Facilitating Dynamics of Focus Group Interviews in East Asia: *Evidence and Tools by Cross-Cultural Study*

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Facilitating cultural sensitivity has become a critical issue in user experience design. Although many design solutions attempt to take cultural differences into account, there have been few studies focusing on the influence of culture on user research methods. Since many user research methods popularly used in design have been developed in Europe and North America, one may question how these methods work in completely different cultures. It is particularly worth investigating how focus group interviews work in East Asia where people have different communication styles and a weaker participatory discussion culture than in Western cultures. We explored how a focus group interview works differently in East Asia by conducting cross-cultural experiments. The results of a comparative experiment in the Netherlands and South Korea showed passive participation and poor member-to-member interactions from Korean participants. These findings led us to develop tools to facilitate the group dynamics of focus group interviews in East Asia: "pre-activities" to break the ice and build membership, "Mini-me dolls" to support indirect communication and facilitate playfulness, and an imaginary setting of a "TV home shopping show" to empower participants to express their ideas. We tested these tools in the focus group interview with a group of South Koreans to discuss their real usage and potentials.

***Keywords* –** Cross-Cultural Study, Focus Group Interview, Group Dynamics, User Research Methods.

***Relevance to Design Practice* –** This study offers implications as to how a specific user research method in design should be localized in different cultural contexts. Specifically, cross-cultural experiments on focus group interviews in the Netherlands and South Korea showed differences in participants' behaviours and attitudes. The findings from theoretical reviews and experiments in this study provide practical guidelines to conducting focus group interviews in East Asia.

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Introduction

As people's values, behaviours and even cognitive processes differ in different cultures, facilitating cultural sensitivity in design has become a critical issue. Cultural differences have been taken into account in design in various ways, such as focusing on preferences in colour or form of products, using cultural dimensions as criteria for website design (Marcus & Gould, 2000), considering human cognition styles in interface design (Kim, Lee, & You, 2007; Dong & Lee, 2008), and creating new mobile communication experiences for target locales (Konkka, 2003). There have been, however, few studies focusing on how cultural differences influence user research methods in design. Since the design process increasingly involves users in terms of participatory design and co-design, the relationship between culture and user research methods has become a more crucial one. In addition, since most user research methods popularly employed these days were developed in Europe and North America, it is natural to question their fitness in very different cultures.

Recently, a few studies have addressed the notion of cultural influence on user research methods. In their work on usability evaluation methods, Hall, de Jong, and Steehouder (2004) argued that European participants had more critical attitudes towards tested products and found more problems than Asian and African participants did. They showed that users' cultural backgrounds do influence the results and the process of user research, concluding that retrospective think-aloud protocols are less affected by cultural differences than the plus-minus test. Similarly, Chavan (2005) argued that conventional ways of conducting usability tests do not work with Indian users because Indians are reluctant to give negative comments on test products and would rather try to work around them. In her work, she modified usability test methods by incorporating characteristics of Indian local culture, such as the collective nature of being on a train or critiques of "Bollywood" films. These related studies show that cultural backgrounds influence users' attitudes and comments during the user research and highlight the need to take culture into account when applying user research methods.

In addition to different attitudes to criticism, how group dynamics is organized in different cultures is also a crucial aspect,

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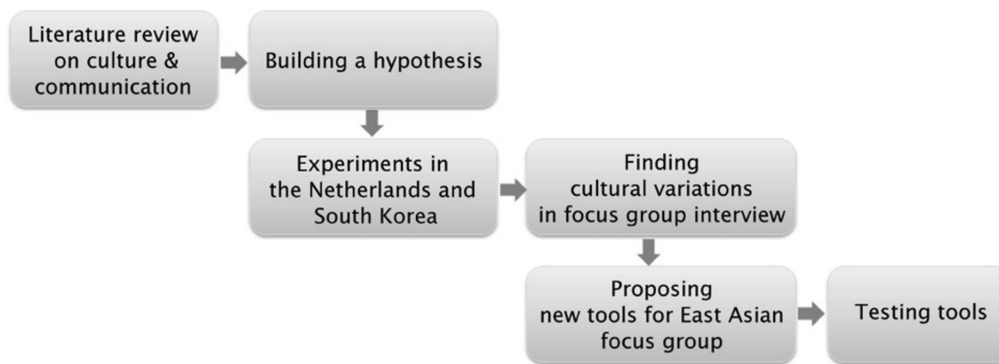

Figure 1. Research process.

especially in group methods, such as focus group interviews and design workshops. The success of such group methods often depends on how participants express their thoughts and feelings in public and how they interact and discuss with each other. In particular, focus group interviews, which are popularly used in different phases of the design process (Kuniavsky, 2003), heavily rely on participants' verbal social interaction, not only between researchers and participants but also among participants. Because participants' interactions play an important role in producing sufficient and valid information in focus group interviews, it is worth exploring how participants' cultural backgrounds influence this method.

In this study, we aim at uncovering cultural differences in participants' attitudes and behaviours in focus group interviews by conducting cross-cultural experiments. We then derive implications of how to modify focus group methods in East Asia. To achieve these aims, this study consists of three phases. Firstly, we reviewed theories in culture and communication studies to build a hypothesis; secondly, we conducted experiments with focus group interviews in the Netherlands and South Korea. Finally, the findings from this comparison led to the proposition of tools which were designed to facilitate group dynamics for East Asians. Figure 1 shows the process of this study.

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Culture and Interpersonal Communication Style

According to Toseland, Jones, and Gellis (2004), communication processes and interaction patterns are fundamental to group dynamics. They are the forces that emerge and take shape as members interact with each other over the life of a group. The participants' communication style influences the development of the dynamics in a group, such as the degree of participants' involvement, centralization, i.e. group member-centred versus facilitator-centred communication, or group cohesion. In this section, we explore the relationship between culture and interpersonal communication style by reviewing cross-cultural studies in cultural anthropology, cognitive psychology and communication studies. This literature review later led us to hypothesize how participants from different cultures show different behaviours in focus group interviews.

