high when it came to exchanging audio, songs and images for the same reason: it is free of charge — one more way of keeping costs to the minimum, in a country where value-for-money is as ingrained as is the 'sharing' that is seen as a key value (and IPR or Intellectual Property Rights is a rather alien concept).

"Another important way the device helps the teenagers is to create a little world for themselves …. their own private little space in space-starved homes, while they quietly text their friends through the night, listen to their own music and so on. Also, parents are rather bewildered about this newfangled item, anyway; technology is something this age group understands far more than their parents, who, in fact, depend on the next generation to guide them

— quite ironical in the 'family-oriented' Indian culture where age is expected to be revered."

Otto Rodriguez (Latino teens in U.S.)
"Latino teens seemed to share a tremendous 'innate' necessity to communicate with friends and family members on a constant basis. Consequently, mobile phones, internet/computers and other technological advancements seemed to ideally fulfill such great 'cultural' need. In addition, having access to the latest cell phone type or model was often deemed 'extremely important' and basically described as a welcomed status symbol among this highly impressionable target audience."

Raf Manna (Italy)
"The stark difference between girls and boys was obvious. I was expecting girls to be more mature at an equivalent age, but even the youngest girls turned out to be much ahead of the older boys in terms of being articulate, forward thinking and mature overall. I was encouraged by the Italian teenagers' sense of pride and satisfaction that researchers show an interest in their views. This is something that they are not used to and that they found very fulfilling at their age. This impacted in terms of their compliance and quality of participation, which I found to be outstanding."

David Ying Hon Ho (China)
"What is most striking in China from the international perspective is the different set of players in the internet and technology market. While many teenagers in Western countries (the bulk of geos in this project) are searching frequently on Google, communicating heavily on Windows Live/Yahoo messenger or aspiring for the ownership of an Apple iPhone, Chinese teenagers are searching on Baidu, chatting on QQ and are mostly unaware of iPhone. The China market shows its uniqueness in this respect. Consumer behavior might be somewhat universal, but the different history of economic development in China in the last few decades has given its market a different ecology. This is something researchers and marketers should be aware of. More attention is needed for the localization of international research projects in China than in the Western countries."

Corette Haf (South Africa)
"South African teens were unique with regard to their extensive use of MXit, an instant-messaging service for cell phones, allowing users to send and receive text messages at a fraction of the cost of an SMS. MXit dominates their cell-phone-usage behavior and fulfills the majority of their communication needs. It replaces online chat rooms, other internet-based IMs and even social networking, to an extent."

Ilka Kuhagen (Germany)
"In Germany, I was impressed to find out the different types of communication through the various channels:

cell phone with voice is used for immediate check of dates, and texting is more the way of sharing experiences, while (real time) chat is the regular exchange of updates, emotions and everyday gossip. The computer, and thus the internet, is mainly used for chats and social networking and not necessarily for anything else by this age group."

Colette Chambon (France)

"We were really surprised by the sincerity of responses on the internet and how teens underlined how free they felt to express themselves without the face-to-face judgment of their peers. The high level of enthusiasm surprised us, too: they wrote after the BB to say how much they appreciated the experience and that they wish they had more time to react to the others.

"We found that both the cell phone and computer are great ways for French teenagers to create their own social network and exchange outside of parents' control. Blogs and communities are really appreciated, and they spend hours chatting, whereas virtual worlds (Second Life) are rejected and associated with an image of 'frustrated adult' inventing a better life than his own and spending money for 'wind'!"

Diva Oliviera (Brazil)

"These young people grew up surrounded by technological advances, and they constitute the first generation that knows more about the subject than their parents. They are eager, demanding and multitasking, and they are not in awe of technology, which they consider a means, as opposed to an end.

"The relevance of this study transcends the specific comprehension of attitudes and behaviors of the age group in question, when one considers that this generation is inaugurating a new way to deal with reality and that the transformations generated by this contact with technology are structural in nature." ⧫

(Editor's note: The authors presented this case study at the recent 2007 annual conference of QRCA in Vancouver.)