IN SEARCH OF PLATFORM
NINE AND THREE QUARTERS…

The internet: the magical platform to enter the young mind?

This paper examines the nuances of setting up and managing an online qualitative research panel as a methodology for deeper insight into the minds of youth. It aims to demonstrate that a flexible, yet fun method of eliciting information works well with youngsters who lead always-on lives, and to lay down the rules of this game…

Back in the cave, after we feasted, we told our stories by drawing lines in the dirt with fingers and sticks, and we narrated with increasingly refined grunts. Eventually, we illustrated our stories by using blood and berries to draw pictures on the cave walls.

- Shel Israel^

In the beginning was the panel…

<u>The attack of the Zippies!</u>

Zippie: A young city or suburban resident, between 15 and 25 years of age, with a zip in the stride. Belongs to Generation Z. Can be male or female, studying or working. Oozes attitude, ambition and aspiration.

Cool, confident and creative. Seeks challenges, loves risks and shuns fear. Succeeds Generation X and Generation Y, but carries the social, political, economic, cultural or ideological baggage of
neither. Personal and professional life marked by vim, vigour and vitality (origin: Indian)

(Source : 'Outlook' magazine cover story - *The Zippies Are Here* - Jan 12, 2004)

<u>In pursuit of the Zippies</u>… we recruited a panel of thirty college going youth between the age of 18 – 22 in the cities of Mumbai and Bangalore. The respondents in the panel came on board as peer groups and were chosen basis, apart from demographic criteria, on some psychographic filters indicating the nature of their socialization and articulation skills. All had computers or access to one, were already on social networking sites such as orkut and facebook hence had a basic idea of how these sites worked. In addition we allowed some level of 'member get member' for recruitment. However, every new recruit was screened to ensure fundamental demographic criteria and socialization.

<u>Why the panel?</u>

We started out with two clear objectives for this panel:
-   to use this as a form to explore and track youth culture and emerging trends
-   to use this as a panel to provide respondents for ad-hoc quick turn-around research on product and communication concepts

<u>…so why not conventional research methodology?</u>

In conventional research, we tend to stick to time-tested safe methods, with the researcher at the helm, looking at respondents from a distance - or in case of ethnographic methods,

getting closer to the lives of the respondents but still viewing them through the prism of the expert researcher.

This has the following issues:

- Trying to get closer to the lives of the young people we want to understand, wearing the hats of the "adult" and "researcher" simultaneously, is a fairly futile exercise. Young people have defenses already in place against 'prying adults' that would prevent direct entry into their minds and lifestyles
- Still at an awkward age, this segment tends to be self conscious and worried about peer judgment – hence 'ideal speech' as defined by Habermas never quite takes place in the case of conventional research

We searched for a methodology that would:

- replicate as far as possible current communication patterns and preferences of the young people we wished to understand
- provide the conditions for 'ideal speech'- a forum where the respondents would feel comfortable and express themselves freely
- take us deeper into their minds and lives than adults would normally be allowed

Preliminary groundwork yielded some interesting thoughts:

- We found that the need to be in touch with their peers is so strong amongst the youth that they use every available method with equal enthusiasm – physical meeting and hanging out, short text messaging, chatting over the phone - and of course online chatting and use of networking sites. Each one of these channels in fact has its own space in their lives. What this told us is that an ideal methodology would need to marry both online as well as offline approaches in order to obtain holistic input.

- Specifically in terms of social networking online, the tendency appears to be to associate more with friends and acquaintances with whom there is an offline connect. Therefore unlike the conventional Focus Group scenario where we deliberately bring a set of strangers together for a discussion, on an online networking site there may be a need for participants to develop a level of personal connect and trust for smooth communication to take place.

-       There is also the additional layer of the Indian social ethos and culture that seems to suggest the need for offline connect among participants. As researchers in India, we have seen time and again how it is important for people to be able to interact with other people. A clueless customer care executive in person, rather than a helpful disembodied voice over the telephone. Directions, even if confused and misguided, given by the owner of the tiny corner tobacco stall rather than a sophisticated GPS machine. And it is this understanding of Indian culture we take forward into the research process.

