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CHEIL ACQUIRES CHINESE SOCIAL MEDIA ANALYST COLOURDATA

Cheil Worldwide has concluded a share purchase agreement with ColourData, one of China’s leading and most innovative social big data analytics service providers, to strengthen its data-driven marketing capability.

Founded by a group of big data experts in 2014, the Shanghai-based ColourData has developed proprietary technology that helps it to collect postings and comments from more than 5,000 social media, news, and e-commerce websites, giving the company the ability to analyse buzz by geography, gender, and age group. It also features advanced, AI-powered natural language processing, real-time visualizations, and on-demand report generation.

Cheil Worldwide has worked with ColourData on several social media digital marketing projects in China and moved to acquire the company after recognising its competitive technology and high potential for growth.

PRS IN VIVO EXPANDS ONLINE LAB SUITE

Shopper insights agency PRS IN VIVO has continued the expansion of LAB, a consultative offering that draws on a suite of innovative qualitative services, designed to leverage authentic behaviour in consumers. LivingLAB and ListenLAB, the newest online digital modules, enhance brands’ abilities to plan for future success across the entire lifecycle of the development, design, and marketing of consumer products.

“Digital consumer behaviors have become ever more apparent during the Coronavirus pandemic. Brands therefore need to understand consumer behavior today in order to prepare for action tomorrow. In this strategic step to build out our four LAB pillars, these online tools take consumer closeness to another level. They help clients to build in empathy and clarity to insights we observe in consumers’ personal environments, and in their online social activity. These new tools complement our in-person LAB techniques and amplify our clients’ ability to navigate as consumer behaviors change,” said Matt Michaud, Senior VP of Behavioral Qualitative.

Chief Innovation Officer Emilie Boutes Eberly added, “These online LAB enhancements are perfect extensions of the in-person qualitative best practices and solutions PRS IN VIVO has pioneered throughout our history. They enable us to serve brands with a totally consultative approach to consumer closeness that allows clients to Immerse and Inspire, Build and Iterate, Guide and Refine, and be Always Ahead of authentic consumer behavior, even as the world is changing.”

NEWS In Case You Missed It

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ACCENTURE ACQUIRES AUTOMATED INSIGHTS FIRM BYTE PROPHECY

Accenture has acquired India-based automated insights and big data analytics company Byte Prophecy, to meet the growing demand for enterprise-scale AI and digital analytics solutions across the region.

The acquisition will add nearly 50 data science and data engineering experts, with a particular focus on insight automation, to Accenture Applied Intelligence. The move will deepen existing consulting and technology capabilities that help clients in areas such as data foundations and advanced analytics.

"Across industries, decision making has become more complex, and businesses are increasingly relying on advanced analytics and AI to ensure insight driven, rapid decision making," said Piyush N. Singh, Accenture's market unit lead for India and sales lead for growth markets. "Beyond advanced technology capabilities, Accenture brings our clients a co-innovation mindset, and in Byte Prophecy we found a partner with the right mix of technology and consulting skills, and a client-centric innovation culture."

Founded in 2011, Byte Prophecy has worked closely with Accenture Ventures since 2018 on open innovation efforts, collaborating and co-innovating with Accenture and its clients in Asia Pacific on advanced data and analytics projects.

NIELSEN PARTNERS INNITY, LAUNCHES TARGETING TOOL IN HK

Nielsen Media has rolled out VisualDNA for the Hong Kong Market. VisualDNA is Nielsen's proprietary data that helps companies, brands, and marketers understand the human personality, allowing businesses to serve their customers better.

In partnership with Innity, a leading online media company, Nielsen VisualDNA allows the provision of audience personality to marketers for the first time. The data is a result of a global psychographic personality test that has been taken by over 40 million people. VisualDNA enables Innity to run personality-based marketing campaigns with highly customised messages, all with the grand goal of enhancing ad resonance and boosting campaign performance. Depending on campaign types, marketers can target audiences by demographics, lifestyle, brand preference, personality, and shopping personality.

"In the past few years, Nielsen Media has been focusing on developing Nielsen's proprietary data assets and VisualDNA is a core product launch. VisualDNA is powerful in the sense that it provides marketers with the ability to target based on individual motivations and habits, thereby increasing the accuracy of targeting. This heightened accuracy of targeting is especially valuable to ensure marketing success amid challenging market circumstances," said Clare Lui, Vice President, Media, Nielsen Hong Kong.
We reference insights from our partner publication Green-Book, ESOMAR, and interviews with management consultants and heads of research firms in Asia. A series of articles will examine the impact on the demand side for consumer insight, the supply side, the expected changes in research methodologies, and how consumer markets in Asia will be affected.

