

WATER WOWS

TAPPING THE UNLEASHED POTENTIAL OF MOBILE PHONES

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INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly changing and demanding market we operate in, there are multiple forces that we researchers are all a part of. In order to survive, and in pursuit of a healthy bottom-line, clients increasingly seek global markets that stretch beyond the place of origin. As markets and their consuming powers expand globally, there is an equal thrust to pare costs to the minimum, more so in the midst of a global recession.

The seven emerging markets – China, India, Russia, Indonesia, Mexico, Brazil and Turkey – are expected to contribute 45% of the global GDP in the coming decade.¹⁾ As the corporate world of our clients seeks to seize growth opportunities, there is an understandable sense of urgency, which has led to an increasing tendency for a ‘one size fits all’ pattern of setting up the qualitative research study. Yet, even within these listed countries, there is a world of difference from one to the next, and often within the country as well. In the following paper, we aim our theoretical lens at a broad West (United States, United Kingdom) vs. East (India, China) landscape, and honing down further, we look at India through a methodological lens.

The current reality

To be able to get a thicker slice of client spending on consumer research, there is increasing competition amongst research agencies to: a) be seen to provide a global footprint; and b) stretch the dollar to ‘get the project’ and be seen to provide the maximum in the eyes of the client. In the name of innovations, there is also an increasing tendency to ‘wring the last drop’ in a single qualitative study – and as a result, studies are crafted in which a participant could be asked to keep a pre-task diary, use a product, write a story, do a collage, turn her wardrobe inside out, attend a focus group or participate in a depth interview, and go on a shopping expedition with the researcher. An exhausting instead of an exhaustive list.

More often than one would imagine or expect, our participants are asked to keep diary pre-tasks in a culture that is far more gregarious than ‘diary-enabled’ (often insisted upon by clients, given perceived notion of literacy and English fluency: *“Oh, but you must recruit literate consumers”* / *“According to the internet, many Indians can read and write English?”*); clients use similar formats of cookie-cutter research across countries in a multi-country study (*“We are using the same format in Brazil, Russia, Germany and India, and we need continuity”*); for an in-home study in a cramped emerging market residence, the reality of international teams arriving with moderator and translator in tow to ‘do a three hour ethnography’ (*“Please ignore the six of us, think of us as flies on the wall and be yourself”*).

The current methodological potential

With approximately 800 million cell phone subscribers in India - projected to cross a billion subscribers by 2013 – cell phone based qualitative research has a huge potential for delivering impactful research and bridge some of the gaps we are facing in consumer segments as well as across markets. The scheduling of assignments, communication with participants and compilation of data is facilitated through online platforms and mobile apps for capturing multimedia files. Results, then, are near instantaneous. (See figure 1.)

The current client potential

Apart from the methodological paradigm shift, this has far-reaching consequences, even in the expanded access to market research amongst a wider range of clients – since, by using the latest innovative options, good qualitative research need no longer be priced out of the reach of most companies barring those entities with large research budgets.

FIGURE 1, A TYPICAL LOWER SEC INDIAN HOME – 16 PEOPLE AND ONE GOAT LIVING IN TWO ROOMS

Small and Medium Business Enterprises (SMEs) are considered the backbone of economic growth in all countries because they account for 80% of all economic growth.²⁾ The unfortunate truth is that as established qualitative researchers we have out-priced ourselves beyond the reach of SMEs, which form the foundation of a grassroots driven, chaotic entrepreneurship model in emerging markets. In a global economy where the need of the hour is emergent businesses that create employment, that unshackle a spirit of enterprise and succeed in making a viable space for themselves, the role of affordable research that unerringly illuminates the road forward needs no emphasis. (See figure 2.)