-       Apart from the choice of channel or 'platform' the question of the extent to which an adult and 'outsider' would be allowed into the lives of young people still remains. The answer we came up with lay in the manner in which we treated the 'respondents'- not just as subjects to be studied, but as our co-researchers and 'reporters'.

<u>So what was the chosen platform?</u>

The original idea was to use facebook or a more public forum as the platform for this research. However, an initial scan of the behavior and preferences of this target group revealed that a site like facebook was not best suited for this purpose, starting with the basic handicap that it was not popular among this group.

> *n d luk of it is quite complex n takes quite a while to understand d way it works...whereas Orkut is simple to understand n not too cramped up wid lotta thngs..*

The first and most important trick was to find a way to balance data needs with simple means of eliciting it. We therefore decided to start on a **blank page**, opening the '*young turks'* forum in the format of a wiki. Participants were identified and invited basis preliminary screening, and following an initial meeting to explain the purpose of the forum and the format, *young turks* was ready to roll.

…and then came the community

Communities can start out with a single purpose, but inevitably, they will end up serving multiple purposes. You need to prepare for that. If you start a customer support community, for example, people will eventually give you new product ideas. If you are not set up to execute against those product or service suggestions that the community finds important, they will lose interest and leave - it's as if you are not listening to them. They don't care what your internal goals are for the community. They care about having a better complete life-cycle experience with your product.

- Francois Gossieaux

We heaved a sigh of relief when we came across this interview* for these few sentences sum up what happened in the course of the first few weeks of the life of the online panel. The biggest success for us in this project was the fact that **we started out to set up a youth panel and found that we had set up a youth community instead**.

Unlike a conventional panel, respondents in this set up got to interact with each other, got to raise issues and topics of discussion with each other, and we got the opportunity of watching them interact. The chance to conduct some Netnography, though was not part of the initial research plan, was dropped in our laps and we picked it up. And the best part of this is that the respondents did not feel this was a research / experimental set up, so we got to watch them behave and respond in a way that is perhaps closer to real-life than a carefully chosen research "panel" would behave in the same circumstances. There was friendship and flirtation, discussion and debate and argument, and sometimes cat fights too.

By virtue of having created *young turks* as a community, and by allowing them to interact and make friends with each other, we managed to keep the interest and involvement levels high. As a result, planned research questions and probes, whenever inserted did not feel intrusive but felt like an additional way to interact with each other – and not just with us as researchers (or in this case as they saw us, as moderators of the forum).

In inscrutable teenspeak*,*

> *"this has been something completely new, i'm on a lot of social sites, n ths one's by far been the bst whn it comes to voicing opinions, definitly one of a kind experence, hopefully it will go on"*

The *young turks* forum so far has worked out (and more importantly, been interpreted by the participants) to be an "orkut plus" – the simplicity of the format, with the added element of openness. Orkut has been the most popular site in India, with close to eight million registered users in 2008, comprising 17% of all Orkut users across the world, only after Brazil. Incidentally, our poll with the panel also revealed Orkut as the single most popular networking site among this target group.

> *actually the basic thing y people prefer orkut cos its much more simplier n u cant get in to touch with ur many old frnds............n v can dowload videos,photos easily..........unlike facebook where the home page is sooo messy n complicated...........*

Looking at the experience of setting up and maintaining this youth panel over the last few months, there are two primary values the forum offered, which are reasons why it worked well - for the participants, and therefore, for us: **freedom and flexibility**

Freedom

- Freedom of choice: to choose what I talk about, to discuss only topics of interest - feeling of controlling my own destiny and not being forced to do anything – while participants were not forced to answer questions and probes set up by us, we found that they willingly and eagerly responded and at times took the lead in probing and taking discussion further on topics of interest

- Freedom of expression: there was minimal control or censoring from our side - we took the decision to place total trust in the participants and in their ability to maintain decorum and stay true to the purpose of the research; we communicated this to them in the initial meeting and never had to repeat this or have reason to regret this decision

Flexibility

- Perhaps since this was a learning journey we took together with the participants, there was a lot of scope for changes and additions in the format of the forum and we encouraged participants to proactively provide suggestions and ideas to improve the experience within the site.