We would like to thank the various contributors to these articles, including 2CV, ABN Impact / InSites Consulting, BVA BDRC, Duxton Consulting, GlobalData, GMO Research, IBM Services, Mike Sherman, Ratuken Insights, TapestryWorks, Toluna, and YouGov.

Our first article is a higher-level view, drawing on our full range of sources, highlighting where the COVID-19 pandemic has had the most impact and the changes that are likely to endure in the industry and in the broader economy.

We have summarised these into 5 key factors as follows:

1. **Rebooting of the economy – in which direction?**

The world economy has gone through an unprecedented decline, with economies shrinking by 20–30% during the worst periods of the lockdown. Unlike 'normal' cyclical recessions, and even the ‘abnormal’ Global Financial Crisis, the economy will recover in a fundamentally new direction, with changed consumer attitudes, behaviours, and lifestyles. Corporations will have to respond by introducing new products, changes to their service channels, and very different corporate communications.

We are seeing some positive impact from the lockdown, including the reduction in pollution from decreased human activity and particularly from much less air travel. But while the environment has had a temporary respite, the rise in single-use plastics for greater hygiene could set us back. Brands will talk about sustainability, but unfortunately, consumers and governments under budget pressure will not be able to spend so much on saving the planet.

We are moving into a ‘post-globalised’ world where international trade is significantly reduced and where countries are putting more of their national interests first. Global brands have seen their supply chains disrupted, and consumers might turn more to homegrown brands and local produce. This is both to support local economies and for greater safety, e.g. supply chains that are simpler, easier to monitor, and might not cross international borders. The independent testing and certification industry will see more business and in new categories involving closer human contact, such as restaurants, hotels, and hospitality. Production of non-viral packaging and surfaces, e.g. for fixtures and fittings, will be a growth sector.

Political tensions have increased over who is to blame for...
the outbreak and how it has been handled. In recovery, the US could impose punitive tariffs on Chinese imports as ‘reparations’, leading to more trade disputes.

The economic fallout from COVID-19 has already been felt, and some aspects will get worse as governments and corporations will have to deal with more debt. Many people have lost their jobs, and most have seen a reduction in their income.

During the lockdown, households have had their lifestyles fundamentally changed but have had time to think and plan for the future, e.g. about how best to change going forward. With this, many have found ways to reduce costs, not only out of necessity, but as an insurance policy for more difficult times ahead, or just as a way to save money. Based on an ongoing consumer survey, people say they will ‘trade down’ in the longer term in categories including groceries, eating out, entertainment, holidays, and car ownership, and some will generally avoid luxuries and expensive brands. There will be some redefining of what is ‘luxury’ and what are ‘luxury brands’.

A recent business survey in Singapore shows that they will continue to cut costs and change their priorities going forward. Some will postpone new investments and focus more on their core, more established markets, rather than on new business development and expansion. But investments in IT could increase as they look to new solutions for remote working, cloud services, AI, and automation, among others. Corporations will outsource more of their services as they move to slimmer business models with less headcount and cheaper/smaller offices. There will be more start-up businesses as some PMEBs and expatriates lose their jobs but look to service this new outsourced business through their own enterprises.

The prime rental markets will be severely impacted as companies become more virtual or take offices in cheaper locations, and by moving offices they will redesign them for more remote working – e.g. hot desks – and for more distancing. Cramped co-working spaces may become less popular and start-ups will seek alternatives to these ‘quick fixes’ for facilities, e.g. in cheaper premises outside of central business districts, with the benefit of not having to use public transport to commute.

2. Media and corporate communications

In any crisis, consumers turn more to news media for information and updates. With more time on their hands and plentiful online media, people are consuming more news than ever. The public is already aware of ‘fake news’ and has turned to more reliable news brands. In many markets, trust in government, leaders, and government websites has actually increased. The public sees this as the best way to find out what is really going on in a world of fake news, rumour, and junk science.

But corporations also need to build trust with their consumers. Authenticity, safety, well-being, and reliability will become even more important brand attributes to communicate going forward. Brands have scaled back their advertising during the lockdown as it has been difficult to launch new products during this period, even though the size of audiences, media reach, and frequency has gone up. Brands have been reluctant to invest in creative development as corporate expenditure has been put on hold, but those that do invest in their brands will benefit more on the recovery. That said, advertising during the lockdown period has been somewhat clichéd, with similar themes around ‘teamwork’. Considerable research will be needed to help formulate unique and compelling communications strategies during the recovery.

