Malaysians win global Internet popularity contest

November 1 2010, by Sarah Stewart

A Malaysian professional writes her password to enter facebook for social networking in Kuala Lumpur. Malaysians are the most popular people on the Internet, while Japanese are the least, according to a global survey which shows how national cultures are reflected in online behaviour.

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Malaysians won the Internet popularity contest with an average of 233 friends in their social network, compared to 68 in China and just 29 in Japan, according to the Digital Life study by global research firm TNS.

The findings are no surprise in a gregarious, multicultural nation which has a tradition of "open house" parties where the doors are literally

thrown open to all, and where new acquaintances are eagerly made.

"The Malaysian way is just to invite everyone you know," said Chacko Vadaketh, a Malaysian actor and writer with an impressive 1,010 friends on his Facebook account.

"And people who you would know and consider your friends is a much broader concept than in other communities," he said, reminiscing over family weddings with 1,000-strong invitation lists.

Malaysia also has a large diaspora of professionals who have sought opportunities abroad, in a "brain drain" that has made social networking sites invaluable for maintaining links among far-flung friends.

Vadaketh, who has Indian and Syrian ancestry, studied in Britain, has family and friends on several continents, and is now living in the United States, is not untypical of Malaysia's wired generation.

"I resisted Facebook for a while but I felt I had no choice because it's overtaken email in some ways," he said. "I wanted to keep in track with events or get invited to parties, and a lot of it was only going out on Facebook."

Mark Higginson, director of digital insights with Nielsen's Online Division, said that each country's embrace of social media is dictated by its own national characteristics.

So the outgoing Southeast Asian nations of Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia have reacted differently to the more conservative East Asian cultures of China, Japan and South Korea.

"Japanese are big users of social media, they're just not highly adoptive of Facebook and a platform like Twitter is only just starting to take off,"

he said, adding that blogs are also enormously popular in Japan.

"A blog is very much a self-editorialised viewpoint so it's a statement and not a discussion... I think that fits in with the Japanese culture in that sense, the concept of face and of a very organised profile."

Koreans prefer the more free-wheeling discussion forums on leading homegrown portals, while in China social gaming or other activity-based concepts are most popular, he said.

"Social media is so diverse and one of the big things we learned looking at different countries in Asia Pacific is that the differences are really quite amazing," Higginson said, adding that this had big implications for business.

"One size does not fit all in a region like Asia Pacific. You can imagine it's a little easier to have a social media strategy across Europe, but here, knowing the local landscape is so critical."

James Fergusson from TNS said that the firm's study showed each country has "a unique digital DNA".

"Malaysians like many Asian cultures are very open to establishing friendships online whereas in Japan people tend to be more selective in choosing their online friends," he said.

"Social networkers in Japan tend to shy away from revealing personal details, instead relying on avatars and aliases."

In some Asian countries, lack of media freedom has also driven the rise of blogs and social networking sites where information can be freely exchanged.

In Malaysia, where the mainstream media is mostly government-controlled, there has been a blossoming of independent news portals, political blogs and prolific Twitter feeds on current affairs.

And Malaysians are also not shy about using such sites as a marketing and networking tool for small business.

Daniel Zain, a Kuala Lumpur-based photographer whose social network is nudging 2,000, estimates he knows just 10 percent of those "friends" but the list has grown as he has steadily added clients and their contacts.

Malaysians care little for privacy and "are generally a very curious lot", happy to make online contact with friends-of-friends who they have never met, he said.

"We love to meet up with people, we love open houses," he said, referring to the free-for-all parties held to mark festivals including Christmas, Deepavali, and the end of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan.

"We've taken the concept of open house and put it online. Anyone is invited to your house, and anyone is invited to your Facebook page."

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