

INSIGHT SERIES

Hello, is anyone there?

Can we really know the customer if we can't see them?

By Kylie Chong

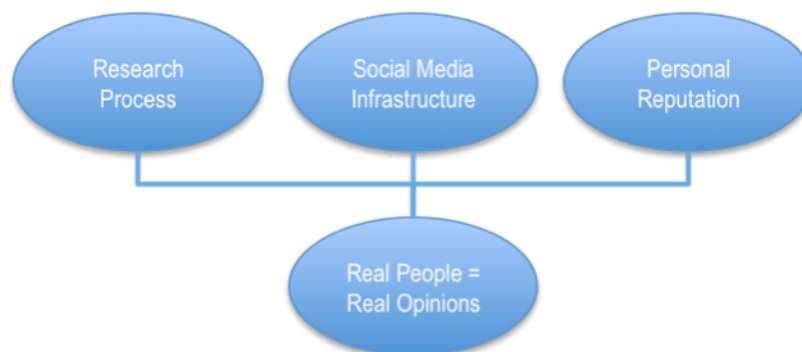
We're all familiar with toddlers hiding behind their hands in the belief that if they can't see you, you can't see them. In this early stage of cognitive development, the egocentric child is yet to fully recognise that the world can be perceived from alternative viewpoints. Yet this is a monumental step compared with babies who have yet to develop object permanence – if I can't see it, it doesn't exist.

In considering online qualitative research for the first time, clients are often challenged by the notion of conducting research with people they can't see. "But how do we know they're being honest?", "Are they real customers?" or "Won't we miss out on non-verbal cues?" are common concerns. There's something innately reassuring about being able to see the words come out of people's mouths in a focus group, as if by being witness to the discussion it is legitimised. Yet, for decades the invisible respondent in quantitative research has been accepted without question, if only because the number of individuals speaks louder than each individual.

A significant amount of academic research has been conducted into the area of online identity and anonymity and it is widely recognised that few functional barriers exist to adopting an online identity that is different from who you are in the 'real world'. We can easily choose how much we reveal in cyberspace - whether we tell all or nothing. This is best demonstrated in the social networking game, Second Life, where it's almost expected that you will be someone different online.

So, what does this mean for Online Research Communities and the authenticity of the insights generated in these forums?

The explanation is approached from a number of angles. In all, the research process, social media infrastructure and personal reputation drivers contribute to how people behave in online research communities. In essence, it is the management of the community, the platform and the interactions within the community that reinforce and encourage honesty in member involvement.



The Research Process

At Latitude Research a number of important steps are incorporated into every project to ensure that the online community truly reflects the target market, within a qualitative context (that is, it is a representative rather than definitive sample).

Strict recruitment criteria	➔	Delivers target market
Offline follow up	➔	Confirms identity
Guidelines for participation	➔	Ensures commitment
Clearly identified community leader	➔	Presence of an 'authority'
Personal introductions	➔	Encourages openness
Constant communication	➔	Reinforces purpose of community
Trust in members	➔	Create sense of being valued

The process creates a clear understanding between the community members, researchers and the client that the most powerful opinion is a genuine one. Misrepresentation is easily recognised because it is difficult to maintain over the lifetime of a research community. However, the strongest motivation for members to participate with complete authenticity is that their 'voices' are being heard by clients who actually care about what their customers have to say.

It's not surprising then, to find that online qualitative research can actually generate more open and honest responses because of the perceived lack of judgment and the cloak of invisibility (but not anonymity). The reserved group participant may have less fear of speaking up; the dissenter may feel less pressure to conform. And while clients still 'listen' by watching the conversations evolve online, there is less sense of watching a discussion orchestrated by a moderator.

The most compelling evidence of the authenticity of the customers in our research communities is the extent to which they share information about their lives. Participating in discussions about research topics is only one element of community behaviour, what provides context to these discussions is the background information that is shared, voluntarily, in member profiles and blogs. The member (the customer) tells us about their likes, dislikes, family, habits, pets, lives, and more.

