By Diane Crispell

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McWorld?

America, from outside looking in

In the world family, Americans come closest to resembling pesky brothers and sisters. We have our good points, but we can be annoying, too. Some love us, a few more like us; a substantial share expresses antipathy toward us. Many have mixed feelings, including admiration tinged with both envy and disdain. One thing is for sure: we're hard to ignore. Almost everyone has an opinion about America one way or the other.

It's time to sit in the hot seat for a while. Live inside the fishbowl. Find out how others see us. What do non-Americans think about Americans and American culture? What do they like, and what do they hate? To whom does Americanization appeal? To whom are we "ugly Americans?" A global study conducted by Roper Starch Worldwide offers some through-the-looking-glass insights.

According to this 30-country survey, conducted in late 1998, one in four non-Americans worldwide feels at least somewhat close to the American culture or way of life (see Figure 1). Just 3% feel very close, though, while 22% feel somewhat close. The majority of people—71%—feels distant from American culture, and most of that group feels very distant.

Who feels closest? The ones who may lay claim to knowing us best. Canada is like a favorite sibling, the one with whom one shares the most and argues the least. A majority of our nearest neighbors, 55%, feels very or somewhat close to American culture.

A little distance can be a good thing, though. Aside from Canada, the countries where people feel closest to American culture are about as physically far away as you can get. More than 40% of people in Korea, Japan and the Philippines feel close to American culture. Four in ten Australians, with whom we share a similar history, also feel close. For people in these countries, the relationship is perhaps less sibling-like and more like that of close cousins.

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Europeans express a merely average connection to American culture, including those in our "motherland" England, as well as in France and Germany, whence a large proportion of Americans descends. Like an older sibling who finds a younger brother or sister occasionally fun to be with, but often immature and self-centered, Europeans tolerate us with detached good humor.

Our southern neighbors are like siblings who don't get along with us so well. Latin American affinity for American culture is middling to low. Argentineans, who have strong cultural ties to Europe, feel especially distant.

And all families have members who are so different that they barely relate. Only 7% of Saudi Arabians feel at all close to American culture—two in three feel very distant. The other Muslim countries in the study, Indonesia and Malaysia, also fall at the bottom of the feel-close-to-America list. Here, mindsets are vastly different from American culture on nearly all levels—perhaps springing from religious differences, but not ending there. Feelings toward American culture are also quite cool in a country where the love-hate relationship is especially complex—Russia.

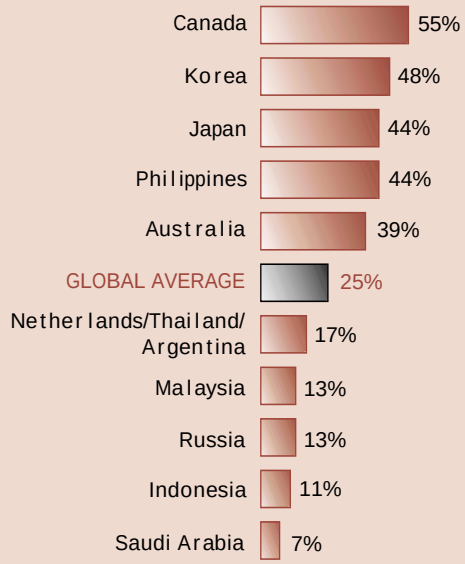
Your family as a whole may have decided opinions about the character of Cousin Jill, but you have your own personally informed viewpoint as well. Likewise, although nationality is the strongest predictor of how close people feel to American culture, personal characteristics also affect attitudes. The rule of thumb is that youth and education combine to create the most open-minded global citizens with affinities for many cultures, including American. One in three young adults with some college education feels close to American culture, compared with 12% of older adults without a high school education.

Figure1

Who Feels Close to America, and Who Doesn't

Question: For each of the cultures I am going to read, please tell me if you feel very close, somewhat close, somewhat distant, or very distant from it... the American culture and way of life.

Percent responding feel very or somewhat close to American culture



Note: Highest and lowest rankings shown. Data are from a 30-country study.
Source: Survey by Roper Starch Worldwide, September-November, 1998.