Discussion Attitudes in Individualistic Culture and Collectivistic Culture

Individualism versus collectivism is an idea that contrasts those who only care about themselves and their direct family members (I-conscious) and those who emphasize the importance of loyalty and unity to the group that cares for them (We-conscious) (Hofstede, 1991). This idea is related to the communication pattern of the society's constituents and can be explained in relation to Hall's (1977) "context" theories. In Hall's culture theory, information during communication or in a message is a part of a context. It is more or less defined by the degree to which the message or communication is internalized by an individual. In "*high-context cultur*e," such as that of China and South Korea, most information is included in the context, thus it expresses less externally. However, communication is direct, clear, and expressed externally in "*low-context culture,*" such as that of the United States and the Netherlands. Hofstede (2001) explains that *high-context* communication occurs in collectivistic culture and *low-context* communication occurs in individualistic culture.

Recent cross-cultural studies in cognitive psychology and creativity research have revealed that members in *individualistic and low-context* culture and members in *collectivistic and high-*

context culture have different attitudes towards discussion or argumentation because of their different values and education systems (Nisbett, 2003; Kim, 2005). In his book on cultural differences in human cognitions, Nisbett (2003) explains that "lively discussion" is a part of the culture in individualistic countries, in which discussions support academic activities and formulate social systems. People in individualistic countries learn to argue and persuade from a young age and believe that problems can be solved through discussion. In her cross-cultural studies on children's education, Kim (2005) also explains that parents in individualistic countries educate their children to have a positive outlook in a conflict, while parents in collectivistic countries educate their children to avoid conflicts. Influenced by Confucianism, they tend to compromise when they have conflicts.

Politeness Theory and Facework

In communication studies, these cultural differences are explained at a more detailed behavioural level. Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998) connected theories of cultural differences to the politeness theory by Brown and Levinson (1990) whose central notion is the human desire to maintain their "face," the public self-image that every member of a society wants to claim for himself. People want to be appreciated by others (positive face) and do not want to be forced by others to do things they do not want to do (negative face). Concerns and acts to maintain or threaten positive and negative face always happen in interaction between oneself and others, and thus, communication strategies can be categorized into four types of facework according to two dimensions: positive versus negative and self-face versus other-face (see Figure 2).

According to Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998), people trying to maintain self-positive face use communication strategies to defend and protect their needs for inclusion and appreciation (face-assertion). Other-positive face maintenance includes strategies to maintain, defend and support another person's need for inclusion and appreciation (face-giving). People trying to maintain self-negative face use interaction strategies to give themselves freedom and space, and to protect themselves from infringements on their autonomy (face-restoration), while other-negative face maintenance involves the use of interaction strategies to show respect for other persons' needs for freedom, space, and disassociation (face-saving).

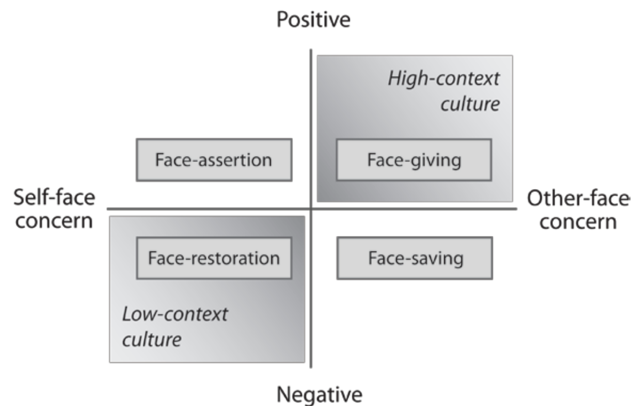

Figure 2. Cultural differences in facework (based on Ting-Toomey & Kurogi 1998): This framework explains the difference in communication patterns between low-context cultures, in which one desires not to be disrupted, intruded upon, or forced by others, and high-context cultures, in which one desires to be liked and approved by other people and is concerned about others' reactions.

Ting-Toomey and Kurogi argue that the communication strategies related to facework differ in *individualistic and low-context* culture and *collectivistic and high-context* culture. In the facework framework, they explain that people from *collectivistic and high-context* culture tend to "face-give," supporting others' needs for appreciation, while people from *individualistic and low-context* culture "face-restore," protecting their own freedom and space. Based on Ting-Toomey's proposition (1998), Hall et al. (2004) compared the face-related characteristics differing in two contrary cultures. (see Table 1).

The framework in Table 1 enables hypothesizing about cultural differences that can be observed in focus group interviews. For example, the degree to which people care about "positive face" can influence their degree of participation. To illustrate, participants in focus group interviews are asked to talk about their personal experiences and subjective opinions on certain topics. When people care about positive face, they may be afraid that their experiences or opinions sound irrelevant or silly. These concerns supposedly result in passive participation. Furthermore, we can also assume that participants from collectivistic and high-context cultures may feel reluctant to criticize or disagree with others' opinions because they do not want to hurt others' feelings and thereby lose their face. Thus this tendency of avoiding

Table 1. Face-related characteristics in Individualistic/low-context versus Collectivistic/high-context culture (Hall et al., 2004)

Key elements of 'face'	Individualistic/low-context	Collectivistic/high-context
Identity	Emphasis on 'I' identity	Emphasis on 'we' identity
Concern	Self-face concern	Other-face concern
Need	Negative face need	Positive face need
Supra-strategy	Self-positive and self-negative facework	Other-positive and other-negative facework
Mode	Direct mode	Indirect mode
Style	Controlling, confrontational, solution-oriented style	Obliging, avoiding, affective-oriented style
Speech acts	Direct speech acts	Indirect speech acts
Nonverbal acts	Individualistic nonverbal acts, direct emotional expressions	Contextualistic (role-oriented), nonverbal acts, indirect emotional expressions

confrontation can also result in passive participation in focus group interviews.