3. Change of relationship between clients and research suppliers

COVID-19 has produced a lot of social distancing – e.g. lack of face-to-face meetings – but the crisis has in many ways strengthened relationships between clients and research suppliers. Corporations will need to adapt as their business and consumer markets change, and consequently, clients are seeking even more advice and guidance from their agencies.

With many projects on hold or cancelled, research agencies suddenly have more time to do their own research, and with it increase their visibility with clients (as important as brands maintaining visibility with their consumers). Agencies have reconnected with lapsed clients by providing them with free research, including the tracking of consumer sentiment during the lockdown, the impact on consumer purchasing, and how these are likely to endure for the longer term. Clients spend more time reading the
marketing content put out by their agencies as they hold off on commissioning their own research.

The relationship between corporations and their employees will also change. Remote working will become more common and staff, who have seen it work in practice, may demand it, wanting more flexible working arrangements with their employer going forward.

Some agencies have offered clients free staff surveys as a means of demonstrating their capabilities in employee research, and to help build demand for employee research as the job market evolves with more remote working. Assessing staff productivity and maintaining engagement of staff will require know-how in terms of how to manage staff with a combination of technology, training, and perhaps a completely new style of management.

4. Change in status of research

COVID-19 and its aftermath will produce fundamental changes to markets and target audiences. Nearly all strategic market research prior to the crisis will need revising. Indeed, much of the business literature itself now seems dated – we can expect numerous new publications on business, marketing, and human resources in a post-COVID-19 world. Many of those browsing these books will be looking at when they were published.

Brands will see a shift in their equity, as some have lost visibility due to the lockdown, and others (particularly e-commerce brands) have become more prominent. Consumers have bought more online during the lockdown, some from retailers they have never used before, and many say that their increased online expenditure will be maintained with a loss of share for traditional retail. Brand equity measures of retailers will have shifted considerably in the space of six months.

Senior management will turn more to their consumer insight departments for information and guidance, increasing the status of market research within organisations all the way up to the level of Chief Executive.

We expect (or hope) that more of the marketing budget will be directed into consumer insight in order to find out ‘what the hell is going on’. Target audiences have changed, as well as the required messaging and channels to reach them, meaning that investment in new research should be the precursor to investment in campaigns. Corporations could make the mistake of rushing into campaigns at the first signs of recovery, but agencies will need to deliver their insights faster and more iteratively, especially if there is a re-emergence of COVID-19, e.g. brought about by the opening up of markets or even seasonal changes.

5. Research methodologies

Social distancing measures have restricted the use of face-to-face research methods – either in-person, in-depth interviews or focus groups. Suddenly qualitative research has gone very digital. Online focus groups had been used for some time but had not gained the level of traction that some had hoped for – all that has changed. By necessity, focus groups have gone online, and many clients, agencies, and respondents have started to see the benefits of this for the first time.

It is likely that online groups will stick, and we could even see a growth in qualitative research as the cost comes down and the reach increases, e.g. to non-metropolitan areas where traditional focus groups did not usually penetrate. Qualitative research could see more online groups being undertaken, with fewer, more targeted respondents but in a wider geography.

Emerging markets have seen a slower adoption of online research, despite panels having been established in these markets for some time. More quantitative research in emerging markets will move online, but cultural objections to long, remote surveys mean these surveys will have to be streamlined – something that the research industry had been moving towards with lighter but more regular surveys, e.g. through insight communities.

Much of the investment in insight communities is made up front. If these communities were set up prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, then clients have been able to tap into them for insights throughout the crisis. This has been useful for ‘toe-dipping’ research, e.g. into what concepts might work in the crisis and during the recovery.

As stated earlier, most strategic research will need to be renewed. With such significant changes to markets, economies, consumer lifestyles, and attitudes, most segmentation models will need to be updated, and with this a revision of products, services, prices/promotions, and channels of delivery.
But others see more fundamental changes to the type of research being undertaken. Analytics and AI were already being used by corporations to assess consumer behaviour and predict purchase patterns. With more online purchases, more online media consumption, and more home delivery (which will be sustained even when shops, restaurants, and hospitality services are fully open), there will be more data than ever. Consumers have also become more accepting of being traced and monitored online.

During the lockdown, in-person presentations were suspended and we moved to video conferencing. Zoom, a video conferencing company from California, became a household name almost overnight. Agencies have even used ‘digital workshopping’ with positive results, and this method of client debriefing will continue, with the benefit of including more stakeholders across a wider geography.