Social Media Infrastructure

The advent of social networking sites has seen a massive change from anonymity on the web, to sharing and personalisation. A veil of secrecy offers no advantage when developing and maintaining connections online. In the English-speaking world, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, as examples, rely on people being able to find you.

Additionally, with our personal audiences extending beyond our day-to-day contacts, it's easier to 'thine own self be true' than to manage multiple online personalities. So, with the interconnectivity of social media, so to must there be a convergence in personal identity management. We can now move between various social networking sites, encouraging our friends, fans and followers to come with us.



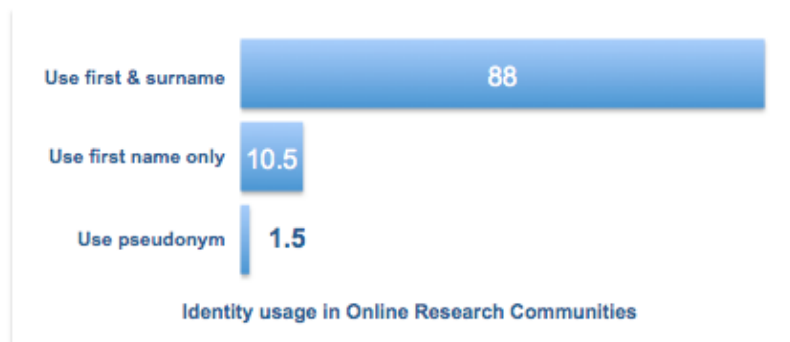
Consider the following questions:

What's on your mind?
What are you doing?
What are you working on?

The questions require short, immediate responses, to be shared with people who you know (most of the time). Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, respectively above, ask us to be honest, because it is assumed that people in cyberspace, actually care about the answers. Plus, our profiles are scored for levels of 'completeness' based on how much personal information we have shared. There is little point in participating in social networking if there is no willingness to share.

The impact this has on our online research communities is that members recognise that being recognised is part of life online. But what makes them feel even more comfortable in using their real names and sharing personal information is that our research communities are private and invitation only. So while they are sharing, it's within the security of a closed community.

To many, hiding behind an avatar or pseudonym would be as nonsensical as using a disguise in a focus group. Analysis across a number of our research communities reveals that a vast majority of members use both their first and surname to identify themselves, while less than two percent could not be recognised at all by a real name.



Personal Reputation

In 1968, Andy Warhol claimed that 'everyone will be world famous for 15 minutes'. What rings true about the statement today, is that everyone has platform to communicate and be heard on the Internet. We've seen the rapid shift towards user generated content and individuals powering global dissemination of information through social media. There are few, if any barriers, to having a say about anything.

Still, our community members have an inherent desire to make a worthwhile and constructive contribution to the research discussion. There's also an element of having their opinions, feedback and ideas attributable, even if only amongst the community itself. A thought or suggestion in an online research community seems more 'real' when coming from Amanda



Smith, versus Cupcake_73. Members know their discussions are being scrutinised, and for this very reason, they are compelled to be brutally honest in sharing their opinions.

Ultimately, it's about personal reputation. So whether from our mouths or through our keyboards, the words we utter in research are a reflection of the individual. And online, our words remain long after the conversation has finished. It is with this in mind that community members are motivated to speak the truth about their experiences with our clients' brands, products and services, in order to help companies better meet their needs and expectations.

Conclusion

The rapid uptake of online qualitative research is a reflection of the depth and richness of the insights delivered through this approach. Concerns about the authenticity of the community members are largely unfounded when it is understood that individuals have little to gain by not being themselves online.

Online Research Communities have evolved out of social constructs, rather than research practices, and as momentum gathers behind social media it will become increasingly apparent that online conversations are closer to 'real' than watching small groups of people from behind a one-way mirror.

About Latitude Insights

Latitude Insights is a market research consultancy, specializing in online research communities to develop rich and deep customer insights for our clients.

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