To attain versatile and valid data from group interviews, fluent interaction among participants plays a crucial role. “Member-to-member interaction” can lead to a higher degree of participation and more versatile results than “member-to-facilitator and facilitator-to-member interaction” (Toseland et al., 2004). As discussed earlier, people from collectivistic cultures are not accustomed to an “arguing” culture (Nisbett, 2003). It is also assumed that participants from collectivistic cultures will have weaker member-to-member interaction amongst themselves and show a tendency to rely on a facilitator.

Based on the discussion above, we can build a hypothesis of cultural differences between a *collectivistic and high-context* culture and an *individualistic and low-context* culture as follows:

> In focus group interviews, participants from a collectivistic/high-context culture will show less activeness in participation and poorer member-to-member interaction than participants from an individualistic/low-context culture.

Comparative Experiment

To test the hypothesis, we conducted cross-cultural experiments in the Netherlands and South Korea. This section describes the process and results of this comparative experiment.

Test Cultures and Participants

We recruited two groups of people from the Netherlands and South Korea. According to Hofstede’s (1991) cultural dimensions, the Netherlands scores 80 out of 100 in the dimension of individualism, while South Korea scores 18, which is remarkably distinctive. The Netherlands well represents the *individualistic/low-context* culture and South Korea the *collectivistic/high-context* culture.

Typically the ideal size of a focus group for most noncommercial topics is six to eight participants. Smaller focus groups, with four to six participants are, however, becoming increasingly popular because the smaller groups are easier to recruit and host, and they are more comfortable for participants (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Especially if the questions are meant to gain understanding of people’s experiences and the researcher wants more in-depth insights, these aims are usually best accomplished with a smaller group. We therefore invited five participants to each session: three males and two females in the Netherlands and two males and three females in South Korea. Participants in the two countries were engineering students in their early twenties. None of them had previously participated in focus group interviews. The participants in both countries met the facilitator for the first time about a week before the focus group interview. Two participants already knew each other before the session in the Netherlands, and two in the Korean group also knew each other. The rest of the participants were meeting for the first time.

Since the facilitator was a non-Dutch speaker, the session in the Netherlands was held in English while the Korean participants spoke in their mother tongue. Although English is the second language for Dutch participants, they spoke the language fluently because it was their official language in everyday practice in university.

Procedure

The same focus group interview format was followed in each country: the first experiment was in the Netherlands and the second one in South Korea a month later. The topic of the interview was “the use of digital multimedia devices.”

The same researcher took the role of a facilitator in both countries. To allow group-centred interaction and minimize the facilitator’s influence on participants’ interaction patterns, we limited the facilitator’s role to giving topics and distributing speech turns. To elicit different kinds of speech styles, such as storytelling or argumentation, questions in the focus group interviews varied from asking about personal experiences of digital multimedia use to discussing existing products and participants’ desired future products. Each session lasted for 110 minutes including a ten-minute break. Each session was video-recorded for further analysis.

Results

The analysis mainly aims at comparing the degree of participation and interaction patterns in the two countries. Since this study

Table 2. Utterance categories and examples

Categories		Examples
Participant interactions	Asking a question	How do you use these two cameras? (Dutch participant 5, asking participant 2 about his mobile phone with two cameras)
	Approval	I agree, I also do not think those functions will be converged any more. They will be rather specialized. (Korean participant 5, agreeing with participant 1’s opinion of specialization of mobile phone features)
	Disapproval	I would say that’s a freaky idea! Why don’t you just call? (Dutch participant 1, responding to participant 3’s idea of a mobile phone locating people)
Facilitator roles	Providing a topic	What aspects do you put more value on when you buy a mobile phone?
	Calling on a person	What is your opinion, Mr. Chang?
	Asking for volunteers	Does anybody have a different opinion?
	Detail questioning	Would you explain further why you value more the size and weight than the style when buying an mp3 player?

focuses on verbal communication styles in different cultures, the analysis was done on participants' utterances and the direction of group interaction. From the analysis on transcriptions of videos, utterance categories were developed to identify participants' interaction patterns.

First of all, to identify the participants' member-to-member interaction patterns, their reciprocal utterances were divided into three categories: "asking a question," "approval," and "disapproval." Utterances by the facilitator were also categorized into four criteria: "providing a topic," "calling on a person," "asking for volunteers," and "detail questioning." These criteria were set to discover what kind of role was required from the facilitator and how much participants relied on her, which in turn provided clues to determine the participants' activeness and interaction patterns. Table 2 shows examples of utterances in each criterion.

We then counted the number of each participant's utterances in order to compare the degree of participation in the two countries. The number of utterances by each participant in the two countries is compared in Table 3. The category of "other" refers to the participants' utterances that were not from interactions amongst them but were from interaction with the facilitator or voluntary storytelling.

A comparison in Table 3 indicates:

- Overall, Dutch participants produced more utterances than Korean participants.
- From the numbers in the three categories of "asking a question," "approval," and "disapproval," we found more member-to-member verbal interactions in the Netherlands, and with greater difference between utterance types.

We also counted the facilitator's utterances (see Table 4). This numerical comparison gives us findings as follows:

- Firstly, we found more utterances from the facilitator in South Korea.
- Difference in the categories of "providing a topic" and "calling on a person" was especially large. Relating this finding to the differences in participants' utterances, we can infer that more active speech and member-to-member interaction by Dutch participants made such facilitator's roles less prominent in the Netherlands.

To identify how participants' participation and interaction changed over time, we presented these utterances in timeline graphs (see Figure 3 and Figure 4). In these graphs, a timeline of the 100-minute interview was divided into 30-second interval units. When an utterance was observed, the units were highlighted. On these timeline graphs, the three categories of reciprocal utterances are presented as different types of arrows. The arrows start from a person reacting and head to another person to whom the comment is pointed.

These timeline graphs of the Netherlands and South Korea allow us to visually compare the degree of participation between the countries: the graph of the Dutch focus group interview (see Figure 3) displays more coloured bars, which means more utterances than the Korean one (see Figure 4), as also identified from the numerical comparison in Table 3 and Table 4.