Asia Research Media goes deeper into these areas, reporting on the findings of consumer and client research, and elaborating on the factors impacting the research industry in Asia. Specifically, we look at:

- **Demand-Side Changes**: how client organisations and research buying will be affected. [https://asia-research.net/demand-side-changes/](https://asia-research.net/demand-side-changes/)
- **Supply-Side Changes**: how supply-side organisations will change and need to use new research methodologies. [https://asia-research.net/supply-side-changes/](https://asia-research.net/supply-side-changes/)
- **Consumer & Business Market Changes**: in selective markets in Asia, we will look at the changes to be expected in consumer and business markets and the opportunities to be realised.
With increased comfort levels for online shopping, forced trials of new brands, and wider consideration sets available online, how do you ensure your online strategies are optimised for this new reality?

**If shoppers who normally choose your brand have been forced to try other brands, how do you win them back?**

**Four ways to win online**

1. **Optimise omnichannel strategies for search and purchase**

How will familiarity and reliance upon online search and purchase affect long-term behaviour and in-store buying habits? Which channels, triggers, and touchpoints will be more or less influential?

The COVID-19 disruptive change in behaviour requires a reassessment of omnichannel search and purchase strategies.

Forced brand substitutions resulting from the COVID-19 crisis are likely to prompt more deliberate information-seeking. For example, we see consumers turning to social media for social connection, but they’re also seeking referrals for new products and services. And we expect mobile voice search via digital assistants to be used more often for in-store research, such as comparing prices and searching for broader product choices.

Consumers will demand a more sophisticated, seamless, and integrated omnichannel experience in order to satisfy their needs.

**Tip:** Consider how you adapt your consumer journeys and product promos for an evolving omnichannel world. Can you use geofencing and/or push notifications on shoppers as they enter brick-and-mortar stores?

2. **Optimise digital content for conversion**

The acceleration in online shopping and research has been one of the most visible changes that has occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether or not the choices that consumers make during the crisis become a new habit, understanding online consumer behaviour will be increasingly important in the future.

What type of content and visuals are best at grabbing consumers’ attention?

When you know which stimuli maximise click-through and add-to-basket rates, you can develop content that attracts, engages, and converts consumers online. To effectively optimise content for online retailer sites, consider the following:

- **Category or search pages:** Does your content have enough stopping power? Are consumers able to find your products?
- **Product detail page:** Is your content engaging? Does it clearly communicate the product offer? Would it convince consumers to buy the product?
Tip: Develop research-informed guidelines for your digital content (e.g. headings, images, videos, and text). Consistent guidelines help make digital content creation more efficient, effective, and benefit your retailers as well. And don't forget to make sure your content is optimised for mobile.

3. Optimise your online assortment and pricing strategy

As online competition intensifies, assortment, pricing, and promotions will be key. You’ll want to retain new customers gained through a crisis-driven forced trial, as well as win back formerly loyal customers forced to try your competitors. Speed and agility are key.

To optimise your online strategy, we recommend you:

1. Optimise your assortment by channel. Consider which bundles, packs, or configurations will drive sales through online retailers vs grocery store websites vs brick-and-mortar stores. Determine how shopper behaviour varies between click-and-collect services and subscription services.

2. Know which promo formats are most effective. Coupons may drive conversion on one site, while multipack offers have more impact elsewhere.

3. Identify the impact of pricing and pricing format on consumer choices. Unlike in-store shopping, price format plays a surprisingly important role online. You should uncover what holds true for your products.

Tip: Ask yourself if you have the right tools to achieve an agile pricing and assortment strategy. What are your data sources? Do you have access to shopper simulators that can help you create ‘what-if scenarios’?

4. Build a mobile-first, digital research toolbox

To win online, you must first uncover what truly drives online decision-making for your brand. Unfortunately, popular online retail and comparison sites don’t readily share behavioural data on consumer activity. An online shopping simulator can help you understand how consumers search, filter, and shop online in a replicated online environment.

Use a simulator to test your online product communications, assortment, pricing, ads, and promotions in a safe and secure environment – and get specific, actionable insights and guidelines as a result.

With so many significant behavioural shifts taking place, you may be wondering what the omnichannel marketplace will look like from one day to the next. You are not alone. In uncertain times, the most effective branding decisions will be rooted in solid, behavioural data.