FIGURE 2, WOMEN AT HOME IN THEIR 'NIGHTIES' (AND MEN WEAR *LUNGI*)

OBJECTIVE

The objective is primarily to suggest the advantages of a methodological pluralism that helps researchers become culturally complementary and enter into our consumers' lives in hitherto unexplored and unexpected ways:

- To bend and blend traditional research methodologies with high tech solutions to get the best of both worlds – e.g. the intimacy of an unobtrusive observer of the teenager shooting footage of his mother/relatives doing household chores, and the single-canvas of analysis under one roof as information steadily streams in from various sources.
- To provide examples of bypassing the obstacles of incorporating technology when working in developing countries and non-tech savvy population segments.

- To revive the viability of doing in-depth ethnographical research across time – by offering up cost and time efficient solutions convenient to both researcher and client – that goes beyond the usual time-starved global client's diktats to the market researcher to 'do a two hour home ethno', client, simultaneous translator and cameraman in tow.
- To call awareness to the 'tectonic plates' of the research landscape; the critical meridians running between collectivist and individualistic societies – shifting the focus away from standardisation and the current one-fit-all approach across markets to a broader recognition of the need for culture-complimenting research approaches.

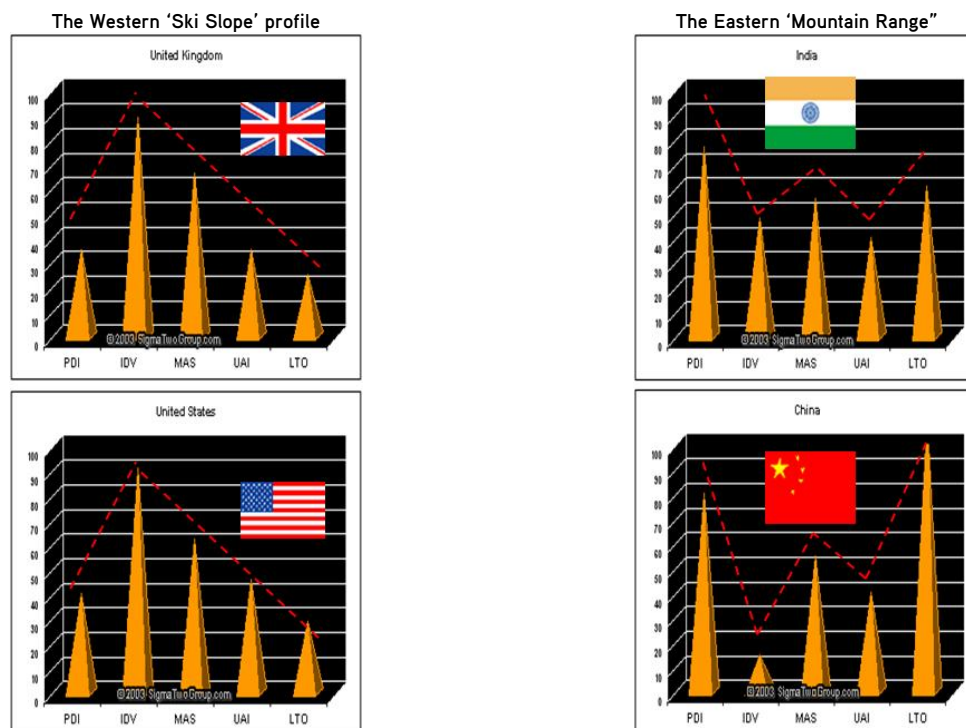
THE GEERT HOFSTEDE CULTURAL PARAMETERS

While cultural differences have been mapped thoroughly in nearly every academic discipline and despite the fact that the exact objective of multi-country qualitative research typically revolves around unravelling and comprehending cultural differences, we have yet to apply this knowledge to our qualitative research designs and methodologies.