Besides the degree of overall participation, these graphs indicate how the Dutch and Koreans participated in the interview over time. Dutch participants were actively involved from the beginning, while utterances and member-to-member interactions were increasingly observed in the latter part of the interview in South Korea.

To easily compare member-to-member conversations and the equivalence of participation by each member, we diagramed the number of each member's utterances and member-to-member verbal interactions (see Figure 5).

Figure 5 shows richer member-to-member interaction in the Dutch focus group interview than the Korean one, especially between D1 and D2 and between D2 and D5. In Korea, the facilitator made the most utterances among all group members and the difference between the dominant participant and the others was larger than in the Netherlands. Figure 5 shows the facilitator and the most dominant participant in Korea (K2) had no verbal interactions. This is because K2 spoke voluntarily when the facilitator introduced new topics.

Table 3. Comparison of participants' utterances in the Netherlands and South Korea

Categories	The Netherlands						South Korea					
	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	Total	K1	K2	K3	K4	K5	Total
Total	89	77	58	67	62	353	33	80	45	39	27	224
Asking a question	11	5	7	7	17	47	2	1	6	2	1	12
Approval	9	2	4	8	7	30	1	1	1	2	1	6
Disapproval	17	11	2	3	15	48	2	5	2	1	1	11
Other	52	59	45	49	23	228	28	73	36	34	24	195

Table 4. Comparison of facilitator's utterances in the Netherlands and South Korea

Countries	Facilitator's utterances				
	Providing a topic	Calling on a person	Asking for volunteers	Detail questioning	Total
The Netherlands	18	23	7	16	64
South Korea	30	32	10	19	91

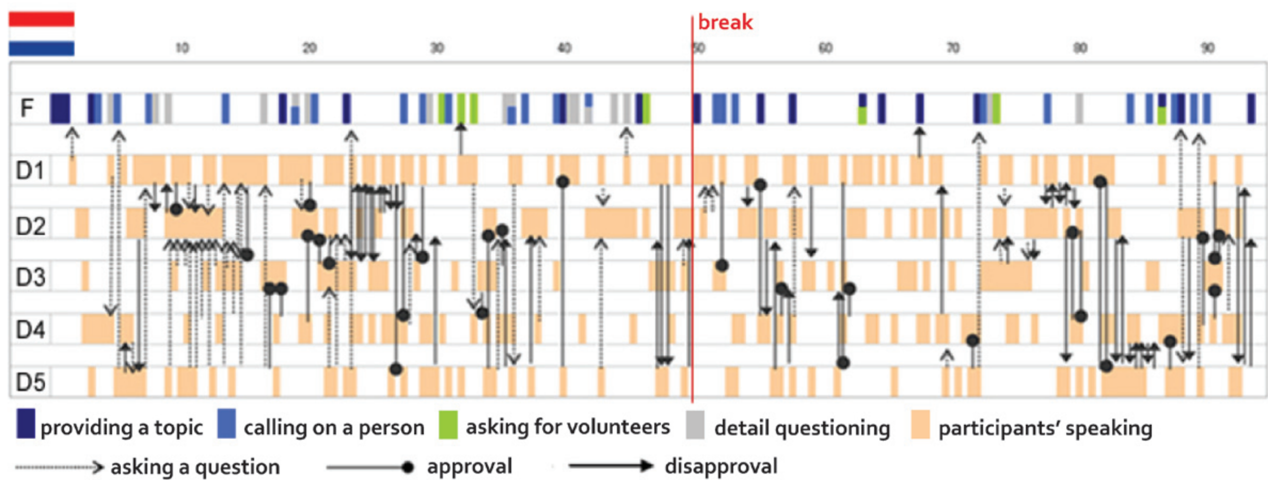

Figure 3. Timeline analysis of the focus group interview in the Netherlands: "F" on the top row stands for the facilitator and "D1" to "D5" stand for the Dutch participants. The distribution of the pink coloured bars in the rows for each participant indicate frequent changes of a speaker, which implies active member-to-member interactions, as does the frequency of the arrows.

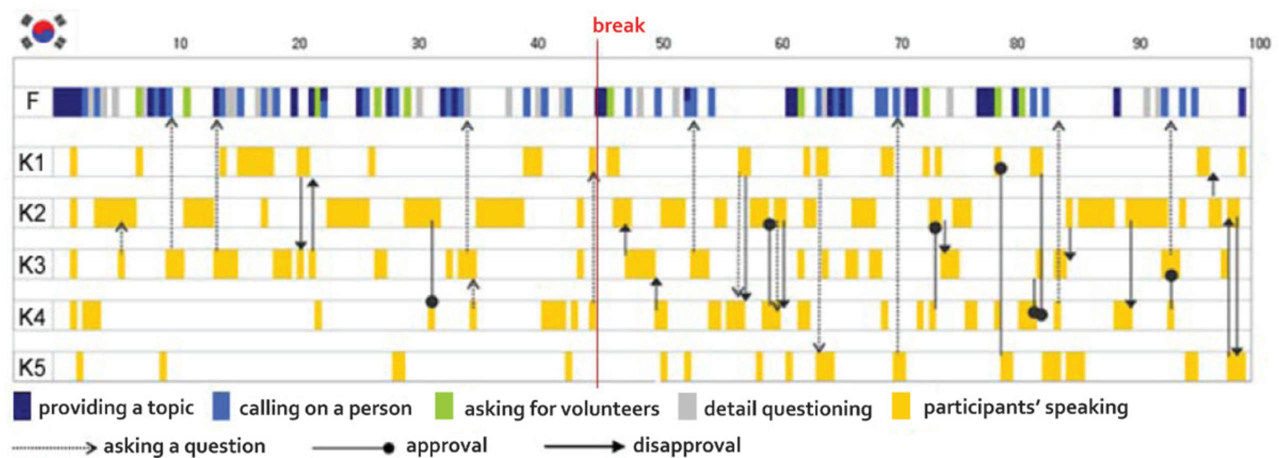

Figure 4. Timeline analysis of the focus group interview in South Korea: "F" on the top row stands for the facilitator and "K1" to "K5" stand for the Korean participants. The loose distribution of the yellow coloured bars in the rows for the participants indicates slow turn-takings. After the break, more yellow coloured bars, i.e. participants' utterances, and more arrows, i.e., member-to-member interaction, are found.