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**Decision-making continues to change**

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- Brand communication
- Product development & innovation
- Advanced analytics
- Decision & customer journey mapping
- Choice modeling

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The stated actions from consumers, e.g. via survey research, are not always deemed reliable. But the COVID-19 lockdown has given people plenty of time to think, so System 2 thinking can be a fair indicator of intended actions, particularly regarding more rational decisions such as the planning of household budgets and finances. Based on a BVA BDRC survey of consumers in Singapore, conducted via Dynata’s consumer panels, during the lockdown 63% of respondents consumed more news media than average to keep themselves up to date with developments on the pandemic, and 41% of consumers took time to review their finances/financial plans and their careers.

Brand managers will need to adapt to a new economic reality that will see consumers still spending but trading down to lower-cost alternatives across a range of categories. This brings both threats and opportunities to brand managers.

The BVA BDRC/Dynata survey assessed how people had so far been impacted by COVID-19, and what their intended actions would be post-lockdown, specific to household spending. The survey was conducted in May 2020, a time when people had already experienced the full ‘circuit breaker’ measures, and following the announced phased reopening of the economy in June.

The Singapore economy (and the global economy that it depends on) has had its worse contraction in living memory. We are still speculating what the nature of the recovery will be: V-shaped (the rapid recovery that we are all hoping for), W-shaped (early recovery, but with a new dip due to a resurgence and renewed lockdown), L-shaped (the worst outcome with no recovery in sight), or U-shaped (perhaps the most likely, requiring a waiting period for recovery, but with the question as to how long).

What is certain is that people have already been affected. By the end of May, 50% of households had seen a reduction in their income, 15% had seen someone in the household lose a job, and 31% had had to dip into their savings to subsidise their living costs. Those on lower incomes (PMI of less than S$3,000) have been affected more, with 63% seeing a drop in income, compared to just 33% of those earning more than S$8,000 per month. 10% have taken out loans or refinanced during the crisis, but this was more consistent across income groups.

The lockdown economics

Some sectors benefitted during the lockdown, including supermarkets, media, and specific household categories where consumers needed to adapt to spending more time in the home.

Most households (86%) increased their spending in supermarkets either because they could no longer eat out (66%) or for stocking up (37%). And with supermarkets being one of the only retail outlets allowed to open during the lockdown, 31% found themselves spending more on groceries because they were simply making more frequent trips to the supermarket in order to get out of the house.

With people being forced into staying at home longer, many found themselves spending more on some home services or products, including signing up for video streaming services (48%), doing more video gaming (43% increased how much they gamed, plus 4% took up gaming for the first time), upgrading internet or PCs (28%), and buying...
new home appliances (15%) and new furniture (5%). A lot of this is a result of having to work from home and finding more entertainment at home instead of outside.

While most looked for more movies and TV series from streaming services, 13% of households upgraded their cable TV subscription, to get more channels showing that traditional linear TV is still in demand. There could also have been something of a renaissance in offline gaming, with 25% playing board or card games (more than usual), and 32% taking part in new types of home-based exercise, e.g. yoga or weights.

The lockdown gave people more time, and consequently 62% found ways to improve themselves through learning to cook (44%), reading (27%), or other creative activities such as writing, art, or music (22%). Those being ‘forced’ to cook could end up eating at home more in the future (to try out their recipes), rather than eating out.

It has also been a time of upskilling, with 18% reading up on business to improve their management skills, and the same number improving their IT skills.

The post-lockdown economics

The consumer outlook is pessimistic – 17% expect someone in their household to lose their job as a result of the economic fallout of COVID-19 (15% of households say someone has already lost a job), and another 42% expect further loss of household income. 40% expect to have to dip into savings to subsidise their living costs and 11% expect to take out loans or refinancing. This is in addition to those who have already undertaken these measures, as mentioned earlier. In combination, these measures will have serious implications for the Singapore economy.

But the economy will still function.

Firstly, there will be a temporary recovery, partly by consumers wanting to get out of the house more, as well as pent-up demand for some essentials, e.g. haircuts! Consumers will also seek a boost in morale through some ‘retail therapy’. This will manifest itself in a resumption of offline shopping by visiting stores and going back to restaurants and bars. The key motivators for this will be to seek out new products that retailers and restaurants might want to introduce post-lockdown (20% of consumers are looking for new menus from restaurants, and 24% for new products from retailers).

The lockdown has forced more people online with greater online purchasing, and more home delivery (instead of eating out) is likely to be sustained. 54% stated that they had shopped more online during the lockdown (including 3% who had never shopped online before), and 33% claimed they would continue to shop online more than before, even when all shops are open. 53% have started using new retailers during the lockdown, and among these 42% were dedicated online retailers (with no physical stores). This all points to much greater e-commerce in the longer term.