- All participants who were invited were given the role of writers, which allowed them to add, edit and delete their own and others' work within the forum.

- At the same time, there was an element of safety perceived by participants, since "membership" was by invitation only. This made them feel secure enough to open up and contribute actively to discussion threads since "outsiders" had no access to the forum, and valued enough to feel part of a group with a purpose, and there was therefore little attempt to *make franship* or indulge in orkut style scrapping.

  I wouldnt make friends weith strangers- nope, u nevr knw who tht prson is, u xcpt their request n th nxt thng u knw th guy's put up yr pics on some disgusting site

- Another thing that worked in our favor was the **fun** factor – rather than make it a formal strict forum, we gave participants a free hand to create their own diversions and excitement. And out of this chaos finally appeared some order…

The learning journey: rules of the game

There was a clear purpose in the way this research was planned and executed, keeping in focus the **three essential Es of youth research:**

- Engage: keep attention, energy and enthusiasm going through activities
- Entertain: ensure that the participants find the exercise enjoyable and meaningful in their own lives so as to be able to transmit that into the "reporting" process
- Elicit: obtain rich and varied data in terms of sound-bytes, visuals, write-ups, scraps etc. that this would provide

These are some of the rules we have formulated on the three Es basis our journey so far with the young turks…

Engagement

In this, what was most appealing to the participants was the concept of a forum that allows them to talk and be listened to and reacted to.
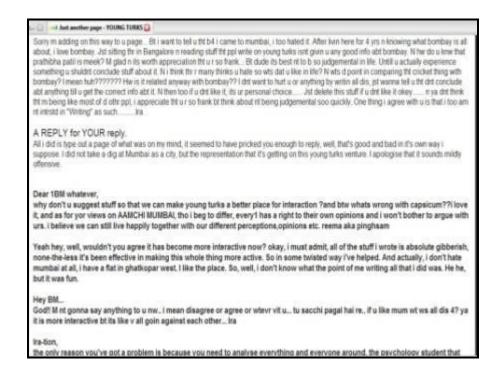
"we found this site fun because it allowed us to put forth our own views"

"this is not like a typical networking site – here we got to discuss many things from about our life to social and political issues"

There was a sense of ownership and pride that got built early on in the life of the site -
"Hey guys come on lets get more active lets get together and make this happening" -

there were regular such messages prodding and promoting each other to do more, do better things with the forum that has been opened to them, wanting to make it happen!

Therefore, our '*engage*' mantras:

- First of all, a nod to **transparency** of intent, honesty in creating and maintaining the forum. Though this group did take on various forms through its first few weeks, participants had the security of knowing what was happening and why

- Brush up your **listening skills** (eavesdropping skills, really) – a place to express opinions, be heard is what made this forum click

- Recognize the **role of free-play** – create space for an unfettered section where they can start thoughts and threads without restrictions

- Keep it **simple** - stay on one page, with optimal applications and features, to much or too little is the easiest way to kill interest, as is too simple or too complicated

- Have **communication lines** open – despite the constant feedback mechanism on the forum itself, we found participants calling or texting one of us all the time for "tech support" with queries and technical complaints.

- Look out for and **deal with patterns** around excitement and energy levels; after the initial burst of energy in the first few weeks, there appeared to be a mild waning of interest. One possible method of dealing with this is to graduate the first "batch" of participants into *veterans* after the first 2-3 months, and add a new "freshers" batch. A graduation party (perhaps a meeting offline too) with extended privileges as masters, would keep them excited.

- Keep all activities **in the open** – right on the home page was space that displayed all recent activity on the forum, including who was doing what, who was most active and what they could expect in the near future on the forum.

- We also followed a **system of incentives** to first get the participants on board, and later to keep them involved in the activities, initiated by both them and us. The follow up incentives are in the form of points that get accumulated, basis kind of activity and level of contribution to it.