Discussion

"Narratives" from Dutch Participants versus "Short Answers" from Korean Participants

Overall, Dutch participants produced more active discussion during the interview than Korean participants. When a topic was provided to the participants, Dutch participants told "narratives" related to the given topic, while Koreans gave "short answers." For example, when the facilitator asked what kind of digital devices the participants have, one Dutch participant told stories about his mobile phone, such as when he bought it, what he likes and dislikes about it and even the subscription he had. Another participant then responded by telling his story, such as getting his phone from his brother and the moments he almost broke it. In contrast, Korean participants answered relatively shortly, by saying, "I have a mobile phone and an electronic dictionary. I do not use an mp3 player."

One reason for this tendency in South Korea can be that Korean participants feel less comfortable talking about their personal stories in front of strangers than the Dutch. Koreans might be more concerned about whether their answers look irrelevant to the topic as hypothesized from the facework framework (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998).

Poor Member-to-Member Verbal Interactions and Big Facilitator's Role in Instigating in Korean Focus Group Interview

We found that member-to-member interaction was considerably less active in South Korea. The Korean participants heavily relied on the facilitator, while Dutch participants proceeded with active discussion among themselves. In the Netherlands, when one participant finished his or her story, another voluntarily continued the discussion by bringing his experiences related to stories told

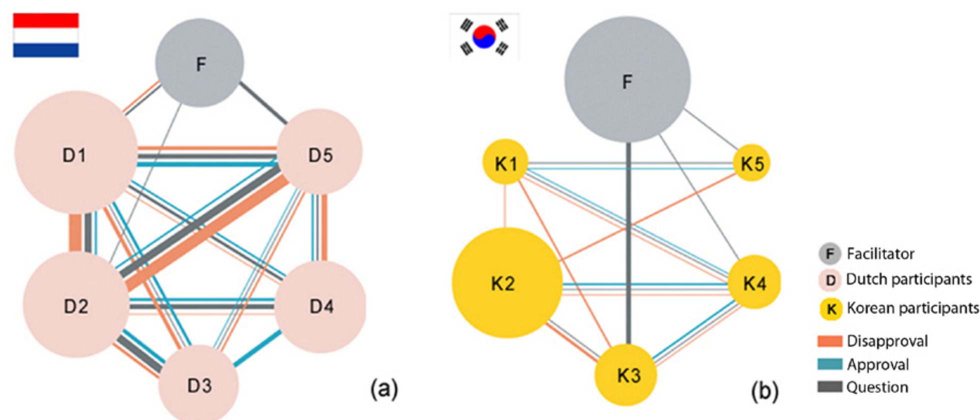

Figure 5. Each member's verbal participation and member-to-member verbal interaction (a) in the Netherlands and (b) in South Korea: the size of circles displays the number of utterances by each member and the thickness of the lines displays the frequency of member-to-member verbal interaction. The different types of member-to-member interaction ("disapproval," "approval," and "question") are symbolized with different colours. In the Korean focus group, the most utterances were made by the facilitator and member-to-member conversations numbered much less than in the Dutch focus group.

before or asking questions. On the contrary, in South Korea, when one person finished his talk, response to the talk from others was rare. Instead, the focus of the group members went to the facilitator, and the facilitator needed to respond, ask detailed questions or ask other participants to tell their stories.

By reviewing Ting-Toomey's (1998) facework framework, it was hypothesized that Korean participants would feel reluctant to show disapproval of others' opinions. As a matter of fact, the result of this experiment showed that Korean participants expressed fewer responses in every category, such as disapproval, approval and questioning. As we shall argue, the reason is that the Korean participants heavily relied on the facilitator, and this tendency led to a facilitator-centralized discussion.

More Active Participation after the Break in Korean Focus Group Interview

In South Korea, participants' utterances and member-to-member interaction increased over time, especially after the break, while Dutch participants discussed actively from the beginning of the session and did not show much difference in the timeline. As discussed earlier, the reason why Korean participants became more active in the latter part of the interview is that they became more accustomed to the other members and the discussion situation over time, especially after casual talk during the break. This observation implies that Korean participants would need more time to break the ice than the Dutch. Thus, a tool for breaking the ice can support a more efficient process in focus group interviews in South Korea.

These findings enabled us to elicit several crucial factors to encourage more active discussion in focus group interviews in South Korea, and in East Asia in a broader range. To implement these findings in a real case, we designed four types of tools, including props and activities, to facilitate dynamics of focus group interviews in East Asia.

Designing Tools for Focus Group Interviews in East Asia

Helping Participants Build a Relationship with Other Members: Pre-activities

Our comparative experiment indicated the significance of participants' relationship building before or in the early phase of a focus group interview in East Asia. This finding is also supported by cross-cultural studies in business research which argue that building a relationship is important but requires more time and effort in East Asia (Hofstede, 1991; Chen, 2004). We propose conducting "pre-activities" before a focus group interview to allow participants to gain familiarity and trust in a focus group. Two types of pre-activities can be facilitated: "pre-question cards" and "pre-session talk."

The inspiration for "pre-question cards" comes from "sensitizing tools," which are one technique for contextmapping (Sleeswijk Visser, Stappers, van der Lugt, & Sanders, 2005). In their study on contextmapping techniques, Sleeswijk Visser et al. argued that performing small exercises can "sensitize" participants to the research topic before group sessions. We expect that this sensitizing step will particularly benefit East Asian focus groups in two aspects. One is to help them be both mentally and materially prepared for a discussion topic. In contextmapping techniques, sensitizing tools usually contain a small workbook or postcards with open-ended questions and a disposable camera, following the Cultural Probe approach (Gaver, Dunne, & Pacenti, 1999), but tuning its usage as a preparation for generative sessions. In our study, pre-question cards were also used to serve as a preparation step to enhance participants' contributions in a focus group interview. They were designed for participants firstly to self-reflect on their experiences and secondly to be prepared with what to say and show to the focus group. Pre-question cards thus asked questions related to topics that would be dealt with in an early phase of a focus group interview to easily open discussion. Questions also asked participants to make small drawings to

illustrate their ideas, and these drawings later served as visual aids in discussion.