We use Hofstede's index as a backdrop for our proposition; to illuminate the significant divide between eastern and western markets and support the argument at adjustments that are necessary at the methodological end.³⁾ The five parameters Hofstede operates with are:

1. *PDI = Power Distance Index* -> the extent to which the less powerful members of a society (any group, e.g. a family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.
2. *IDV = Individualism* -> (opposite of collectivism) in individualistic societies the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after themselves and their immediate (nuclear) family. In collectivist societies people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, often extended families (with uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents) which continue protecting them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.
3. *MAS = Masculinity* -> has to do with degree of assertiveness, focus on recognition and advancement, challenges and personal accomplishment (= masculine) vs. more modest, focusing on cooperation and good relationships (= feminine).
4. *UAI = Uncertainty Avoidance Index* -> shows a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity; It indicates to what extent a culture is comfortable with unstructured situations. Uncertainty avoiding cultures try to minimize the unknown by strict laws and rules, safety and security measures. Uncertainty accepting cultures have fewer rules, are relativists on philosophical/religious issues and members are not expected by their environment to express emotions to the same degree as Uncertainty avoiding cultures.
5. *LTO = Long Term Orientation* -> Value orientation towards either thrift and perseverance or more towards respect for tradition, fulfilment of social obligations, and protecting one's 'face'.

FIGURE 3



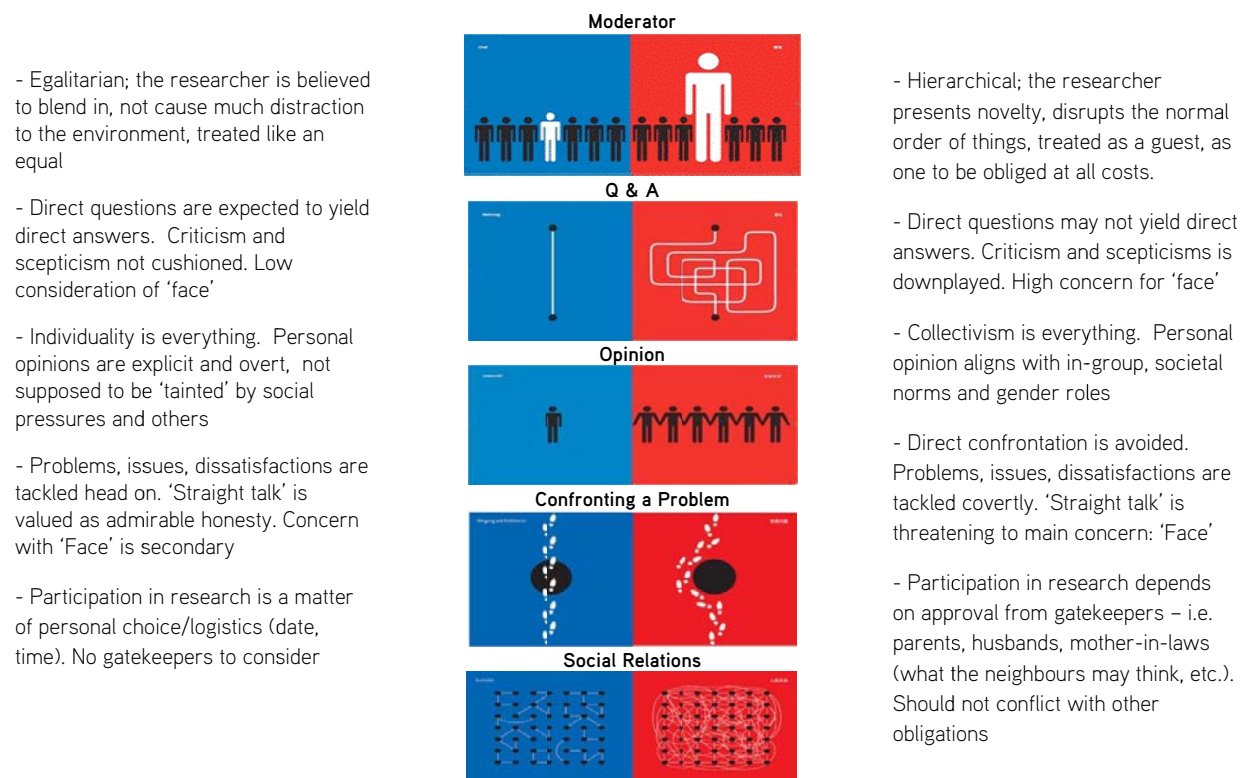
When comparing markets such as India and China to, say, the United States and United Kingdom, a ‘fingerprint’ of macro fault lines between East and West appears. In this comparison, the constellation of the five Hofstede parameters can be seen as forming either a ‘*mountain range*’ or a ‘*ski slope*’ (see red dotted line, figure 3) – suggesting entirely different environments.