Entertainment

In most online communities, 90% of users are lurkers who never contribute, 9% of users contribute a little, and 1% of users account for almost all the action.
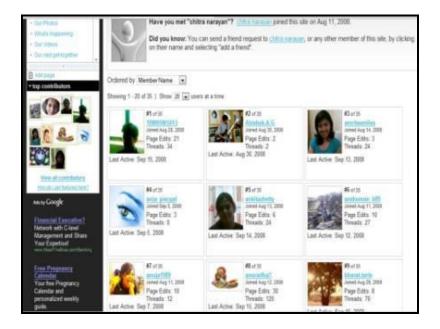
- Jakob Nielsen**

As with other online communities and networking sites, we found lurkers here on *young turks* too, as well as others with clearly defined online personalities and roles.

The important learnings (that is to say, our '***entertain'*** mantras) in this regard have been:

- Make the research probes and reporting formats as **interesting and relevant** as possible – for instance, we introduced a basket of activities and let participants choose their activity (as peer groups) as well as reporting formats. Thus, there were photographs, videos, short posts and even key words that were entered in as data.

- Have **something for everyone** – just as there are personality types in the real world, so too in the virtual world, we found different types of participants, and we found that what kept them engrossed differed. Therefore what started off as a uni-dimensional forum soon took on additional layers to keep interest and involvement levels up.

Broadly these were the participant types we found in the forum:

Typology	Personality	Behavior	Type-speak	Hot buttons
The snooper-reporter	Curious, outgoing, motivated	Asked questions, posted photographs and videos, started discussion threads, sometimes took on the initiative to probe on flat responses… constantly called and wrote in with suggestions and complaints	*"I find that I am having trouble putting up pics - help"* *"y do u lik the gadget u voted for… most?"*	Photo gallery, chat room / board, offline meets
The dreamer-writer	Quiet, observant	Occasional remarks and questions to peers and moderators, blog posts and mood images	*"what makes you happy?"* *"this is a photograph that shows calm and serenity – what do you think of it?"*	Blog / open pages to pour out thoughts and expressions
The needler-jester	Outgoing, fun-loving, inconsistent	Provocative comments and responses, as well as discussion thread and questions	*"Not to be rude, but I think Mumbai girls are very boring"* *"this feels like a baby-orkut site – I want something more interesting here"*	Constant interaction, open discussion threads

Elicitation

Given the surprisingly short leap from panel to community that this project took, there were two ways in which we found insights through this group - questions we asked them, and questions they asked each other.

Two types of analysis were done:

- **Analysis of "freeplay"**: the threads started, the topics discussed, topics that received the maximum responses, topics that received very few, the language of discourse: the slang and cusswords, the conversations and back and forth banter : all of which fundamentally constitutes "netnography"

- **Analysis of specific response to probes and queries initiated by us**: this kind of response was incentivized in two ways:
  o A 'best response' bonus promised (detailed, relevant, prompt)
  o A requirement that a minimum participation in the moderator led queries / tasks was essential for eligibility for the base panel participator fee

Given the vast scope that is possible with a group of this nature, in our line of probe, we kept the focus on media and media habits. Some of the topics we covered with the gang are:
  - Media topics: favorite movies, social networking, essential gadgets, favorite ads
  - Personal topics: ambitions and aspirations, shopping and hang outs, fashion and trends, youthspeak and buzz words

Some nuggets from "freeplay"

• Their favorite ad – The conferencing ad for Virgin mobile, KILB outdoor ad for Religare insurance

"ya it did kinda make me curious n had me make a few guesses too.. Actually if u see it from d advertising point of view..d Ad was sumthn diff n creative...it did achieve wht it had to..got ppl do remember d Ad...but i dun quite think it'd make much diff to d sales of d Co.. coz many do remember d Ad but not the Co's name..(Aegon Religare)!"

And as a result of being kept engaged and entertained, the number of discussion topics they raised on their own and took forward with great involvement far outnumbered the topics we broached with the purpose of understanding their lives and likes better! At last count (on September 14th), we counted that out of 64 discussion threads live in the forum, only 15 have been started by us – the rest were all initiated by members.

