

“Viewpoints/ Concerns” on empirical methodologies for Socio/ cultural studies

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Abstract

Since the advent of man there has been a constant struggle to define social pattern, and understand ways of cultural thinking. Every culture has its own limitations and freedoms, problems and expectations. For centuries now anthropologists, ethnographers have worked on mapping and defining these differences. These findings instigate the designers to formulate new design theories and research methodologies for drafting cultural specific solutions. The question arises “in a cross cultural application how effective and applicable are the basic research methodologies”? Quoting one such example the “Privacy” issue seems to be a very strong component in the Japanese culture but is often a deterring factor in allowing the “home ethnographic study to take place effectively”. However in countries like India similar studies could have a more welcoming reaction owing to the adaptive social culture. Similarly, the high rate of “illiteracy” in rural India closes many doors for “form filling” user surveys.

This leads to the scope of research for understanding specific cultural traits that may effect adaptation and re-improvisation of these existing methodologies. Quite often the cultural traits of a country may lead in forming new research methodologies.

1. Introduction

“Culture is beneath awareness, in the sense that no one bothers to verbalize it, yet it forms the roots of all actions”[1]. Various layers of verbal and non verbal communication strategies adopted by inhabitants of specific culture become visible when we look beyond the evident. As the body of knowledge relating the cultural factors influencing the applications of the empirical methodologies is comparatively small. Quite often it is observed that these methodologies don’t withstand the load of *cultural difference*. At a primary level they hold high, but it is observed they often don’t comply well while unfolding the secondary and tertiary layers of user behavior.

It is time to rethink!! Understanding user’s technology exposure/attachment would play important role. For example, many cases in India we have literates but not computer literate. Illiteracy can be measured but literate illiteracy for

technology is a challenge! Interestingly, the difference between developed and developing countries is profoundly visible in cases like consumer electronics. While conducting several field analyses it was observed that the many methodologies were too general to derive cultural specific insights. Based on the understanding of the above issue, the question arises, how do we build upon new tools without stereotyping the cultural difference? How do we define specific cultural traits to trigger new methodologies?

The findings shared in this paper are based on authors personal work experience in cross cultural scenarios including Germany, India, and Korea. These are general findings and they serve as the premise for a serious and more detailed research to follow.

Issues like gender, hierarchy, illiteracy are some such examples of causes and effects of various empirical methodologies on various cultural settings. Where the work situation/ and social environment of users are different.

2. Gender Issue

In many regions in India, women cannot voice their opinion freely. The social structure has yet not granted women a status equivalent to that of a man. In many cases, interviewing women is intruding their privacy. Quite often, their opinion is muted in an interview due to prevailing social pressures. This leads many user surveys carry a gender biased opinion. On the contradictory, in Germany the society allows women more freedom to voice their opinions, making it a straight forward affair.

A street vendor in India was more comfortable using an ATM [2] for depositing money, vs. a bank, as it avoided contact with the female bank employees. Even in case of conducting detailed interviews it was noticed that gender played a valuable role in achieving a level of comfort, female user group preferred female interviewers. In countries like Germany the case was found to be neutral in this regard.

3. Lack of technology penetration a blessing in disguise?

India, being one of the major IT hubs in the world, still

lacks technical infrastructure in several regions, in rural India. Many people have never seen a camera let alone use one; this makes them very conscious in front of the camera. Even when a private camera was installed at their residence, their excitement level was very high. They often dressed formally, deriving unrealistic results. Interestingly the same fascination for the technology spins magic while implanting the “Bollywood factor”- i.e. weaving a dramatic scenario around their favorite cinema star, triggers active and informal participation from the users. However it is the reverse case in Japan, Germany and even in Korea where any amount of lucrative offers don't succeed in motivating users for private camera viewing.

4. Co-discovery

The socio cultural behavior thrives on collectivity in eastern countries. Co-discovery was an effective way of learning to use new products in various socioeconomic groups. It also worked fine as an analysis methodology. Quoting Geert Hofstede “Individualism vs. Collectivism” [3] In Germany, users connect to individualistic behaviors making co-discovery analysis often lose its practicability.

5. Is local language the solution?

We talk about speaking the local language but mere language change doesn't make the user respond deeply the queries. The communication strategies need to be culture specific to derive deeper insights. Are the interviewers themselves briefed about the do's and don'ts in the culture specific behavior?? Often, the interviews are translated in the local language to enhance communication. Considering a case in India, a technically correct local translation for an interview might not be a practical one. As many banking terms in India are understood by the illiterates and literates, in English, a local translation often confuses them. Similar case in cell phones GUI for text inputting, the literal translation for Indic script were often found to be impractical with the users. In India English has established itself quite strongly as an official language. It has even taken lead in the IT industry, where the local languages are inconsistent. In such cases use of colloquial terms often helps rather than literal translations. On contrast in countries like Germany/Korea, the native language is dominant and English is not so well accepted in products and services. Making it really important to translate all technical interaction/interviewing in local language.

6. Testing users not technology vs. testing technology not users.

Especially in India due to lack of computer literacy in many cases it is often difficult to overcome this mental glitch. Quite often during the first time user testing session the users prime focus is on “performing well” rather than the

natural way. Often they practice using the product before coming in for the testing session.

7. Hierarchical factors- Voicing opinions in focus group reviewing.

Voicing an opinion in front of your boss? Admitting a failure using a device in an open focus group session? In India, and Korea where social networking is very strongly interwoven into the hierarchical structures of the community, the above often triggers a difficult situation in focus group sessions. Nationalism vs. religion might also play an important role in such discussions. As for Germany raising personal openings is a comfortable affair.

8. Matrix

While comparing methodologies vs the cultural parameters the following matrix [Table-1] was plotted. Even though it carries a generalist point of view it is helpful in triggering new insights leaving scope for further detailed research.

The countries marked on the matrix indicate the problem areas.

Empirical Methodologies	Interviews	Co-Discovery	Focus Group	Private camera viewing
Cultural Parameters				
language	In			
Illiteracy	In			
Gender Issue	In			In
Power Distance	In/Kr		In/Kr/Jp	
Collectivism Vs. Individualism		Gr		
Privacy				Gr, Jp, Kr

[Table-1] The countries mark indicate the problem areas
Note: India-In, Korea-Kr, Germany- Gr, Japan-Jp

9. Conclusion

The above quoted user behaviors of trends and tendencies indicate specific patterns of value and behaviors. They are not to be over simplified or generalized. Providing specific parameters or solutions from analyzing an average attitude is a difficult task. The multiple user dimensions have to be understood in detail and new tools have to be developed in areas of user analysis to make it a success.

References

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