East and West Europe: Uncovering the perceptions, attitudes and behaviours of Europeans towards digital media

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Digital technology and the online environment have altered consumer behaviour - including the way people interact with and shop for brands. However, these changes are happening at different rates in diverse regions. Even within Europe, it is all too easy for marketers to fall victim to lazy pan-continental targeting.

Yet the behavioural habits of digitally-enabled consumers differ widely, with notable disparities between East and West European markets, and these characteristics are often rooted in political, cultural and socio-economic history. Many brands in Western European regions have been household names for over a century and have become entwined in the cultural pasts of countries. By contrast, brand culture is much less established in Russia, Romania and other former Soviet bloc markets which have only really opened up for international brands in the decades since the end of the Soviet Union.

The ways this uneven brand access and history has shaped current consumer habits in the digital space across Europe emerged in a study G2 EMEA commissioned. The eCultures study polled more than 6,000 consumers across six countries (UK, Spain, France, Germany, Romania and Russia). Amongst the extensive findings, clear disparities emerged between the Eastern and Western regions.

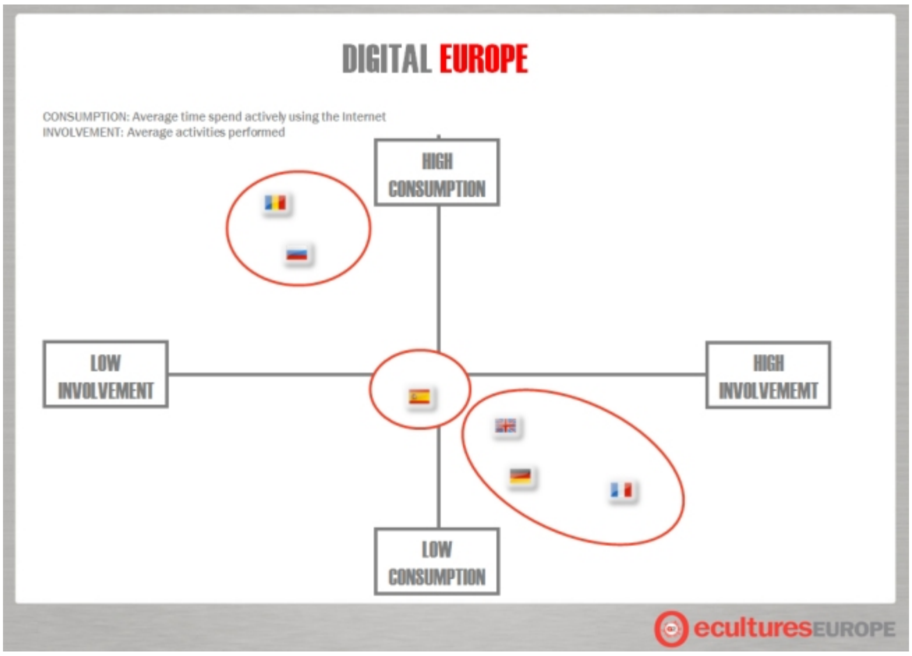

Figure 1: There was a clear divide between consumers in the Western markets who used the internet less (consumption) but in more areas (involvement) compared to consumers interviewed in Russia and Romania. Source: eCultures Europe, September 2011.

The detailed findings suggested there were four key areas where brands operating in the digital environment need to be aware of differences across european markets in attitudes, namely:

- Internet usage
- Online privacy and security
- Online shopping
- Perceptions and associations of the internet

It is important to map the differences between the online behaviours in the East and West to develop clear strategies for brands operating in some or all of these markets.

Internet usage

It is now widely accepted that in the context of e-commerce and digital communications, brands are in an "always-on" environment where consumers with internet access may choose to interact with and buy a brand at any time of day or night. There is some evidence that this ubiquity factor matters most to Eastern Europeans.

Of the six countries surveyed in the eCultures report, consumers in Romania and Russia spent the most time online daily, respectively allocating a daily average of 5.4 hours and 5.03 hours to their online activity. At the other end of the scale, the equivalent daily figures for Germany and France were far lower at 3.27 hours and 3.16 hours respectively.