The kind of topics they have started for discussion span a wide range – from fashion and shopping to current events:

> *"can u speak 1 language without any mixture?is the impact coz of media?"*
> *"do u think national anthem shud be playd in movie theatres?"*
> *"another successful star tries his luck wid politics nd dis time its andhras super star chiranjeevi....dont u thnk stars hve a clear vote-win coz of dere popularity like wat happened in our chi chi bhaiyas case??do stars actually make gud politicians??wat do u guysthnk??"*

The fact that many of these topics revolved around current affairs, both social and political, came as a pleasant surprise to us, dispelling any notion that youth are much too involved n their own lives and friends to bother much about the world around them. For many of the subjects initiated by them, possibly there are no alternative platforms on which they get to express their views and opinions. In everyday face-to-face interactions (either among themselves or with us), there would probably be a diffidence about discussing such topics, and other networking sites (which they frequent, such as orkut) do not at present allow them to open conversation threads.

For instance, this question and responses to it put forth by one of them – under the subject head – ***61st independence day for us*** - was very enlightening:

> *"What is the 1 change u think india needs?"*

>> *Politicians!!!!! They need to be removed frm India!!*
>> *An effective judiciary system is the need of the day!!!*
>> *Better education system n as u rightly said tanu better judiciary system*

Through all the threads we were privy to the nuances of youthspeak- the banter, the language, the traded insults, the mutual appreciation, the tentative efforts at creating friends out of strangers, the moral fabric and emerging values of the next generation.

Some nuggets from Directed Queries:

What is the one gadget that you cannot live without?

- The one gadget they would not do without – is the mobile phone – followed by the computer. The television is at a distant third, with only a few voting for it. And why? (This probe was put up by one of the participants – *y do u lik the gadget u voted for… most?*)

"hmm....i voted for my cell!!im so addictd 2 it....cnt stay a min widout senakin n peekin into it......wen i miss calls...i do gt a little restles.....dunno y.....but its an integral part of my life.....its taken ova d tv n pc!!in every aspect 4 me!!hehe"

- **"Buzzwords"** was a popular thread started by the moderator that gave rise to as many as 15-20 new "youthspeak"- the thread still continues as participants want to keep contributing

To sum up, the key **'*elicit'*** mantra is: keep them engaged and entertained, in order to elicit information and insight to the maximum and optimum extent.

- **Push the data** as much as possible, as in conventional or offline research – many topics receive quick and curt responses from participants, and given the tendency of discourse on the internet to be short and crisp, there is danger of seeing only the tip of the ice-berg and no further. However, a first level probe (even a simple *who do you think so? Or why do you feel that way?*) is enough to bring out deeper responses and interaction within the forum

- **Create a hang-out within the hang-out** – observation, and their own admission, tells us that youngsters of this age hang out at preferred locations, to just meet, greet and chat. Given the nature of this community that includes youth from different locations and backgrounds, a place to "chill" or just message old and new friends (or

scrap - orkut again!) feels a must. Several of the more outgoing participants were already using the discussion threads as chat mechanisms, and a live chat application would easily serve as space for a quick online focus group discussion.

- **Keep the pace going**- there is a tendency after an initial period for participants to view the site as just another networking site, and to become lax in responding to serious questions from the moderators. Constant reminders on sms or even calls are necessary to **remind of the seriousness of intent** of the site. Participants already feel slightly important in being asked their opinions – this needs to be tapped into adequately and used to best advantage.

Is there a need for offline contact at all?

There was extensive use of sms (as text messaging is known in India) on mobile phones to stay connected with the site moderators in case of problems in uploading material or for response-related activity etc. The feedback we received shows that they have seen the moderators as some kind of benevolent enablers - the site really belonged to them.

Apart from this a couple of meetings were organized to discuss some of the more specific tasks and to bounce off some thoughts that emerged from a stud of threads started by them. There appeared to be no strong need amongst the participants to actually meet in the real world. For the time being they appeared quite happy to be cocooned in the virtual world in a virtual peer set.

A youth community is all fine, but what value does it have?

So what does an online community like *young turks* have for a client?