Another benefit of pre-question cards is to provide a stage for participants and a facilitator to build a relationship. A facilitator delivers these cards to the participants several days before the focus group interviews and, at this time, participants can meet the facilitator in person. This relationship building offers East Asian participants trust, certainty and familiarity with the facilitator, which help them feel more comfortable interacting with the facilitator in a group session.

"Pre-session talk" provides a stage for participants to become familiar with each other and open dialogues. Since our experiment in South Korea showed that participants become more active in the latter part of the focus group interview, having a short tea time for 10 to 15 minutes in a casual manner will break the ice and help participants to contribute more in the earlier phase of a group session.

Providing a Shared Ground and Supporting Indirectness: *"Mini-me"* Dolls

We designed *Mini-me* dolls to be used as tangible tools for participants to express their emotions and presence in focus group interviews (Figure 6). In interview sessions, each participant is given his or her own *Mini-me* doll. The dolls' faces are blank at the beginning, and participants can draw faces on their own dolls expressing their identities. Participants can also put the dolls' arms up and down, similar to how people raise their hands for attention. Our literature review and experiments indicated that East Asians do not want to interrupt or disapprove of others' utterances in a focus group interview. These doll-like representations would empower East Asian participants to express their willingness to speak or disapprove in an indirect and humorous way. In addition, drawing the *Mini-me*'s faces can allow participants' emotional attachment to these representations. This activity can also facilitate playfulness that can make participants feel at ease in the early phase of a focus group interview.

In addition, a design of *Mini-me* dolls aims at providing a shared ground for participants by having the same representations to express themselves, like virtual avatars in online games and blogs.

Utilizing a Random Effect in Taking Turns: *A Spin-the-Bottle Game*

We observed that a facilitator needed to play a heavier role in encouraging participants to talk in South Korea. The strong role of a facilitator makes participants rely more on him or her and leads to facilitator-centralized discussion rather than member-to-member discussion. To hand the authority of turn-giving to the participants, van Rijn, Bahk, Stappers, and Lee (2006) developed a prop called *"Ki-bun,"* a Korean word for current mood and state of mind, which participants can give to others when they finish talking or have nothing to say. We assumed that selecting the next person to speak might pressure the person who is supposed to choose. To lessen the pressure, we facilitated a random effect to it. A *"Spin-the-Bottle"* game, one of the Korean drinking games, was adopted for random turn-taking. A bottle is placed in the centre of the tabletop, and participants can spin the bottle when they finish talking or at any time.

Facilitating an Imaginary Situation to Support Indirectness: *TV Home Shopping Show*

van Rijn et al. (2006) introduced using a TV frame for idea presentation in their study of contextmapping techniques in the Netherlands and South Korea. They found the TV frame worked as a frame for discussion in South Korea, while it was never used this way in the Netherlands. We adopted this idea of the TV frame as a stage for both idea presentations and discussions for South Koreans but constructed a more imaginary scenario around it. We set the situation of a *TV home-shopping show*, in which hosts and actors have unique actions and speech tones. By setting this somewhat exaggerated scenario, we wanted participants to place themselves in different roles so that they can be less affected by the structural facework. This setting also aims at facilitating a playful atmosphere where participants can feel more comfortable when presenting and evaluating ideas.

Testing Tools

We conducted another session of a focus group interview with South Koreans to test real usages of the proposed tools. This section describes how the new tools were used in the focus group interview and discusses their strengths and weaknesses.

Participants in the Test Case

Unfortunately we could not conduct the test in South Korea this time. Instead we recruited five Korean students who live in Helsinki, Finland. Because living in a different culture can influence participants' perceptions and behaviours (Nisbett, 2003), we tried to minimize the influence of studying abroad by recruiting students who have lived abroad less than 8 months. Two of the

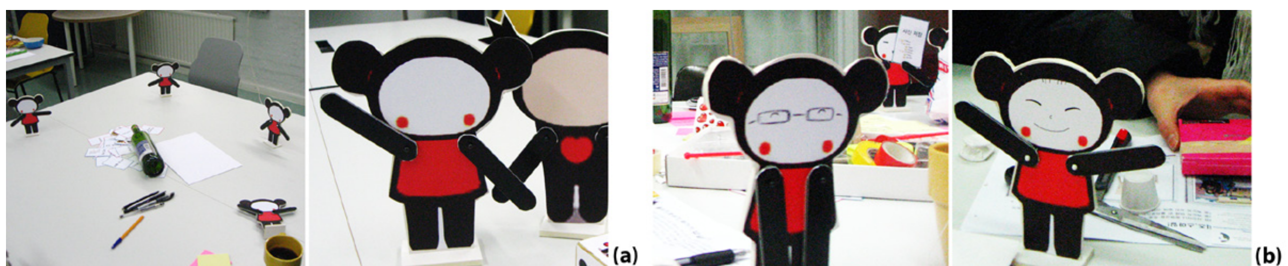

Figure 6. "Mini-me" dolls: (a) before faces are drawn (b) after drawing faces.

participants were exchange students who were supposed to go back to Korea in a few months. Other settings were facilitated with native factors: the facilitator and the assistant were Korean and all participants spoke Korean. As cross-cultural studies in cognitive psychology argue, these native factors in a setting are important in people's systems of thought (Peng & Knowles, 2003). In their experiments on Asian Americans, Peng and Knowles proved that Asian Americans think differently when their self-concept is stimulated with Asian culture and when it is primed with American culture. We assume that meeting Korean researchers and speaking Korean helped to minimize this influence of living abroad on Korean students' behaviors in this test experiment.