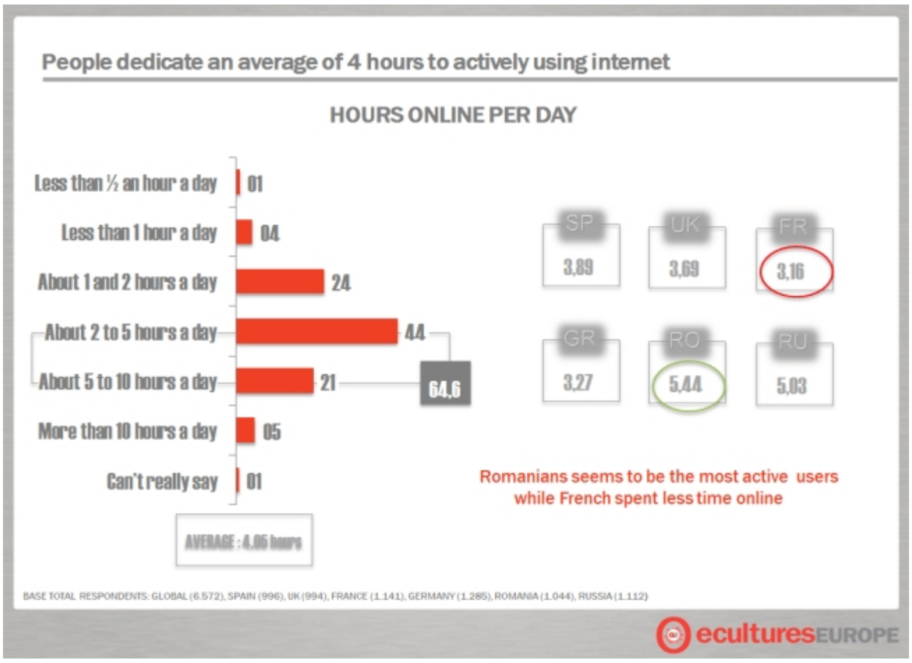

Figure 2: Average number of hours per day spent online in six markets (Spain, UK, France, Germany, Romania, Russia). Source eCultures Europe study, 2011.

It was also clear that more than any other population studied in the report, Russians thought it was essential to have the ability to access the web at all times and wherever they went. Audiences in France and the UK cared least about this.

There is also some evidence (see Fig 3 below) that consumers in Eastern European markets were embracing the use of smartphones for accessing the internet.

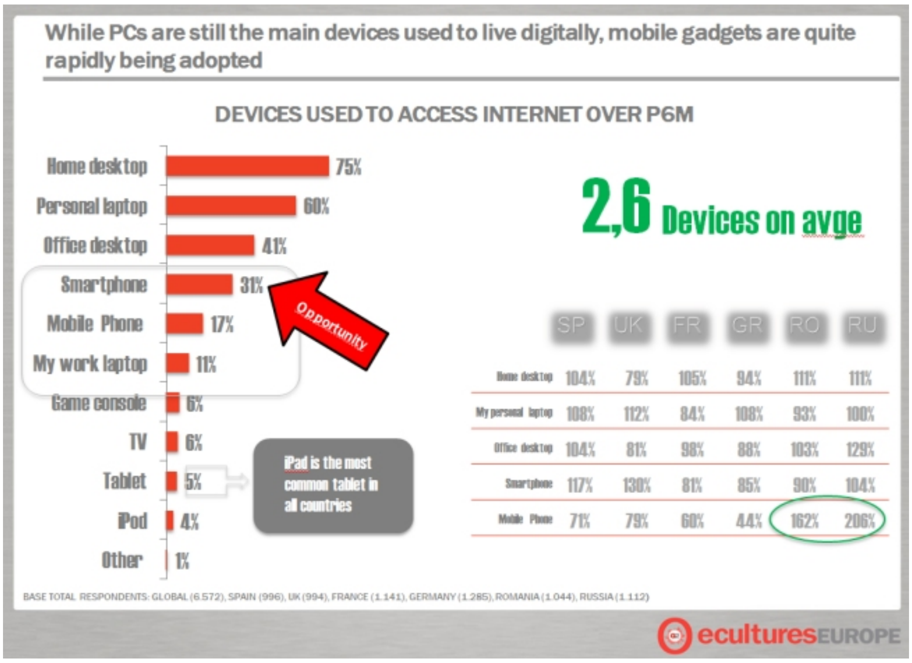

Figure 3: Across Europe mobile devices are fast catching up with desktop and laptops as a means to access the internet. Source: eCultures Europe, September 2011.

Whether they were using a PC or a mobile device to do so, consumers were often, unsurprisingly, going online to visit social media sites. Facebook was the most popular of these in nearly all the markets studied. Russia was an exception; here, home-grown platforms, Vkontakte (VK) and Odnoklassniki, were still the biggest draws, and brands operating in the Russian market need to acknowledge this fact in their approach.

Privacy

Against a background of changes to cookie regulation with the European Union, online privacy is becoming an increasingly important issue for brands, marketers and consumers alike.

Almost 70 per cent of Europeans surveyed in the eCultures report said they expected companies they interacted with online to handle their personal data responsibly. But only one in three of respondents actually trusted brands to do so.