Dip stick research, quick testing of ads and concepts, trend spotting, live interaction with target group, response to product prototypes and tests – are just a few uses that we can think of. Compared to more conventional methods of research, this process is:

- much quicker – it was possible to get response to a variety of probes, from test ads to poll questions within twenty four hours
- less expensive – the community is up and running, the cost of recruitment and maintenance is absorbed over many months and many projects
- less in controlled unrealistic settings – to tie it back with the Ideal Speech Situation propounded by Jürgen Habermas that we had envisaged for this - where:

   1. *Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.*
   2a. *Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.*
   2b. *Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.*
   2c. *Everyone is allowed to express his attitudes, desires and needs.*
   3. *No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in* (1) *and* (2).

This is ideal for use in studies where unbiased first responses are critical. A typical example is a quick advertising check:
- the ad is viewed by the participant in the privacy of his home, at a time convenient to him, in natural surroundings
- far from the distracting influence of peers, the response provided is sharp and real- the need to provide a polite response (a serious problem in FGD's in India) does not exist as the medium is impersonal
- after the "first contribution", participants tend to follow the thread as more and more responses come in. The conversational nature of a "thread" also has participants naturally referring to each others answers and saying "I agree with you" or "why do you feel that way"- which adds dimension to the responses

The nine and three quarters platform – beta testing

Research on music download from the internet : a case study

A regular client of ours from a leading advertising agency in India was working on understanding the area of youth behavior and attitudes with respect to music downloads from the internet. To this end, we used two techniques to gather insights from the participant group:

Question of the day – *Would you pay for downloading Hindi music from the internet? Why?*

Ad preview – through embedded videos of current advertising of two popular websites which offer music downloads

To the question of paying for music downloads from the internet, the response was a loud and overwhelming "no way!"

> *i download english for free too, y pay for Hindi? it depends though, if it's a rare song i'm looking for then maybe, not for a random Himesh song or somethn, tht i wouldn't download evn if someone payed me :)*

> *no never would i pay to download a hindi song I would rather pay for something worthwhile*

no i dont thnk i wud lik to spend money downloadn music... unless n until..... i find it wrth it

i dont waste money on downloading songs ya but if theres any song tht i like then i ll like to do so but till now i have always got songs from my frnds who have either downloaded it free so money is saved heheheh

no way!!!its absolute waste of money - I would rather spend the money on buying the movie-dvd but for downloading songs....no way!!!

Who has the money anyway to pay for downloads!!!

A further probe was introduced to add a layer of understanding to this response: **so which are the (most popular) sites from where you download music free?**

well.. i download hindi songs from either from www.Cooltoad.com or www.Apunkabollywood.com....mostly d latter 1...

From responses to the ad preview, we also culled out what works for them and what does not with respect to advertising for such websites:

Ad 1

i think the add is quite okay.........the first few seconds make u feel no matter what is happening around you or what ur environment or circumstance is music can pep u up......it sees music as the ultimate saviour............but after that few seconds the add is qiute boring bcoz the same kind of moments keep repeating........the backgruonds becomes a lil irritating after the initial few seconds

Ad 2

this ad was also just ok............the basic concept of telling where u can play ur songs was dragged a lot.........the ex gf thing was bad...it felt as if it was put ther just to fill a basic time limit for the add..the visuals were gud but blue colour throughout was a lil boring.....the add wouldnt have much of an effect on anyone watching it........

The responses came in over a couple of days, and the findings were collated and delivered very shortly thereafter, and gave the client the 'first feel'.

Key Take-outs from the analysis of response to the ads:

> *Show me something new, do not make it dull or repetitive…*
> *Keep it simple, do not try to be overly smart…*

And these perhaps, are our key learnings for such a methodology to work well too…

Broader learnings from the youth community exercise

What started off as a panel concept ended up as a networking site with a difference, unique and a first of its kind for the participants. This site excites young people who like to express their opinions and are looking for a forum to air their views - and this is the key to the success of this concept. It provides unfettered, uncensored, raw voice of youth on a range of topics. It is in fact a perfect match between the researchers' objectives and the respondents' objectives.

While ostensibly the responses and discourse do not appear to go very deep, live chat sessions with 3-4 participants at a time would be able to provide the requisite depth whenever required.

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