



Intelligence Applied

The ideal man: the challenge of national cultures for global brands



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Global brands need global propositions. Yet while the power of things like the internet, international trade and Hollywood have brought countries closer together, the reality is that national cultures will continue to remain highly idiosyncratic. International researchers know this from the questions they face day to day.

The ideal man: the challenge of national cultures for global brands



Michael Griffiths
Global Expert,
Cultural Insight & Strategy
TNS Qualitative



William Landell Mills
Global Qualitative Director
TNS Qualitative

Why is a set of perfect white teeth imperative for Americans? Why are Chinese men so slow to trust each other? Why did the Italians re-elect Berlusconi on so many occasions? And come to that, why do German men think it is okay to walk around naked?

In each case the answer is cultural. Each culture has its own unique set of codes. The challenge for somebody with a global proposition is that these codes are largely invisible to those that live by them. In the same way that people don't think of themselves as having an accent when living at home,

but are surprised when this becomes an object of amusement when they move away. We are blind to our culture. We are like goldfish swimming in water which we don't even notice.

For a long time, this didn't matter too much to marketers. Powerful brands won through technological and marketing muscle. But with increased competition, the advantage increasingly lies with the brand that is most intimately aligned with its consumers' needs, and tells them so. Witness how in China, the once unstoppable McDonald's and KFC have both had to fight like fury to resist the encroachments of indigenous restaurant brands. These days, if you want to show you are the 'best a man can get', you really need to know how a man's cutting edge differs between Brazil and England.

Anyone working on an international brand will have first-hand experience of cultural difference. But how can we make it easier to navigate the complex differences that culture presents?



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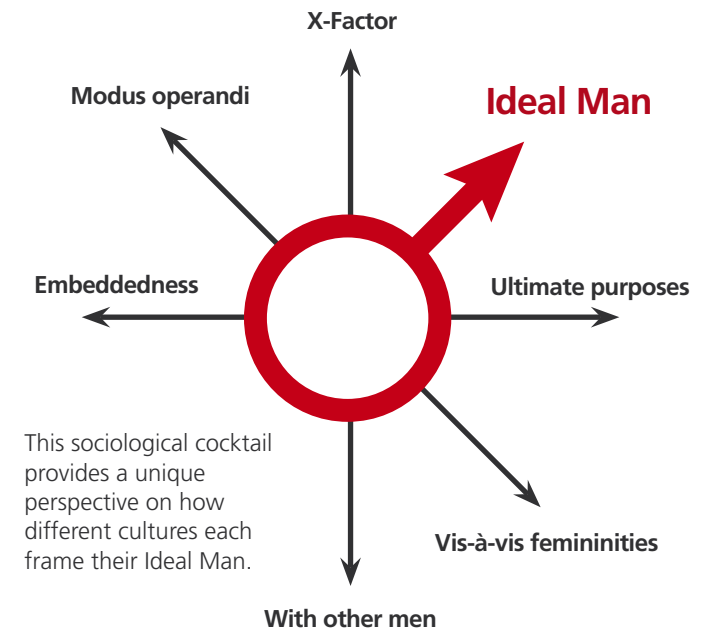
A systematic approach to cross-cultural analysis

Our aim is to give global brands deep insight into how to articulate their overall propositions within national cultures. The Ideal Man study is a step along that road, an example of comparative cultural analysis which illustrates how national cultures deal with the same things in very different ways (i.e. what it is to be man). It so happens that this is a really big question for a culture, so the answers to the Ideal Man question have wider significance beyond just how to target men for certain products. But before we get into that, we need to explain how the study works and give some examples of what it reveals and how that insight is useful.

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People instinctively imagine that our Ideal Man study is about how a man should be, from a woman's sexual perspective. That is part of it. But the study actually looks at man through the lens of six deep sociological questions about what a man is expected to be like in various domains. What happens is that each culture answers these questions in their unique way. By expressing that unique answer as a code and comparing cultures side-by-side (apples compared to apples) we are able to systematically understand how the cultures differ. Our six questions draw from thinkers such as Heidegger, Bourdieu, Levi-Strauss and Weber. We don't claim originality there, but we believe that the way we have assembled this sociological cocktail provides a unique perspective on how different cultures each frame their Ideal Man.

The following is a brief tour around each of the six questions.



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How is he embedded in society?

'Embeddedness' describes the Ideal Man's typical fit with the sociological circumstances into which he was born. Take India, where social, gender and life-stage roles are still shaped by tradition, and where the Ideal Man's identity is clearly defined by his status as Brahmin, son or breadwinner. We describe the nature of the ideal Indian man's embeddedness as 'role-bound'. Contrast this with China, where social roles are less rigidly defined, yet where social relations are still extremely important. China's society is less a strict hierarchical system than a complex, constantly shifting, social and political matrix. A Chinese man's identity is defined by his relationships, never in isolation. He has to be careful about possible risks before doing or saying something. In the same way that the ideal Indian man is role-bound, we can describe the ideal Chinese man as 'circumspect'. This goes a long way to explain why men (and women) in China are slow to trust each other.



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What is his modus operandi?

'Modus operandi' relates to how the Ideal Man needs to operate in society given the nature of his embeddedness. In his ever-shifting world, the ideal Chinese man must above all be strategic and prudent, just as in Sun Tzu's iconic Art of War. By contrast, the ideal Indian man is egotistical and proud, since in his highly trammelled, role-bound world, that is what being a man means. The ideal Indian man's modus operandi can be manifest in the figure of the warrior – an intense, physical and sexual character who always has a battle to fight. Alternatively it can be manifest as the benevolent father-figure who can occasionally be uncontrollably angry. Where anger would be a serious loss of face in China, it is seen as a legitimate expression of the Indian man's status, strength and authority. The Ideal Man framework highlights many such contrasts and distinctions.

