

THE ASIAN (DIGITAL) MALE

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Let's face it, in an ever-shrinking world it's becoming harder and harder to draw specific cultural or societal trends out of geography, but looking at 2010 through the lens of the Asian male does deliver some interesting insights.

I've had the honor of being in Asia around about a year. That's not a lot of time at all, but I've made up for it by being as mobile as I can be - to soak up insights (and great food), to help us further sharpen our knowledge as a consumer marketing firm, but also to enrich my life personally. To be in Asia and to work with the preeminent firm in the region is, for me, the best work-life balance ever.

A CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE IN THE ASIAN MALE?

In Singapore they say you're not complete until you have the 5 C's - credit card, career, car, condo and club (as in gentleman's). Our GoodPurpose™ study this year, which featured three Asian markets, makes us wonder if a sixth C is developing in the region: C for cause. Now, there may well be a perception in markets like Singapore, and to some extent the tier one Chinese cities, that fiscal status is king. But it's important to consider many of the founding religions and philosophies of the region that influence how men here tick. Confucianism, Buddhism and Hinduism have strong positions on giving back; supporting friends and family; and being in a way "humble." It's this clash of old and new that is contributing to a confidence issue here in Asia.

It's all well and good to have the Rolex, but above and beyond that, tomorrow's male family leaders will face a crisis of confidence. They stand to inherit large sums of family savings as one generation moves to another with a heightened global influence of doing good. Coupled with a need to fulfill their parents' wishes, the question is: will inheriting this money be more of a burden than a bonus? There will be an onus on the Asian Male to provide and be seen as "doing the right thing" with this newfound inherited wealth. It might be the case that buying another BMW or Louis Vuitton case might be seen as shameful.

So Asian Men, moving forward, might well return to their elders' beliefs and channel this wealth in a different way – away from mass consumption and into providing and supporting communities, causes and crisis. The mass outpouring of support (financial and physical) following the terribly frequent natural disasters in Asia in 2009 is an indicator that a sense of "doing the right thing" might be delivering respect and status in a way that a new car simply cannot.

THE RISE OF WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE

A recent study in the Straits Times in Singapore tells us that many developing Asian countries are treating equality in the workplace in a way that's maybe more up-to-date than we may think. For example, in Thailand – a country perceived to be still "developing" – women are treated more equally than in Singapore. Again, history and culture can be reflected in the way organizations operate today. And in some markets here, women benefit from a family-based authority that lends itself to fairer workplace rights.

Now, that's not to say that there aren't still equality issues across the region. But the fact is, more women are delivering more money to economies through leadership and entrepreneurship and that's going to add pressure to how the Asian Male defends his, perhaps, ingrained sense of entitlement at work. This can be brilliantly demonstrated by the often cited Japanese Kimono Traders, vast swathes of women across Japan who, in their spare time (and some as home workers) are trading more than \$15 billion USD per day on the currency exchange.

Transactions are so significant that countries like Turkey, for example, fear that women losing interest in their currency could have devastating effects. This rise in the digital workplace, coupled with the upward movement of women in the workplace and as entrepreneurs will, once more, pressure the Asian Man to deliver and be the "man" he must be.

THE DIGITAL MAN IN ASIA?

Men in Asia, much like the rest of the world, are closely wedded to digital. And wedded is a good word. The trend for matchmaking online is growing in the region. The Singaporean government has programs that fund "match making" from digital to arranged meetings for some time: societies like to see families grow and one can expect growth in these sorts of services online.

That's a move that will see more Internet conglomerates moving into Asia to launch local versions of dating sites. Match.com already dominates with local sites in 14 markets in the region. Naturally the Asian Man, facing family pressure to commit and fearing he'll "lose face" by being turned down in person, will benefit hugely from online dating and matchmaking services.

Sports are a big driver of content for television, cable and Internet. But it still has room to grow significantly in handsets and mobile. Of course, Japanese men can already watch, record, skip and save live television on their powerful mobile phones and have been able to do so for some time.

In Thailand, True offers an incredible range of services for handset holders, on and off line. But there is opportunity as countries in Asia bicker and squabble over sports rights (much like the local drama in Singapore with the English Premier League). We should start seeing more immersive content across all channels - aiding convergence and offering strong monetization opportunities from the Asian Male's wallet.

And we can look at blogging: it's a patchwork in Asia. In Singapore, the blogs tend to focus on eating - and this attracts men and women alike. In many other markets, it's sporadic. The Asian Man probably won't be writing controversial or political blogs in the region. In some markets, the government has created an environment where dissent isn't tolerated. In others, life is so simple; there's not a lot to complain about. So the Asian Man is more likely to drive his online activity towards receiving information and comment over creating noise and fame.

You also have to look at the regional differences in social life. There's less of a drinking culture in many markets here. Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia, for example, as opposed to the U.K. and U.S., don't qualify as a "down at the pub" region. However, in markets like Japan and Korea, for a man not to go out and have a drink after work can sometimes be seen as either weak, or even offensive.

I would contend that fun and play and status is something that is built more subtly, and online is an ideal place for the Asian Man in 2010 to build his status and profile factually. He might also consider the creation of alter egos and characters to provide the thrill and ego that may be hard to display in a coffee shop on the weekend.

Then there's gaming. It's a preserve of the male set and still the dominant use of time online for men in Asia. You can often drive through a very basic village but still discover one little shop house containing a single PlayStation, an old tube TV and a long queue of men waiting to play.

It's this online world of gaming and competition that really drives many Asian Males to become gaming-reclusive - countering what might be a fairly mundane daily routine (work, lunch, work, family) into a world of escape and ambitions realized. I would also propose that as Asian Men continue to excel at studies and academia we can attribute some of this increased intelligence to gaming.

A Forrester report last year suggested that intense game play online delivers a set of latent management and learning skills to players that best-position them for success in management and learning. It doesn't take a statistician to draw a parallel between the amounts of time a man in Asia might spend playing games online and the impressive education ability he might have.

Finally, what can organizations, brands, and bodies do better in 2010 to attract the attention of the men in this disparate region?

First, the answer isn't always Facebook. Remember this is a social network that has no place in China. And in other markets, local players take the lead (Japan, Thailand, India all have significant local social networking tools). It's not just Twitter either.

In fact, the answer isn't "digitally based." The answer has to be cultural. I believe that the brands that will succeed with this target consumer are those who connect "locally" and understand the differences in culture and society. Simply lifting a successful campaign from one market to another will only breed discontent.

As suggested at the start of this article, the bond between history and future, old cultures and new opportunities, is a powerful paradox in Asia and one that brands in the region must understand to succeed in 2010 and beyond.