Home delivery for restaurants has been a growing category over the years, with more people using Grab and Deliveroo, among others. During the lockdown, consumers have used more delivery services for a wider range of mealtimes than before. Many say they will continue to use these home delivery services at these new mealtimes after the lockdown, particularly if home-based working becomes the new norm for those able to work remotely, e.g. in service industries.

But in the medium term (i.e. for at least six months), nearly all consumers state that they will seek to reduce their household expenditure, including 55% who (under budget pressure) have no choice, and 40% who don’t have to but think it would be prudent to do so. Among these, one-third say that as a result of the changes brought about by COVID-19, they have simply found new ways to cut costs, although the majority will do so in order to plan for more difficult times ahead.

The main ways that people will reduce expenditure for at least the next six months are summed up in the chart below:
In the longer term, we should see a recovery of the most severely impacted sectors: travel and tourism. But even here consumers foresee big changes. With a strong Singapore dollar and a wide range of flight connections (in normal times), most Singaporeans travel internationally. But in response to either the health threat or budget pressure, 38% of consumers will travel less frequently than before even, when travel returns to a level of normality. 22% will take lower-cost holidays (e.g. shorter haul, and budget options for flights and hotels), and 20% will consider staycations in Singapore, hence opening up a market for more domestic holidays in Singapore itself. With hotels in Singapore benefitting much less from inbound travelers, they will need to market themselves more to their home market, with more emphasis on the hotel than the location.

COVID-19 has been a catalyst for change. Some will argue that the changes are overstated and there will be a greater resumption of normality. Others argue that this has been an economic shock like no other that will result in the most significant changes in consumer behaviour ever seen. What is clear is that consumers will need to tighten their belts during an economic downturn expected to last well into 2021.

With governments around the world taking on more national debt to help their economies, some fear more inflation. We argue that this old bogeyman of economics will no longer be so relevant as consumers can find cheap substitutes for their common purchases. These will be supplied by an increasingly competitive marketplace, with brands innovating and providing new products delivered to consumers via lower-cost business models. The challenge for businesses is how to develop these lower-cost models going forward. In the next article from BVA BDRC, we will look at the business response to COVID-19, and how businesses will evolve in a post-lockdown world.

COVID-19 has brought about an unprecedented change across the world. As the world went into lockdown across continents, offices were forced to pull down their shutters and employees had to stay at home. Employers had to improvise quickly or risk losing their businesses. What was their next course of action? Remote working.

Now, let’s be clear that remote working, or telecommuting, is not a new concept that emerged due to COVID-19. But it is for sure a concept that became the ‘norm’ because of COVID-19. Before this pandemic, only a handful of companies across the world, such as Appen, Amazon, VIPKID, Abbott, Sanofi, and American Express, had chosen to hire telecommuting employees, as they had recognised that some roles in their company did not require their employees to be in the office physically. As one can tell from the company names above, telecommuting was a concept that was embraced more by the Western world, rather than in Asia.

Now fast forward to the present. According to a Gartner webinar snap poll, 91% of HR leaders across the Asia Pacific region who attended their webinar indicated that their companies had implemented working from home to keep workflow going through this pandemic. The pandemic had forced companies in Asia to begin experimenting with the idea of remote working, despite many businesses being completely unprepared for it.

Boom of video conferencing applications

So what do you do when you need to work from home and stay in touch with your colleagues? Download video conferencing applications, of course! In mid-March, as many countries across the world saw lockdowns being put in place, video conferencing applications saw an incredible 62 million downloads worldwide within a week. According to mobile data and analytics provider App Annie, this was a 90% spike in comparison to the same week in 2019.

Taking the lead was Zoom – an application which many across the world are now familiar with – which generated close to 131 million downloads in April. The highest number of downloads surprisingly came from India, with its population making up 18.2% of Zoom’s downloads, indicating that this Asian country was quick to implement remote working to accommodate the lockdown of over 1.3 billion people.

Other popular applications include Google Meet, Skype, WhatsApp, and Houseparty, the last being an application...
which is designed more for social purposes. While most of these applications have been around for many years, the influx in downloads only came about when the COVID-19 struck, and the importance for such applications to one’s everyday life, both professionally and socially, came about.

Remote working – bane or boon?

Ideally, the concept of working remotely may sound attractive for both employees and their employers. Employees can conveniently work from home while juggling their daily responsibilities at home. The daily commute to and from work can be eradicated, saving time and money. Working parents are able to spend more time with their children and nurture them while earning an income.

