

Countries with tight social norms innovate less in the international arena

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An increasingly common way to source creative ideas is to ask the crowd for help. Various companies have launched online platforms to source creative ideas from online communities. For example, PepsiCo has set up “[Legion of the Bold](#)”, a community website in which the brand asks fans for marketing and advertising ideas. In 2014, Procter & Gamble announced the launch of the world’s first Bluetooth-connected toothbrush and [revealed](#) that the product development process was inspired by 67 innovative ideas from 24 countries across the globe including China, Spain and France. The product shipped globally, market response was above expectations and the product even [earned](#) P&G a design award.

Riding this creative crowdsourcing wave, crowdsourcing agency [eYeka](#) has launched over 900 creative contests to help global brands & agencies find creative ways to develop and market new products.

It seems that, for the first time ever, creative work has become a truly global endeavour that crosses national borders and breaks corporate walls. The creative world looks flat – but is it really? Do ideas travel freely unhindered by national and cultural differences? Are creative ideas universally accepted anywhere in the world? Are individuals from some cultures better positioned to innovate globally than others?

Many institutions, such as IMD, INSEAD, and Rotman School of Management have created rankings of national innovativeness – the Rotman’s Martin Prosperity Institute ranked Australia on top of its [Global Creativity Index in 2015](#), whereas the United States tops the [2015 IMD Competitiveness Scoreboard](#), for example. These rankings use macroeconomic data to determine which country (or culture) is best at bringing creativity to life.

In academia too, there has been interest in studying national or cultural differences in innovativeness. Some researchers, for example, have looked at the impact of cultural dimensions such as individualism or uncertainty avoidance on national innovativeness (Shane, [1992](#), [1993](#), [1994](#)), but a complete framework of the impact of culture on global creativity has yet to emerge. We still lack solid theoretical foundations to understand the nature of global

creative activities.

A key element that may have been overlooked by practitioners and academics – despite being fundamental to understanding innovation at a global stage – is the target audience of a creative task. Problems are not always universal; they more often than not have a local specificity. A global multinational corporation based in North America may have to crack a brand positioning problem for an emerging market in Asia. A European FMCG (fast-moving consumer goods) giant is more likely to achieve its growth objectives if it launches culturally relevant products on South-American or Indian supermarket shelves. But where will these ideas come from? Will foreign creative ideas be accepted locally?

We have been among the first to unpack the “black box” of global creative work to uncover cultural differences in participation intent and success. We found that – even in today’s participatory open source world – ideas require some degree of cultural alignment to be accepted. Using field data from a global crowdsourcing platform, and conducting interviews with marketing experts, we found that a certain degree of cultural alignment is needed in cross-cultural creativity.

In a recent [paper](#), we looked at the novel construct of cultural tightness — the extent to which a country is characterised by strong social norms and low tolerance for deviant behaviours — of both an innovator’s country and the audience’s country. We found that individuals from tight cultures (such as Singapore, Malaysia, or India) are less likely than counterparts from loose cultures (such as the Netherlands, Brazil or Israel) to engage in and succeed at foreign creative tasks.

For example, Singaporeans are less likely than Israelis to enter creative contests outside their own country – and even if they do, they are not likely to succeed. We believe that individuals from tight cultures can find it challenging because they may experience low creative self-efficacy with respect to unfamiliar foreign tasks; their cautious prevention-focused approach to problem solving could constrain their cognitive flexibility.

Additionally, we found that tight cultures are also less receptive to foreign creative ideas. For example, a marketing firm from India or South Korea – both tight cultures – is more likely to reject a creative idea from abroad than a counterpart from the U.S. or Australia – culturally loose nations.

Taken together, these results suggest that cultural tightness seems to be an obstacle to international creativity... in both ways. In provocative terms: our findings imply that cultural tightness leads to a form of creativity xenophobia.

But, interestingly, culturally tight countries shouldn’t be dismissed as un-creative countries *per se*. Our results also indicate that in certain circumstances — when members of a tight culture do creative work in their own or culturally similar countries — cultural tightness can actually promote creativity success. For example, a Turkish retailer which broadcasts a global call for contribution for a national campaign is [more likely](#) to choose a domestic submission as the best one. Because Turkey is a tight culture with nuanced norms and rules, a Turkish creative is probably better able to understand the tight cultural norms of the local audience so as to provide an appropriately creative solution.

Growing up and living in a country that has many strongly enforced rules and little tolerance for deviance seems to give people a “domestic creativity advantage” because it can be hard for foreigners to navigate these rules and norms.

Our research is among the first to look at cross-cultural creativity based on both the innovator’s and the target audience’s culture. Taken together, our findings can be summarised in what we called the “Cultural Alignment Model of Global Creativity.”

What does that mean for business? How can these findings help organisations be more creatively productive or relevant? Our research shows that organisations that want to be innovative beyond their domestic markets must foster a culture of tolerance for novel ideas to emerge. We would also advise anyone who looks for ideas outside of one’s usual innovation partners, from agencies to consultants and even crowds, to think about the target audience

when asking for help. In this open world, in which ideas seem to travel freely and unhindered by any kind of border, do not forget to take the collective programming of the creative mind into account.



Notes:

- This post is based on the the paper [The Impact of Culture on Creativity: How Cultural Tightness and Cultural Distance Affect Global Innovation Crowdsourcing Work](#), by Roy Y. J. Chua, Yannig Roth and Jean-François Lemoine, *Administrative Science Quarterly* June 2015 vol. 60 no. 2 189-227
- This post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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