The contrast is stark and obvious. The ‘Ski Slope’ formation of the Western cultures is contrasted to the ‘Mountain Range’ formation of Eastern cultures. The bedrock is fundamentally different and the pillars upholding these societies can be summed up to be:

- Egalitarian vs. Hierarchical (PDI)
- Individualistic vs. collective (IDV)
- Orientation towards more Masculine values vs. more feminine values (MAS)
- Uncertainty-avoiding vs. Uncertainty-accepting(UAI)
- Less concerned with ‘face’ vs. very concerned with ‘face’ (LTD)

If we bring this knowledge closer home – to our professional endeavours as qualitative researchers – the cultural divides described by Hofstede mirrors the realities faced in the field, doing fieldwork in Eastern cultures through Western research templates. In other words; when the research methodology is based on standard western practices in eastern markets, the researcher ends up bearing resemblance to Cinderella’s cruel stepsisters who attempted to squeeze their foot into the glass-slipper by cutting a heel and a toe. A liberal rendition of Yang Liu’s famous illustration⁴⁾ can depict the conflicts (see figure 4).

FIGURE 4, EAST VS. WEST



Years of research experience in India for foreign (western) clients have made us particularly sensitive to the issues of implementing western research templates indiscriminately across multiple markets. Often the research design itself is a direct barrier or hindrance for obtaining valuable data. In light of this realization, we set out to conduct a series of mini case studies, where the standard ‘western’ research models were tweaked just enough to accommodate the reality on ground in India – by involving available technological elements.

While lots of learnings have emerged from the experimentation across traditional approaches – we have chosen to hone in on two popular qualitative approaches of our times in ‘global’ research projects; the written paper diary and in-depth home ethnography. Using the topic of water shortage, experimental case studies were conducted.

A SERIES OF MINI CASE STUDIES

Coping with daily scarcity of water in congested Indian metropolitan cities requires ingenuity and community collaboration that, in the mind-numbing daily routine and negotiation, goes beyond the conventional ivory-tower creeds of reducing consumption and exhibiting prudency for a 'greener world'. 'Keeping their water wits' – might be second nature to lower middle class Indians, but when it comes to sharing this information with researchers in traditional Ethno settings, they tend to put on their best clothes, spruce up the house, wear their most polite faces and present a part of their lives that leaves out unexplored insights away from the gaze of the outsider. Besides, it is practically impossible for a researcher to be present at the critical juncture when the water is being collected (or used) in a 15x20 square foot home, where some family members are likely asleep, in the middle of the night.

When Bombay and other metropolitan municipalities distributes water after the rich neighbourhoods have had their 24 hour supply, the other 'real' India often makes do with only an hour a day. In mofussil areas, women pump up ground water that goes dry every summer, walk for miles to obtain water, travel to the nearest pond or river to wash clothes and dishes. Even while monsoons deluge the surroundings, families continue to carefully measure and store rain-water to be able to utilize it later. (See figure 5.)

FIGURE 5, WATER TAPPING – RAIN WATER AND ONE HOUSEHOLD TAP WITH ONE HOUR WATER A DAY



Millions of people, at the end of the tap, adjust their lifestyle, daily routines and behaviour so significantly that it affects usage of everything from shampoo, soap, dish wash soaps and clothes-wash detergents to garden hoses, washing machines and even electric compressors. This is not a tale of woe, but rather a portrayal of keen ability to cope with scarcity and finding solutions to daily problems, which the privileged client and researchers in the posh end of town have no way of knowing or even imagining.