What gives him his X-Factor?

'X-Factor' is drawn from the sociological idea of cultural capital: the type of knowledge, skills or practical potential which promotes his social mobility within a culture. The Ideal Man in China is imagined to be motivated by ideas of self-improvement, which are widely expressed in the practice of artistic forms such as calligraphy, Tai Chi or piano. In India by contrast, the Ideal Man's X-Factor is imagined to consist in mental flexibility and street smarts – the making do, short cuts and work-arounds that characterise Indian men, from their love of the way technology helps them negotiate contextual constraints, to fixing things at home.



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What are his ultimate purposes?

'Ultimate purposes' refers to the ways in which the Ideal Man navigates the balance between spiritual and material ends. In China, the Ideal Man seeks material security, wealth and gratification as the goal of his spiritual quest. He must be rich to honour his ancestors and dependents. He may be religious, but his veneration lies not in asceticism due to poverty, but in his ability to donate a solid pure-gold statue of Buddha to a temple. In India on the other hand, spirituality is implicit in every object, and spiritual wealth correlates strongly with material poverty.

How is his male identity defined in the context of feminine identities?

In India, men and women are very clearly and rigidly demarcated in society. The Ideal Man conforms to a macho ideal of strength and muscularity, while the feminine is voluptuous and sensual yet modest. In China, the distinction between the masculine and feminine is not so clearly demarcated. Compared to the ideal Indian man, the ideal Chinese man can be quite androgynous, the demarcation less pronounced. So, for example, Indian advertising for beer brands is full of muscular guys in stand-offs with other muscular guys. In beer advertising for China, on the other hand, we see almost as many women drinking and enjoying beer as men, and there is never any hint of violence between them.



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How does he express his male identity with other men?

Our final question is about his characteristic way of interacting with other men. All cultures mark occasions of male togetherness with a loosening of norms and rules, but there are differences across cultures. Chinese male get-togethers are marked by forms of 'ebullient excess' and friendly competition, where men can demonstrate qualities that are normally kept under wraps: strength, loyalty, and fortitude are vividly on display. In India, by contrast, male togetherness is about the permission to 'break free' from the obligations imposed by traditional roles – by women, parents, figures of authority etc. This comes through in boys-will-be-boys themes and permission to behave badly, and is more aggressive than the 'ebullience' we describe in China.







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Political proof

We were struck that, when taken together, the codes which summarise our analysis (see table) provide a recognisable description of each nation's political leader. The Indian codes can be seen in Modi, the American codes in Obama, some of the Chinese codes in Xi Jinping, the Italian codes in Berlusconi and so on. We believe that this resonance represents an intriguing validation of our approach.

The codes which summarise our analysis provide a **recognisable description of each nation's political leader.**

| Lens | China  | India  | USA  | Italy  |
|-------------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| Embeddedness | Circumspect | Role-bound, dutiful | Righteous purpose | Ingenious, familial |
| Modus operandi | Strategic, prudent | Egotistic, proud | Honest endeavour | Artistic versatile |
| X-Factor | Self-improving | Smart, innovative | Can-do optimism | Inventive aesthete |
| Ultimate purposes | Bank capital | Transcendence, dissolution | Leaves his mark on the world | Savour the beauty of life |
| Vis-à-vis femininities | Ambiguous, caring | Macho | Rugged, romantic | Seductive |
| With other men | Ebullient excess | Unleashed | Supportive, back up | Clownish camaraderie |

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How is this useful?

We help clients understand how to talk to men in different cultures. We have run workshops which have helped crack what were seen as intractable challenges. But the potential is not only to do with men: our findings have value because in talking about what is expected from men, we have learned a lot about how cultures create meaning more generally.

The following is a good example. To go back to our original question about Americans' almost obsessive pre-occupation with white teeth, American consumers will tell you that you cannot trust someone who doesn't have an even, white smile, so they pay a fortune for orthodontics. Contrast this with the Germans who talk much more about the underlying health and strength of their teeth. Germans associate naturalness with strength and teeth are not naturally sparkling white.

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So far, so predictable. But this observation can be explained in terms of cultural ideals. The ideal American man's embeddedness is his 'righteous purpose'. The US is the only national culture where we identified an embeddedness code which is explicitly moralistic. In the world of teeth, the American impulse towards righteous purpose becomes expressed in the desire for explicitly 'good' (white, even) teeth. Now contrast this with the Germans', whose embeddedness is 'authentic and grounded'. Germans ideals are about underlying natural health and strength, and shiny white teeth are seen as symptoms of a bemusing superficiality. This doesn't mean brands cannot sell teeth-whitening products to Germans, but these cultural insights do provide benchmarks on how to frame such a proposition for them.

Understanding cultural dynamics promises immensely powerful insights for savvy brands, and equally elephant-sized pitfalls for the unwary. A one-size-fits-all approach to global branding was never a very good idea, but now at least we have a cultural roadmap for tailoring brand promises to local cultures.

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Listen to our podcast on 'Why don't German men want a Hollywood smile?' to find out more about the Ideal Man >

About the authors



Michael Griffiths is an ethnographer, socio-cultural analyst and brand strategy & communications consultant, with a focus on China. Michael is responsible for developing TNS Qualitative's cultural insights suite of services to help clients harness the cultural drivers of consumer behaviour.



William Landell Mills is Global Qualitative Director with more than 20 years of experience in the industry, and more specifically in branding and advertising.

At TNS Qualitative, William is responsible for developing best practice and bringing new thinking to clients around the world.

Michael and William are the co-developers of the Ideal Man framework. To find out more about how our cultural insight experts can help you develop strategies that are attuned with local values, beliefs and attitudes, contact michael.griffiths@tnsglobal.com or william.landellmills@tnsglobal.com

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