Employees aren’t the only ones who would benefit from a work-from-home arrangement. From an employer’s perspective, money can be saved by doing away with office rentals, expenses can be reduced significantly by hiring a qualified individual from another country who may be more affordable, without having to go through the hassle of applying for employment passes and immigration permits for the employee.

However, is remote working all that it is hyped up to be? Apparently not, it seems. The idea of telecommuting has brought about mixed feelings from employees who have been forced to work from home. In a poll done by Forrester on Singaporean employees in March, it reflected that 60% were in favour of telecommuting. This was just before the Government imposed a ‘circuit breaker’ to curb the spread of the pandemic in April, resulting in businesses having to close their offices. Barely a month later, only 46% were in favour of working remotely, and 50% were looking forward to returning to their offices.

In Indonesia, it was reported by the Jakarta Post that employees are struggling with the remote working arrangements due to several factors, such as small apartment sizes, trying to juggle work and home life at the same time, and more importantly, poor internet connectivity and technological infrastructure. In a Harvard Business Review article, it was stated that research by Tufts University’s Fletcher School indicated that Asian countries, such as Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, and India scored very poorly for the robustness of their digital platforms and the resilience of their internet infrastructure to traffic surges, indicating that these countries were not ready to adopt telecommuting as a way of life as yet.

In fact, even a country like Singapore, which is considered by many to be technologically advanced, has not been
spared its technological infrastructure being compromised by high traffic surges, as two of its major internet providers have faced outages during the ‘circuit breaker’ periods, resulting in frustration as employees were not able to get their work done from home, and employers faced delays and a lack of communication with their staff.

According to Malaysia’s Department of Statistics, only 33.5% of businesses in the country were able to arrange for their employees to work remotely during its Movement Control Order (MCO), while 35.6% opted to provide fully paid leave to their employees – an arrangement that can only be sustained for a period of between one and six months, depending on the firm’s financial position. Even then, for those working from home, a big issue is internet stability, as patchy internet connections result in the inability to conduct meetings effectively and to complete work smoothly.

Moving forward

Many experts have stated that the concept of remote working is here to stay, especially in the foreseeable future as social distancing – or better, physical distancing – becomes the norm. Technological giants such as Facebook, Twitter, Google, and the like are already embracing the concept and are allowing employees to work remotely. However, aside from the technological issues faced by people working from home, it is also worth noting that this style of operation has exacerbated mental issues for many, as the loneliness from a lack of social interaction, disruption in routines, and the struggle of juggling work and personal life come into play. To overcome all the issues and bring forth the positive aspects of remote working, proper blueprints should be put in place by companies to ensure that remote working does not cause disruption but rather provides continuity for their employees. It is ideal for those in management positions to discuss with their teams how best to proceed from this pandemic, to ensure that an ideal management practice is put in place.

DOES GENDER MATTER IN START-UP INVESTING?

By James Redden, MD Asia Pacific, and Satpal Daryanani, Research Manager of 2CV Asia

As with almost everything, the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to dramatically alter the start-up landscape globally. On the one hand, the massive lay-offs will push some skilled people towards entrepreneurship; on the other hand, start-up funding has been hit hard – for example, Series A+ deals in Asia dropped by 33% between November 2019 and February 2020, according to Startup Genome.

While funding levels will return to normal eventually (as with previous downturns), in the short term we expect to see a larger number of start-ups vying for a shrinking funding pie. Many more established start-ups will be looking for survival investment and will be competing with newer start-ups looking to accelerate their growth, while investors will have the unenviable task of investing their limited monies in the right opportunities. In this high-pressure and fluid environment, we wanted to understand if decision-making by investors is completely objective or if inherent human biases influence these decisions.

One of the dynamics that we wanted to focus on was that of gender. It is universally agreed that women-owned businesses find it harder to access capital and are more reliant (compared to men) on capital from personal (e.g. individuals) rather than external (e.g. financial institutions) sources. This results in comparatively limited growth opportunities for many women-owned businesses.

Biases against women entrepreneurs are blamed for this disparity – e.g. men are perceived to be more credible in a start-up context or better performers when pitching to potential investors.

We set out to test the existence of such biases in several South East Asian markets. Do investors subconsciously favour men over women when considering investing in start-ups? And do investors admit to having a conscious preference for male entrepreneurs?