Elaborate systems are put in place for storage and back up and daily chores prioritized (see fascinating example from field from a household with 30 minutes of water in a 24 hour day).⁵⁾ As we see in this home, she collects water early in the morning, and this is a routinized ritual that she wants to complete and get on with the rest of her work. With a family member shooting, she is not seeking to make an impression, or to behave or dress in an atypical way. Sparse family savings are spent on an electric compressor to enhance volume and output. Faucets are kept open at all times, in order not to miss bucketing a single drop.

'Water-economy' is elementary knowledge to all members of the family: One (or even half) plastic bucket per person for bathing, One steel bucket for all cooking, two for laundry (when supply permits, water can manually be transferred to the 'semi-automatic' washing machine – a machine where water can be added and controlled. (See figure 6.)

FIGURE 6, WATER STORAGE – DIFFERENT PROCESS FOR DIFFERENT USAGES



In our experiment with alternative research approaches, the water reality of lower SEC homes came to life in new ways. By reversing the traditional ethno process and leveraging the usage of flip cams and phones, the end-consumer was actively elicited to participate and be involved in our research process, and multiple inputs were analysed simultaneously. A family member – often a teenage son or daughter – served as an extension of the researcher and observed/tracked the mother's routines and administration of the water supply – offering the most unobtrusive and least invasive approach to data gathering.

We used flip cams and cell phone picture and video clips to clock and log the water life-cycle in a series of small case studies in lower middle class households, even prior to the actual meetings in depth interviews or group discussions. In this experimental phase, we worked with various approaches, viz.

1. Unaided flip cam ethnos – Husband recording wife's water collection routines
2. Unaided cell phones ethnos – Teens taking cell phone pictures/video of water usage.
3. Multiple researchers in field – Using sms logs to tally HH water economy. (See figure 7.)

FIGURE 7, CHILDREN FACILE IN USING SMARTPHONES – TAKING PICTURES OF FAMILY MEMBERS



The reasons for suggesting a turn of the process inside out; reversing the order of the immersion, is not a mere Feyerabendian 'let's work with whatever works'. Rather, the methods have been carefully chosen and tailor-made to counter cultural barriers and to avoid issues that long years of experience in the local culture have sensitized us to, a few being highlighted here:

- Male gate keepers/gender roles/etc. in orthodox and patriarchal homes, who want to present their authoritative perspective to the visiting qualitative field team; and feel entitled to participate – often speaking on behalf of his wife;
- Cross generational involvement in joint families, for the sake of breaking barriers typically experienced in collective families – every such family has a hierarchy invisible to the short-term visitor, between mother in-laws, sister in laws, husbands and elders;
- The 'Guest is God' dogma and its impact on the ethno scene, the vast contrast between private sphere (night gown all day, the equivalent to the western jogging outfit vs. decked out in best attire; sari, bindi and jewelry) etc. before visitors;
- The politeness barrier, where it is easier to present an 'untruth' rather than come out with a forthright response.

The results of this format, when presented to various clients – FMCG, white goods manufacturers – has been more than enthusiastic. The water studies continue to unleash interest among a range of companies from various verticals, such as retail to banking, who find the objectivity, combined with the richness and immediacy of the potential, inspiring enough to want to incorporate it into own-brand future. More interestingly, young companies – with limited budgets and less limited imagination – need no longer be turned away.