Young people have different viewpoints in part because they *are* young, but also because they are of a different generation, with a different take on history, than their elders. For example, older Latin Americans remember a time when the US supported military dictatorships in an effort to keep communism out of the western hemisphere. Although that policy has been openly acknowledged and has changed, people who grew up thinking of Americans as Yankee Imperialists may never get over it. In contrast, their children see the US as a pro-democracy force in the region, as well as a source of entertainment and products they enjoy. As a result, Argentinean and Brazilian teens in particular are far more likely than older adults to feel close to the American way of life.

Education has a threefold effect. First, it boosts the likelihood that people understand English, which is linked with their chances of being exposed in a meaningful fashion to American culture. People who say they understand at least some spoken English are, not surprisingly, much more likely than those without any English comprehension to watch and listen to English-language media; they are also twice as likely to feel close to American culture.

Second, education and the urban residential status often associated with it increase people's exposure to American media and products. Luisa Rubio, originally from Guatemala, puts it this way: "In urban areas where the educated population lives, you have access to American TV, American music, and all the American brands in supermarkets. Everything is there—Colgate, Sara Lee. In the country where the ethnic Indians live, they don't see these things."

Education also has the wide-ranging effect of broadening people's horizons

in all directions. Non-Americans who feel close to American culture feel close to other cultures, too. Nearly half feel close to European and British cultures. One in four feels close to Japanese culture, and one in five to Latin American culture.

Even so, a young college-educated Russian doesn't feel as close to American culture as an older and less-educated Japanese does. Why do people in different countries feel the way they do about America?

People's relationships with America are complex. As with personal relationships, it helps to have some common ground. For example, a common history as European colonies helps explain why Canadians and Australians feel close to America. A prevalent and benevolently perceived military presence explains some of the affinity felt by Koreans and Filipinos.

One thing that creates an affinity with a culture is feeling in sync with it. In most cases, the things people value most highly are things they associate more with their own than American culture. For instance, American politicians don't own the market on "family values." In fact, protecting the family is the world's top-ranked personal value. And on the whole, people feel their own cultures are vastly more family-friendly than American culture is. This also holds true for other key values related to personal integrity and relationships, such as honesty, faith, authenticity, friendship, enduring love and stable relationships.

That said, non-Americans associate many qualities as much with American culture as their own. These values fall into two major camps that encompass the American image as a self-reliant, but also self-indulgent, nation. The first group includes attributes such as justice, self-reliance, knowledge, freedom, material security, open-mindedness, and ambition. The second group includes traits such as friendship, having fun, enjoying life, creativity, pleasure, music, leisure and sex. Non-Americans worldwide associate one attribute even more with American culture than their own—wealth.

The long-held notion of the US as a land where the "streets are paved with gold" has drawn millions of immigrants to our shores and continues to do so. Maxine Lee is a native Taiwanese in the process of relocating from Hong Kong to New York City: "When I told my parents I will work in New York, they were very happy. My mother said, 'Don't worry about us; work hard.'" Maxine says she has not encountered one negative reaction to her news.

People who feel close to American culture value certain things more highly than others do. In addition, they feel America is *more* likely than their own culture to stand for several of these—namely, freedom, self-reliance, open-mindedness and enjoying life. This connection helps explain some of the difference between those who feel close to America and those who don't.

But not all of it. Two countries with very different feelings toward America express similar attitudes about the mesh between their local and American cultures. In both Japan and Russia, several top values are viewed as more American than local. So why do Russians feel so much more distant? Perhaps because they have become disillusioned with their culture's ability to emulate the qualities they admire in American culture, such as protecting family and health and fitness. At the same time, Russians still view their own culture as more "connected" in the realm of human relationships. In short, Russians view American culture as efficient and goal-oriented, yet heartless and individualistic. Individuality in this sense is not a positive quality, but a negative and cruel one whereby people are out for themselves at the expense of others.

Urban Asia is a different story. Much of the friendly feeling originates from the long-term American military presence in the region after World War II, which many Asians saw more as a peacekeeping force than a threat. It's being extended by young people beginning to break away from rigid social convention. They aspire to the freedom and individualism represented by America, a place where anyone can succeed and people can be themselves. The motivation tends to be materialistic, driven by a desire for a higher standard of living. But, unlike Russians, Japanese and other Asians appear more hopeful that this American Dream can also be theirs.