The proposed tools perform best in focus groups of four to six people, fostering member-to-member interaction and participants' storytelling. We invited five participants in this test: two female graduate students in furniture design and three male undergraduates in business management. Two female participants knew each other before this focus group interview and both had a slight acquaintance with the facilitator, while the rest met the facilitator for the first time when receiving the pre-question cards.

Procedure

The discussion topic was "experiences with digital media use," the same as in the first comparative experiment. The facilitator was also the same in this test. Three days before the group session, participants were given pre-question cards. The pre-question cards consisted of two activities: one is to draw scenes or objects that participants usually take photos or videos of and another is to draw a map illustrating with whom and how to share those photos. Two individual cards containing each activity were delivered in an envelope with the information of the group session. We used folding card paper and placed the questions inside. The paper was A4 size when unfolded to ensure enough space for drawings and notes.

On the interview day, before starting the actual group session, the facilitator and participants had a 15-minute tea-time together to break the ice and get to know each other. While having tea and snacks, the facilitator asked the participants about their experiences doing the pre-question cards, which became a shared topic in the tea-time conversation.

This new focus group interview consisted of different activities, from sharing personal stories, making "dream products," to presenting and evaluating design ideas, in order to prompt various types of interactions. The activity of making dream products (the "Make" session) followed the fundamental principles of "Generative tools" developed and propagated by Sanders (2000). We allowed the participants to work in pairs instead of working individually to empower them with collective participation (Chavan, 2005). After the *Make* session, the *TV home shopping show* was held when participants presented their design ideas.

During the session, the facilitator wrote keywords from the participants' talks on post-it notes in order to show that the participants' stories were considered valuable. We avoided using a whiteboard because we did not want to give the impression of a facilitator with a higher power status in this collectivistic cultural group. The new focus group interview lasted about two hours including a ten-minute break and was video-recorded for analysis. After the focus group interview, the participants were asked to write down how they felt about their participation and how each tool supported them.

Results

This time we also adopted a timeline analysis to see the distribution and frequency of utterances and interaction patterns among participants. Even though this test uses the first experiment in South Korea as a baseline measure, we do not aim at comparing those two cases in a quantitative manner. Instead we focus on detailed discussions of how each tool worked with East Asians in a real case. Besides the findings from observation, the participants' feedback on each tool was also reviewed in analysis.

Timeline Analysis

Overall, the participants showed more fluent member-to-member discussions this time. In Figure 8, the first row for the facilitator's utterances shows that the facilitator did not need to ask participants to speak as often (see light blue and green bars in the first row in Figure 8). However the facilitator still needed to ask many detailed questions to probe what participants had said and elicit more in-depth stories (see light grey bars in the first row in Figure 8). Figure 8 shows that five participants talked in turn from K1 to K5 for the first 20 minutes. This is because each participant was talking about what they had answered in the pre-question cards in turn.

Figure 7. Focus group interview with new tools.

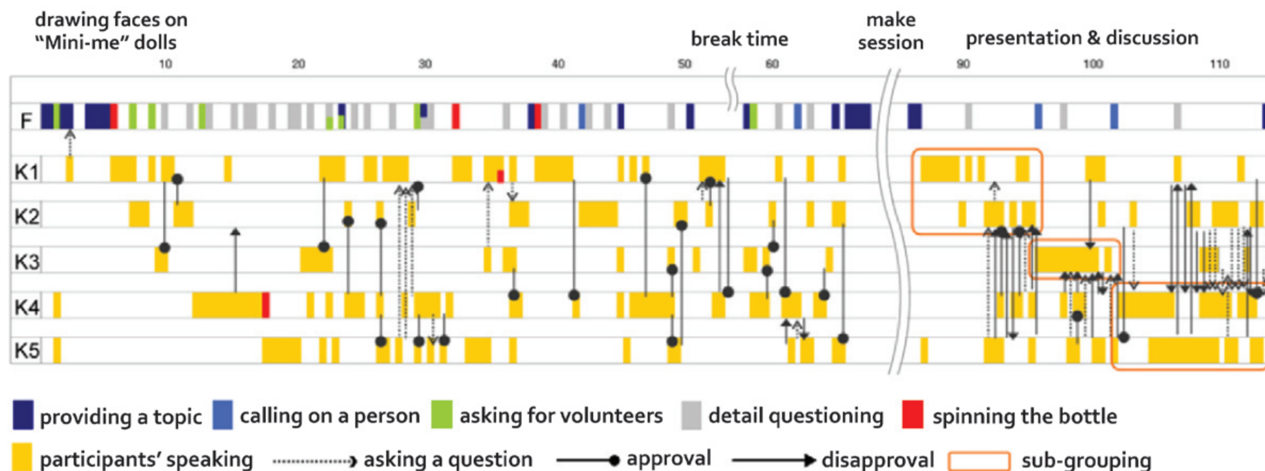

Figure 8. Timeline analysis of the focus group interview with new tools.

Concerning member-to-member interaction, participants K1 and K4 played roles as voluntary speakers and broke ground for others to respond. Game-like activities, such as playing with the *Mini-me* dolls and spinning the bottle, helped participants to break the ice and to feel at ease. In the idea evaluation session with the *TV home-shopping* format, participants actively threw out questions and voiced what they thought was good or bad about the presented ideas. The following sections depict how each tool worked with South Koreans in more detail.

Pre-activities

When delivering the pre-question cards, the facilitator was able to make closer acquaintance with the participants by having tea together. During this time, the facilitator also explained the purpose and procedure of the focus group interview. This activity also gave certainty to the participants.

Every participant answered the pre-question cards faithfully before the group session. The pre-question cards provided participants with a basis to open dialogues at the beginning, by allowing them to talk about how much time they spent answering the questions or how difficult they found them. During the group session, participants were interested in looking at the others' drawings on the pre-question cards and made comments on them. The cards served as visual aids while the participants were presenting their answers.