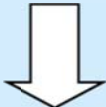

The streamed in visual and text message information coming in from across the diverse country serve as immediate narratives and the convergence is, in an osmotic way, able to catapult the corporate boardroom into the homes of its end-

consumers in real time even while we provide the rigour of our expertise in analysis and conceptualization of the unorthodox data.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HOME ETHNOS IN THE COLLECTIVE EAST

Experimenting with different setup, different technological aids and different levels of involvement of the researcher, we ultimately found a way to obtain the information we were after, in the most culture-complimenting manner, by adjusting the usual home ethno approach in certain ways. The approach/process was virtually inverted and solved multiple cultural issues and barriers. Figure 8 summarizes the steps of The Inverted Process and the pros and cons of such an approach in comparison with the usual home ethno approach:

FIGURE 8, THE INVERTED PROCESS

The usual process		The inverted process	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recruitment 2. Pre-tasks: written paper diary 3. Research team show up at respondent's home 4. Interview unfolds 5. Research team records/take pictures 6. Pix & footage reviewed without respondent 7. Final analysis and editing 		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recruitment + handout of flip/cell 2. Respondent flip cam records/take pictures with cell phone (interact via SMS as well) 3. Researcher shows up at respondent's home 4. Pix & footage is reviewed with respondent 5. Interview unfolds 6. Final editing and analysis (interaction via SMS often continues) 	
Pros	Cons	Pros	Cons
<p>Easier to stick to the time line</p> <p>Possibly more 'professional' shots (lighting, sharpness)</p> <p>Lends itself to 'cookie-cutter' multi-country studies</p>	<p>Disruptive to normal routine</p> <p>'Guest is God' syndrome – novelty of researcher changes all dynamics and becomes 'center-stage'</p> <p>Tend to write a diary in formal 'I am so privileged to be writing this' language, decorating the diaries with spangles, besides being unable to express on paper, as they can face-to-face.</p> <p>Many family members join – especially those top of social hierarchy</p> <p>Focus on key respondents hard to maintain – often drowns in voice of family members</p> <p>May not be able to shoot the real deal – but only 'simulated' actions due to wrong time of day, etc.</p> <p>Significant shyness in front of the camera</p> <p>Only one chance for collecting visual footage</p> <p>In extended ethno sessions, multiple hours may pass, prior to authentic habituated & subconscious information gleaned</p>	<p>Less intrusive and more authentic</p> <p>Tends to go un-noticed by extended family members – bypassing gatekeepers</p> <p>No posing for researcher, no dressing up</p> <p>Key respondent remains in focus / centre stage – not challenged by higher-pecking-order family members</p> <p>Gadget-novelty boosts involvement</p> <p>Visibly less shyness in front of the camera</p> <p>Lots of surprises – footage of 'off-limit' areas / procedures (undiscovered had they not been shot by family member)</p> <p>Cell offers an instant hotline for Qs or issues, easy to follow up/check in</p> <p>Multiple options for getting good visuals footage</p> <p>Less ad hoc – continuing consumer connect possible over time</p>	<p>Less amenable to pre-set grids of analysis</p> <p>Less 'professional' shots (lighting, sharpness, etc.)</p> <p>Ambiguity and uncertainty could arise in this non-linear situation</p>

Interviews conducted in the usual home ethno manner yielded surface information. Too often we were stuck with speaking with the husband (whose involvement with water collection, storage and usage typically would be none) or facing a dressed to the nines house wife who spoke of just parts of the water tapping procedure, but couldn't illustrate it to us live – since the water only was available in the early morning hours or late at night when our team was not at the house. In case she was asked to enact the washing of dishes before observers, she tended to use a lot more water than what she actually used. (See figure 9.)

FIGURE 9, STRETCHING A BUCKET TO LAST THE DISHES OF AN ENTIRE MEAL



The Inverted Process not only allowed for amazing footage of the morning routines and night commotion, it also plainly depicted the strains on the family (not on their best behaviour as during the face to face interview) and made blatant the tediousness of the routine, the stark gender roles (always the women's responsibility to rise to collect water, while the men sleep) and the natural surroundings of the events; nighties vs. saris, no head/hair coverage, the idle chatting, the frustrations during power cuts (compressor not working while the water finally runs or vice versa) and the inadequate filtering systems (normally just a cloth rag on the tap to collect the crudest dirt, gravel and grime (though in the IDI, she claimed to 'boil water').

