

UX & IA on the Other Side of the World

Christy Annatiur



Recent progress in globalization and the presence of the internet have connected the world like never before. These bring a lot of positives and negatives when it comes to user experience. Sometimes, it can bring the concept of diversity which enables pleasant experience for diverse audiences. However, at times it can also cause generalization. Since the world is very connected, people tend to think that things are the same no matter where you are. Things that work in one place will also work everywhere else. The fact is, no matter what, people's needs and demands will never be 100% the same, especially when they come from different cultures or backgrounds.

I found this topic, not only interesting but also relatable. I feel very fortunate that I got to experience various cultures growing up. I got to see how people around the world function differently. How similar tasks are approached differently by different people.

As a resident of the world, we have to start seeing the world as a whole and realizing that it is made up from so many different parts. It is crucial to understand and avoid misunderstanding when it comes to the needs of the user especially when they come from an unfamiliar background.

Differences and Misconceptions

During the research for this topic, I got to see things from others' points of view and found it very interesting and eye-opening. I was born and raised in Jakarta, Indonesia up to the age of 15, when I moved to another big city, Singapore. At the age of 18, I finally moved to Lansing, a place I consider as a small town. Having lived in these places that are not only different geographically, but also in background and culture, I rarely found people's different habits weird anymore. In honesty, I found it hard to point out the difference between living in these places.

Now that I think back to it, I can remember a lot of people's habits that are considered weird or unusual elsewhere. Let me give you an example of American habits that people elsewhere might find weird. You might find closing public places during the holiday normal. However, I find it very confusing. Usually, business places consider those dates as an excellent opportunity to be open. Since the whole family are likely to be on holiday, they are more likely to visit these places (it is very convenient for a family trip). It is not even rare for them to be open longer than usual.

Like I pointed out earlier, we commonly neglected the differences between the needs of one user to another. Sometimes, we forget to take into account how much one's culture influences their views and actions.³ What users perceive as beautiful and usable is largely influenced by their background. One of the most important things for us to remember is that there is always a reason behind why someone does a particular thing, whether it is because of the social norm or their upbringing.¹

Huatong Sun described the cross-cultural market as an iceberg, in which the submerged part is "unspoken and unconscious rules."⁴ This analogy applies perfectly to the Asian market. Eastern people tend to be more traditional and hold their social norm to a high standard. This forms a strong bond between their habits and approach to technology. Because of this, we need to be aware of their culture and habits to succeed in the market.²

Some things that might work in the Western market might not work in Eastern Market. It might also not be suitable for the user. I take an example given by Anthony Morris in his article on UXPA Magazine. In which he described how the assumed transferability of TV Banking that was successful in the UK, was met by instant horror by the Hong Kong Customers. This is because unlike British families that have joint accounts and financial transparency, Hong Kong consumers find it unusual to have their accounts displayed to the rest of the household.¹

However, we also need to pay attention to the differences present between the Asian market itself. For example, Uber, a company based in America, that might not find a need to advertise in America, found a need to advertise in both Indonesia and Singapore due to the lack of interest in both countries. However, the lack of interest in both countries stems from different reasons. In Singapore, it stemmed from the availability of Singapore's public transportations. Public transportation in Singapore is not only very accessible, but also very convenient. Hence, people find no need in taking Uber to get to places as much as American market does. In Indonesia however, it is because Uber entered the market too late. Copycat startup companies that are local to the market have started offering the same service before Uber does and thus earned the user's loyalty. In addition to that, it is also Uber's lack of understanding about the user's reluctance about putting their credit card online. The other startup companies realized this and hence offered a cash payment method. Uber nowadays also offers a cash payment method. However, they already missed the market enthusiasm.

Users's Bandwagon Mentality

To make a successful product, it is important for us to pay attention and understand the user's behavior. During my research, I found that it is stated over and over again how powerful the influence is of a group of consumers in Asia, and how the existence of a small group could bring an even larger group of users.^{1,5,6}

This phenomenon could stem from the fear of missing out that is present in the society. However, it could also stem from cultural values or upbringing. An example given by Anthony Morris in his article is how people in Hong Kong would rather take a more crowded street just to save a small amount of money. It is caused by a social value in which it is a "shame" to waste money.¹ This value and other similar ones, although fleeting in younger generations, are still present in the society. The fact that in people in Eastern cultures hold social norms to a high standard could play a significant role. People simply want to belong, not be different, or viewed as an outsider to the masses. In other cases, it is simply because of the convenience it brings. A good example is how BBM (BlackBerry Messenger, a messaging app) was so popular in Indonesia when it was failing in rest of the world'. Everyone in Indonesia simply used the app because everyone else did. I remembered moving to Singapore and changing my BlackBerry phone to an iPhone and ended up having to buy another BlackBerry (thus having two phones) as a means to communicate with my friends back in Indonesia.

Positive Impact of This Behavior

We can use this behavior as a tailwind for our product's success. In which, the adoption of our product will exceed our expectation.¹ Huatong Sun, in her article on the UXPA Magazine, stated that the approach of using an alternative method to acquire users as "Growth hacking." A popular method of Growth Hacking in Asia is by gaining a fanbase for their product.⁵

A fan base will not only will help to kick off successful initial sales, but also bring in loyal users that are willing to serve as "citizen designers" who will beta test and provide feedback throughout the whole design cycle. These fans also serve as passionate promoters for the product. They are eager to spread the fandom and influence their peers to use the product. An example to this would be XiaoMi's (Chinese mobile phone) fanbase. They nurtured their fanbase since the early version of their phone development. In addition to supporting their release, this fanbase also helped through the development process by giving feedback.⁶

This bandwagon behavior could also make it easy for us as a user experience architect to understand and predict the public demands. In a market where this behavior exists, what the market is usually what trending at the moment. I will give you a non-technology related example for this. I found my mom, a product developer of a food company constantly innovating in accordance to the public demand. Recently, the Salted Egg flavor is trending in Indonesia. She suddenly found herself busy recreating this flavor for her various customer even though no one ever asked her to make this flavor prior to the trend. She also needs to adjust the flavor, color, and texture to fit each customer's demand and keep the exclusivity of each formula even though it does not vary too much due to the bandwagon mentality of the market (everyone wants the same thing). This phenomenon also happened previously when seaweed flavor first entered Indonesia and certainly will happen again.

Negative Impact of This Behavior

In a culture or a market where this mentality exists, we need to be careful when choosing to follow a trend. Although all these trends seemed to be successful at first, some might only be a fad and ended up fleeting.¹ In Experience Architecture, we not only want to bring in people to our product, but we also want to keep them in. In accordance to that, we need to understand the appeal of each trend before deciding to follow it to ensure its longevity.⁵

Due to its instability, we also have to be aware that our product cannot be solely based on the trend. We need to make sure that our product will also meet the user's needs long after the trend passes. We could also approach this by pick and choose. We can dissect a trend, figure out what makes it so appealing to the masses and apply that to our product. Another way to approach it is by being dynamic and always staying on top of the changes (keep following the trend as it changes).⁵