What do non-Americans look to in American culture beyond freedom and wealth? Well, they don't look to us for advice, that's for sure. Hardly any non-Americans in Roper Starch's global study said they look to "the Americans" for advice about important personal decisions—just 3% do so. Not that one would expect them to. People have too many other advisors to turn to—their families and friends, teachers and religious leaders, media sources and others. On such a list, Americans naturally don't rate.

Being a personal advisor is one thing. Being a societal change agent is something else. A fair number of people outside the US acknowledge our culture's influence on the world; 14% list "the Americans" as a major agent of change in their own societies. The French feel this influence most strongly. Four in ten French say Americans cause change in their society. Between 25% and 30% of people in other western countries, including Canada and much of Europe, also acknowledge this level of American influence. So do one in five Argentineans, Russians and Saudi Arabians.

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Not all change is good, of course. Worldwide, 6% of people feel "the Americans" cause change for the worse, compared with 4% who think we create change for the better. This ratio is highest in Saudi Arabia, where those with a negative opinion outnumber those with a positive opinion by 16 to 1. It's slightly reversed in several other cultures, where we're considered a good more than a bad influence—Venezuela, South Africa and the Philippines. Filipinos in particular feel grateful for help provided to local communities by the American military after World War II.

Overall, feelings toward Americans as change agents are most pronounced in France, where the advent of McDonald's and Disneyland Paris hasn't universally endeared us. One in five French people considers us a cause of change for the worse. On the plus side, 9% of French people think America has a positive impact on their society, the highest positive rating in the study.

Clotaire Rapaille is a medical anthropologist who studies cultural imprints, those things that forever bind us to a culture. He also epitomizes French Ameriphilia. In fact, he's not French anymore. He has lived in the US for many years and become a naturalized American. What endears us to him? Like Peter Pan, we've never quite grown up, he told National Public Radio's "Morning Edition" last August. In the interview, Rapaille refers to American culture as "adolescent," and he means this in the nicest way. He loves the way we persist in making our own way, getting up when we are knocked down, never saying die. He contrasts this Pollyanna optimism with the jaded cynicism of his native country.

How do people receive their cultural imprints of America? Rapaille relates an early childhood experience of being befriended by American soldiers during World War II. Big strong guys in a big strong tank who gave him chocolate; what's not to love? Many Asians could probably relate. They are constantly exposed to American culture, through local newspapers that report on US events, pop groups with English names, and American products. Even taxi drivers who do not speak English often play American music on the radio. But people don't always admire the image that comes across. "There is an underlying view [in Europe] that Americans are rather shallow and insincere," says Londoner Steve Thomson. "Hollywood has a lot to answer for here." If you think about some of America's hottest TV exports over the years—"Dallas" and "Baywatch"—it's clear why.

People like our stuff, too—or at least reasonable facsimiles. Asians find American-style clothes desirable, although people are willing to pay less for knock-offs rather than spend a lot on the real thing. In other cultures, status is attached to authentic American goods, even with rather astonishing price tags. Take the Big Mac in Moscow, which costs the average Russian nearly 40% of a daily wage. Even as they express antipathy toward American culture, Russians galore patronize what is one of the ultimate American brands—McDonald's, whose Pushkin Square franchise is the largest and busiest in the world.

Respondents to a 1999 Roper Starch global study were asked to select the brand they considered "best" out of a list of 36 major global brands, ranging from Sony to Mercedes to Disney. Then they indicated whether they think of this "best" brand as global, American, European, Japanese or local. For 17% of non-Americans, the answer is "American." This share is substantially higher only for two brands, McDonald's and Marlboro, which in itself says a lot about why people feel the way they do about America.

What's really compelling, however, is that across all 36 brands in all 30 countries, an average of 47% say the best brand does not belong to any particular country, but is global. Does this mean local cultures are being subsumed by a global culture, one with distinctly American overtones? Hardly. The more likely scenario is a multicultural mosaic. One in four Roper respondents feels close to at least three cultures in addition to his or her own local culture—usually, but not always, including American. Such "multiculturalists" are well-educated, well-traveled, technologically savvy and open-minded people who embrace the world without rejecting local tradition.

As today's young people get older, they will not lose the appreciation for other cultures they have gained through their education and exposure to global media. At the same time, they will not abandon the cultures they were raised in. They will incorporate others into it. This bodes well for the future of the appreciation for American culture worldwide. And it is how Americans ultimately and best fit into the global family, as part of an integrated yet diverse whole.

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