Using self-administered video recordings and cell phone pictures as the ice breaker and starting point at the following interviews yielded amazing insights in terms of water tapping techniques and water usage routines not anticipated beforehand.

FIGURE 10, PUBLIC STREET TAP – EACH FAMILY HAVING 10-20 MIN/DAY, EACH USING THEIR OWN GARDEN HOSE ATTACHED TO A COMPRESSOR



One of the pre-specified assignments to the flip-cam-recording family member was to ask the 'water-tapping' family member (mother, daughter, sister) the question "what do you wish for? And what would be your dream water situation?" While answers during the usual processes had been polite (ma'am, we want 24 hours water), the answers in front of a family member (in absence of the researcher) was much more candid and uninhibited (what would I do with 24 hours water? Why can't I ask for 24 hours electricity?).

In the inverted process, the notion of 'incremental progress as an acceptable water goal' was communicated much stronger. Most women plainly felt that having water 24/7 was too much to ask for and not a realistic goal in current day India. They would be thrilled at the thought of simply having a couple of hours of running water a day – and most importantly – consistently every day (not only every other day or with sudden sporadic weeks of drought). The reality of

these women's everyday lives, their matter of fact disillusionment with 'big dreams' and pragmatic sense of chores to be done – came through in an entirely different manner in the video clips shot by family members vs. the (alien) research team.

CONCLUSION

As researchers we can contribute to – and have impact on – methodological advancement by adjusting our research approach, with an ability to look at problems differently, and utilizing all the technological tools the past decade has equipped us with. Participating actively in exploring new angles challenges the research to be pushed further, and provides the points where a truth of the consumer's life meets a truth of our potential brands.^{6),7)}

It is no longer a debate about classic vs. new (online) methodologies, but rather an emphasis on our industry's obligation to juggle, be creative, experiment and stretch our reach – both to hitherto researched consumers as well as a larger base of clients, even as ethnographies – already shortened drastically by marketers as compared to anthropologists – become both financially viable and even more authentic in their deliverables, in novel ways.

By taking the example of water, which is a life and death daily usage matter, we have indicated how a creative and alternate methodological approach can provide a wider vista for idea generation, and thereby provide viable solutions, when innovations are approached 'from the inside'. What's more, in order to inspire clients and companies in their product ideation process, these also provided a live 'on-real-time' interaction with our consumers.

The advantages of culture-complimenting designs are vast and paramount in collecting pure, authentic and reliable insights. While common logistics may dictate some standardisations across multi-market qualitative projects, we can still gain exponentially by simply tweaking our classic methodologies along the eastern and western cultures. Our encouragement to fellow colleagues and professionals working with qualitative research is an increasingly conscious focus on the cultural divide and attempts to enhance the value we bring to our clients by first and foremost driving innovation from within – improving our designs at the methodological end.

NOTE

Photographs taken by students of Northpoint Center of Learning, Khandala, 2012 batch and children/family members of the household.

FOOTNOTES

1. Aston, Yuval et al (2011); Is your emerging market strategy local enough? In McKinsey Quarterly, April 2011
2. Singh, Rajesh and Suresh Garg (2010) The competitiveness of SMEs in a globalized economy in Management Research Review Vol 33, No 1, pp 54-65
3. Hofstede, Geert and Gert Jan (2005); Cultures and Organizations – Software of the Mind. Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival McGraw Hill
4. Images are from the book "Osttrifft West" (East meets West), Hermann Schmidt Verlag Mainz, designed by Yang Liu www.yangliudesign.com
5. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMlp0EJweW8>
6. Blanche, Christine and Karen Hofmen (2007) 'The Holistic Approach; Emphasizing the Importance of the Whole and the Interdependence of its Parts' in Market Research Best Practice: 30 Visions for the Future ESOMAR World Research Publication, John Wiley and Sons
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<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMIp0EJweW8>

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