"Mini-me" Dolls

Participants showed much interest in the *Mini-me* dolls. They appreciated and made jokes about each other's doll faces, and this process apparently played a critical role in breaking the ice. They even took pictures of themselves with their own dolls. Some participants used the dolls to volunteer by waving the doll's arms and saying, "I'll go first," when the facilitator threw out new topics. Some of the participants changed the dolls' faces and postures according to the situations during the focus group interview.

The dolls were mainly used for drawing others' attention by making jokes rather than for taking speech turns or showing disapproval. The best achievement of the *Mini-me* dolls in this experiment was that they were able to elicit emotional engagement of the participants and create a fun atmosphere.

A Spin-the-Bottle Game

A *Spin-the-bottle* game was played mostly by the facilitator right after introducing new questions. Participants did not voluntarily spin the bottle except when asked by the facilitator. After the focus group interview, participants said that they felt quite active in the discussion and did not need to play the game.

The main purpose of this *Spin-the-bottle* game was to provide another means for turn-giving. However, once participants felt comfortable with interacting with other members and a flow of turns developed, it became unnecessary and awkward to choose a person by playing the game. Instead, we found this game more useful for the facilitator than for participants. The game served to call participants' attention when the agenda needed to be shifted or to decide an order for presentations.

Imaginary TV Home Shopping Show

When presenting and evaluating ideas in the imaginary *TV home shopping show*, every participant imitated the way the TV hosts typically speak. While the participants presented their ideas, the others did not interrupt but listened to them until they finished. After the idea presentation, they showed appreciation first with applause and then started to comment on the ideas. The discussion after each team's presentation was surprisingly intensive. When commenting on the product ideas, participants still talked as if they were show hosts and customers.

Discussion:

How to Facilitate Dynamics of Focus Group Interviews in East Asia

Based on the findings from the first cross-cultural experiments in the Netherlands and South Korea and the test experiment of

the proposed tools, we were able to derive important elements for facilitating group dynamics of focus group interviews in East Asia. In this section, we discuss reflections on the designed tools and finally propose tips for conducting focus group interviews in East Asia.

One of the important findings from the proposed tools is that these interventions facilitated “stimuli” which can boost participants’ interest and motivation in focus group interviews. These “stimuli” then brought “engagement.” The engagement to the focus group increased member-to-member interaction, which can lead to a higher degree of participation (Toseland et al., 2004). Small talks before the focus group interview and playful representations like *Mini-me* dolls also helped participants to build a relationship with the facilitator and other members, which is important in *collectivistic and high-context* culture of East Asia (Hofstede, 1991; Chen, 2004). In the participants’ feedback on the tools, they said that they had expected a boring and serious focus group interview before participation, but they found it fun later. Most of them showed satisfaction with the degree of their participation.

Another remarkable finding is that supporting “indirect communication” can empower East Asians to express their opinions and emotions. Although the *Mini-me* dolls were used mostly for drawing others’ attention by making jokes in this experiment, the dolls show potential to serve as tools to express negative opinions in indirect ways when the purpose of a focus group interview is to evaluate products. In such cases, the *Mini-me* dolls can empower East Asians by providing means for indirect emotional expression and support their willingness to maintain other’s face, which were identified as East Asians’ communication styles (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998).

The imaginary setting of the *TV home shopping show* can be explained to the same extent: the analogy of the imaginary setting and roles offered East Asians indirectness. The Korean participants placed themselves well in an imaginary setting and yielded intensive discussion in this setting. We argue that this analogy can “release” the Korean participants from the structural facework they typically have, because different types of rules are established in the imaginary setting.

With regard to intensive discussion in the *TV home shopping show*, we should not overlook the fact that this activity took place at the end of the focus group interview and the familiarity built up during the whole session might have resulted in intensive discussion. This finding also indicates that activities requiring criticism work better in the latter part of the discussion.

Based on these findings and discussions, we suggest tips for conducting focus group interviews in East Asia.

- **Foster sensitivity and motivation by providing playful props and activities.** Utilizing playful stimuli allows participants from East Asia to feel comfortable with the interview situation and to become motivated.
- **Provide for indirectness by facilitating imaginary roles and situations.** Participants from East Asia become empowered in role playing and imaginary situations that support indirect communication.
- **Ice breaking is especially important for East Asians.** Participants from East Asia need more time to become accustomed to the interview situation and other members. Try to open dialogues before a focus group interview by providing pre-tasks or informal meetings. Playful props and activities will also help to break the ice in the beginning.
- **Place tasks of evaluation and critique in the latter part of focus group interviews.** Participants from East Asia tend to be reserved in the early stage of focus group interviews. However, they become more active once they gain familiarity with the interview situation and the other participants. Place tasks requiring criticism in the latter stage.
- **Visualize respect for their participation and information.** Showing approval of and respect for the participants’ opinions will give them certainty and motivation.

Conclusion

This study aimed at unpacking cultural influence on user research methods by theoretical reviews and comparative experiments. We revealed different behaviours that participants showed in focus group interviews in two different cultures, the Netherlands and South Korea. Korean participants made fewer utterances and relied more on the facilitator than Dutch participants. Moreover, member-to-member interaction was poor in Korea but increased remarkably in the latter part of the focus group interview. Based on these findings, we designed tools, including *Mini-me* dolls and an imaginary *TV home shopping show*, to facilitate the dynamics of East Asian focus groups. Testing of these tools allowed us to elicit important findings for conducting focus group interviews in East Asia: for example, empowering East Asians by facilitating “indirectness” in communication, allowing East Asians to build a relationship with a facilitator and other participants before a group session, and placing evaluation tasks in the latter part.

We hope our findings put an emphasis on facilitating cultural sensitivity in the user research process and offer a basis for further studies on this issue. This study has limitations in that the findings from the comparative experiments and the test of the tools are based on a small number of subjects, limited even further to student groups. To complement the study’s rigour and contribution, further studies should follow with more subjects and various study contexts. In addition, this study only focuses on the degree of participation and performance of participants in focus group interviews. Further research on properties and quality of data produced from focus group interviews will give a fuller picture of how the method works in different cultures and can be localized.

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