We did this by surveying 750 retail investors across Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia, using both direct questioning (do investors admit to being biased against women?) and an indirect approach (using an experimental
The questions were asked in two phases:

1. For the experiment, we created various fictitious successful start-up businesses (a fintech and a food and beverage (F&B) business) and stated that they were seeking growth investment, and asked whether the investor would be interested in investing. For each business, the investors were told the leader was male or female – with the gender altered across different respondents (but all other elements of the pitch remaining the same).

2. Following this, investors were directly asked if they have a gender preference in the leader of a business when they are considering an investment.

The results: investors (particularly men) have a conscious preference for male business leaders

When directly asked, 4 in 10 investors indicated a preference for one gender – 25% preferred investing in a start-up led by a man, compared to 12% who preferred a female leader (the remaining investors claimed gender was not important to them).

This preference for male leaders was more pronounced among male investors, who had a 29% preference for a male leader vs a 10% preference for a female leader. Surprisingly, even female investors had a slight preference for male (19%) over female (15%) leaders.

The bias against women was particularly evident in Singapore, one of the hotbeds for start-up investing – one-fifth of investors stated a preference for a male leader, with almost no investors preferring a female leader (2%). This finding was also prevalent in Indonesia (40% vs 22%) but was not evident in Malaysia (14% vs 12%).

However, when measured implicitly, gender does not play a role in investment decisions

The experiment results indicated that when all business factors are equal (and the investment opportunity is at-
NEW LEAD AT CONFIRMIT

Confirmit has named Kyle Ferguson as the new Chief Executive Officer. Ferguson is a seasoned executive with a track record of developing and leading high-performing teams in the SaaS technology space, while supporting these businesses through necessary investment and growth stages.

Ferguson has an extensive background in the technology space, with over 20 years’ experience in technology, banking, and payments. Prior to joining Confirmit, Ferguson held the Chief Executive Officer role at Fraedom, a global financial technology company, where he successfully led the company’s sale to Visa Inc. in 2018. Prior to this, he also served as Chief Commercial Officer and Managing Director at the company, and spent 11 years with American Express previously.

KANTAR VIETNAM WELCOMES NEW CEO INSIGHTS

Kantar has appointed David Anjoubault as Chief Executive Officer for the Insights division in Vietnam. He takes over this role from Nitin Nishan-dar, who will continue to closely support Kantar’s Vietnam business in his new capacity as Chairman of the Insights division in Vietnam, and through his broader regional responsibility as Chief Client Officer.

Adrian Gonzalez, CEO for Kantar’s Insights division in the region, comments: “David is a very familiar face and trusted partner to marketers and business in Vietnam. He has a deep knowledge of the market and has been helping our clients navigate the COVID-19 crisis which now enter the crucial recovery stage. I cannot imagine anyone better placed to lead Kantar and support our clients’ success in Vietnam at this crucial time.”

David will be supported by Phil Worthington as the Chief Commercial Officer, Luu Thi Nhat Phuong as the Chief Solutions Officer and Khoa Doan as the Chief Growth Officer from the Insights division in Vietnam.

ANDREA BORELLI NAMED NEW MD FOR NIELSEN HK AND MACAU

Nielsen has appointed Andrea Borrelli as the managing director for Nielsen Hong Kong and Macau.

Borelli has more than 15 years of senior management experience, including several senior roles at Nielsen, such as Commercial Leader for the Netherlands, Client Service Director for Global Nielsen accounts, and managerial positions for various reputable FMCG manufacturers, mainly responsible for developing their strategic innovations.

“We are pleased to have a leader like Borrelli with forward-looking visionary and a proven track record of building profitable businesses to guide Nielsen Hong Kong and Macau to bring to create even greater value to our clients and maximize business impact, especially in the tough environment,” said Shin.

Conclusion

The results indicate that while investors use objective measures like cash flow and entrepreneur experience when making investment decisions, they have an inherent preference for male business leaders.

This has a particular impact for women-led businesses who have just started or are in their initial stages of development (e.g. pitching for initial funding). The lack of objective measures (cash flow, experience, etc) for their business during this phase, combined with investors’ preference for male leaders, makes getting the initial investments particularly challenging. This is supported by ample evidence showing that female entrepreneurs have a lower success rate than men at the pitch stage.

However, women-led businesses that overcome this hurdle will likely see the playing field levelling out as objective factors are prioritised over the gender of the entrepreneur.
The sails of the Elbphilharmonie are a technical marvel: 1,000 plate-glass panels, heated to 600°C to curve, bulge, or pucker, each imprinted with a seemingly random pattern of metal dots that change colour in response to the shifting light.

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