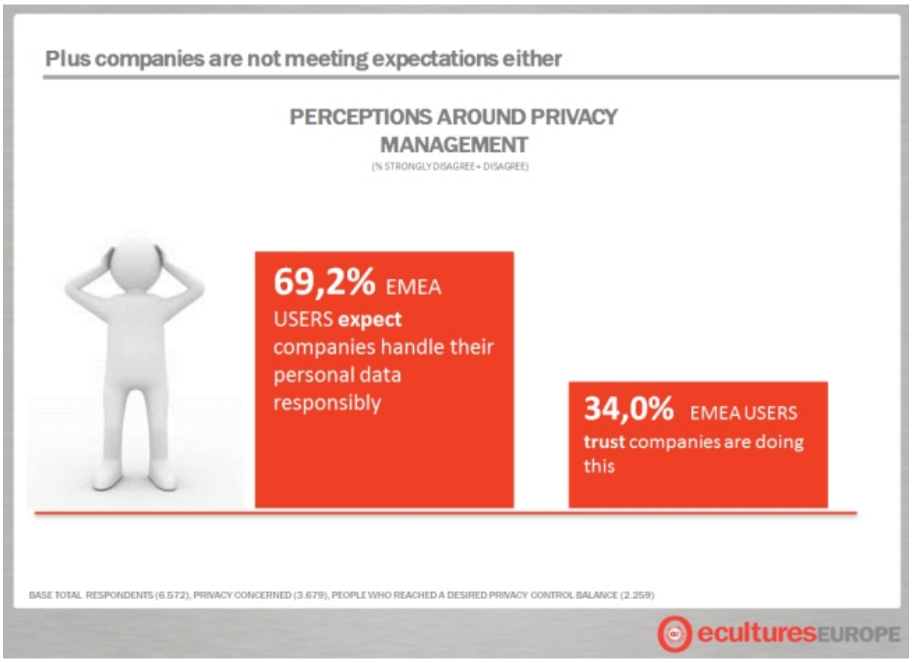

Figure 4: The trust gap on personal data. Source: eCultures Europe, September 2011.

Since at the time of the report, some 92 of the Top 100 Brands featured in the 2011 edition of Interbrand's Best Global Brands survey had a privacy policy in place, it is clear that these brands were not doing enough to reassure their European consumers that they take privacy issues seriously.

Brands should be concerned by the report's finding that respondents who were most concerned about online privacy tended to buy less online. While nearly half of all respondents reported using the internet to research brands, products and services, fewer than half of those who had privacy concerns said they went on to complete sales transactions online, and opted instead to purchase in a traditional store.

Again, there were significant discrepancies between the expectations of consumers in Western and Eastern regions. For instance, consumers in the UK (77 per cent), Germany (73 per cent) and France (71 per cent) had the highest expectations that brands would handle their data responsibly, whilst respondents in Russia (62 per cent) had the lowest. Consumers in Spain and the UK were most likely to trust companies with data, those in France and Romania were least likely to do so.

Poor handling of data security could cost brands millions in deferred or even lost sales. This threat should be addressed by having transparent and believable communications of data protection policies already in place. In fact, only one in three of the eCultures respondents believed they had enough information and adequate control over their personal data. As interviewees in all the countries surveyed expressed such high expectation of brands, this is an area that needs to be addressed very seriously.

Shopping

Throughout the eCultures report, it was found that interviewees in the East and West had different opinions about the benefits and practical value of e-commerce. For instance, 47 per cent of UK consumers reported buying online weekly, compared to only 16 per cent of Romanians. Furthermore, 63 per cent of UK respondents claimed that online shopping had become a major convenience in their lives, whilst only 27 per cent of Romanians agreed with this statement.

These findings suggest that whilst consumers in Eastern countries might be spending a lot more time online, this has yet not translated into proportionate e-commerce spending.

Consumers in Western countries reported valuing the internet for its practical benefits (such as online shopping). And in countries such as the UK, there were many consumers for whom e-stores had completely replaced offline equivalents in at least one area of their lives.

But consumers in Eastern Europe valued the channel more for its entertainment potential. The upshot is that brands need to find a way of encouraging consumers in Eastern Europe to shop online more.

Again, there is evidence that fears over privacy and online security are some of the reasons deterring consumers from shopping online. Nearly half of all respondents in the survey reported frequently using the internet to browse and research brands - for instance, 65 per cent were comfortable researching online for travel products. But a much lower percentage said they followed through to make a purchase online.

And of those respondents who said that privacy was a concern, nearly 40 per cent said they stopped the shopping process before making a purchase - a dropout rate 13 per cent higher than that seen among the less privacy-concerned.

In Russia, for instance, it is clear that marketers need to place more emphasis on encouraging consumers that online shopping is a safe and convenient alternative to the traditional retail experience. Of all the populations surveyed, consumers in Russia were the least likely to agree that online shopping would become more frequent in future.

Perceptions of the internet

In general, attitudes towards the internet were found to be consistently positive across all the countries surveyed. By analyzing the words associated with online media, we found that the most positive perceptions were about the internet's ability to provide information and knowledge, and to help people communicate. Global brands such as Google and Wikipedia were generally perceived to be particularly good at these information and communications aspects.

After identifying patterns in interviewees' perceptions of the web, the eCultures report was able to define three key segments of consumer behavior towards digital across Europe. These segments were: Analog Users, Digital Migrants, and Digital Lovers. These categories can help brands determine what kind of approach they should take towards digital media in different markets.

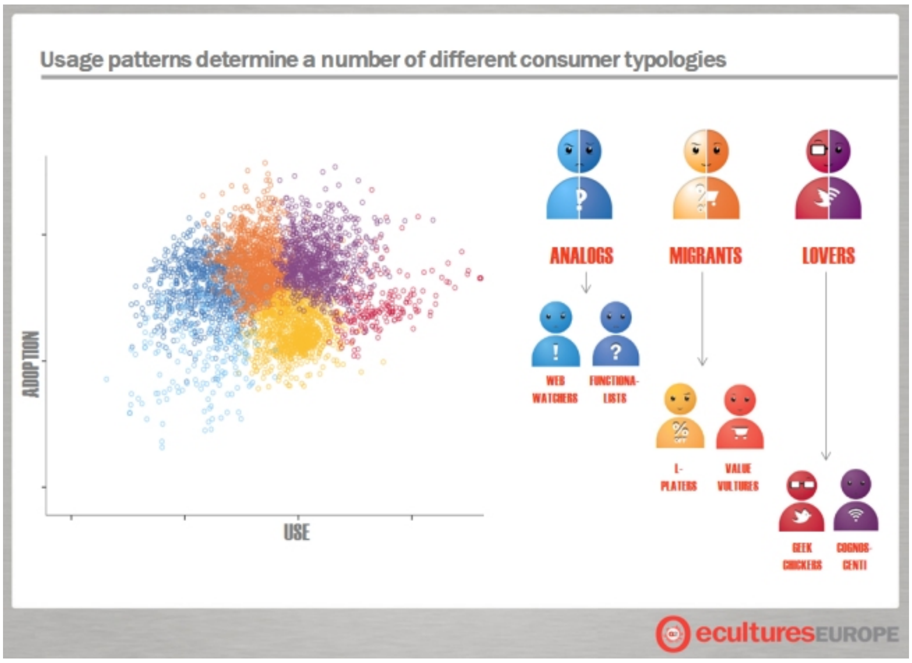

Figure 5: By analyzing the adoption of the internet and its application across different areas, we devised a new segmentation of digital consumers. Source: eCultures Europe, September 2011.

Digital Lovers had a higher degree of dependence on the internet and the digital world was present in most aspects of their lives. It is perhaps their greater knowledge of digital that makes them more wary of its dangers. **Analogs**, on the other hand, held a more mixed view of the internet as they found it difficult to keep up with the fast pace of technological change and had concerns over privacy. However, they did value the communication possibilities of the internet. **Digital Migrants** were the most neutral towards the emergence of digital media.

Here again, a clear geographical pattern emerged as certain groups dominated in different regions. In every country, the **Digital Migrants** - were the most prominent. However, it is interesting that the Eastern regions had by far the highest proportion of **Digital Lovers**: 42 per cent compared with the European average of 24 per cent.

That the highest population of **Digital Lovers** was found in Eastern Europe suggests that newer markets have perhaps been more willing to engage with newer channels. To a certain extent, countries which have a longer tradition of brand interaction and have had access to a wider range of media channels may be less excited about the opportunities the online world provides.

Conclusion

Developments in technology and our increasing reliance on the online world have created a whole new set of consumer demographics that marketers need to consider. These do not reflect traditional classifications according to age, gender, social mobility and so on, but are more influenced by the way people across national borders have embraced the digital environment.

It is certainly advisable to avoid thinking of a simple East-West divide when it comes to discussing European consumers' adoption of digital media. Further work is also needed to look beyond national differences in attitude and behaviour at more granular levels.

However, brands need to acknowledge that even at the broadest, national levels there are some clear divergences between populations. One of the most significant areas of difference is around attitudes towards online privacy and safety. Across the six markets surveyed, there were varying degrees of trust that consumers were prepared to place in brands to handle their private information, and this affected their willingness to buy online.

Russian and Romanian consumers were more reluctant to spend on the internet compared to their Western equivalents, whilst also having more intense internet usage rates than those typically found amongst French and German consumers.

Digital behaviour is fast becoming part of each country's cultural make-up - and needs to be treated as such. Increasingly, it is the case that, at least in the digital space, each country's development rate is less affected by its past, than by its population's readiness to embrace the digital future.

About the author:

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