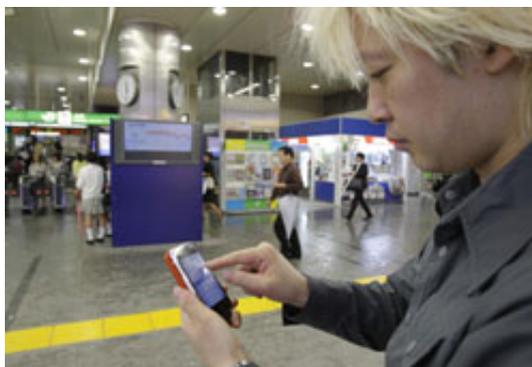


World's tweet is Japan's 'mumble' on hit Twitter

By YURI KAGEYAMA
The Associated Press

Twitter is a hit in Japan, succeeding where other social networking imports like Facebook have foundered as millions "mumble" — the translation of tweet — and give miniblogging a distinctly Japanese flavor.

The arrival of the Japanese-language Twitter service in 2008 tapped into a greater sense of individuality, especially among younger people less accepting of the understatement and conformity the culture is usually associated with, analysts say.



Let's get ready to mumble: Daisuke Tsuda, a writer with more than 65,000 followers, tweets with his mobile phone in Tokyo on June 14. AP PHOTO

A mobile version of Twitter started last October, further fueling the Twitter boom in a nation where Internet-connecting cell phones have been the rule for years.

These days, seminars teaching the tricks of the tweet, as the microblog postings are known, are popping up. Ending Japanese sentences with "nah-woo" — an adaptation of "now" in English — is hip, showing off the speaker's versatility in pseudo-English Twitter-speak.

A TV show features characters that tweet. A Tokyo bar has screens showing tweets along with World Cup games. And pop idols, a former prime minister and plain regular people are all tweeting like crazy.

The proportion of Japanese Internet users who tweet is 16.3 percent and now surpasses the ratio among Americans at 9.8 percent. Twitter and Japan's top social networking site, mixi, have been running neck and neck with monthly visitors

between 9 million and 10 million. But in April, Twitter squeaked past mixi, according to ratings agency Nielsen Online.

In contrast, only 3 percent of Japanese Internet users are on Facebook, compared with 62 percent in the U.S., according to Nielsen. MySpace has also failed to take off in Japan, at less than 3 percent of Net users versus 35 percent in the U.S., according to comScore Inc.

Twitter estimates Japanese write nearly 8 million tweets a day, or about 12 percent of the global total. Data from Tweet Sentiments, a Web site that analyzes tweets, show Japanese are sometimes tweeting more frequently than Americans.

"Japan is enjoying the richest and most varied form of Twitter usage as a communication tool," said Daisuke Tsuda, 36, a writer with more than 65,000 "followers" for his tweets. "It's playing out as a rediscovery of the Internet."

One reason is language. It's possible to say so much more in Japanese within Twitter's 140 character limit. The word "information" requires just two characters in Japanese. That allows academics and politicians to relay complex views, according to Tsuda, who believes Twitter could easily attract 20 million people in Japan soon.

Another is that Japanese are owning up to their identities on Twitter. Anonymity tended to be the rule on popular Web sites, and horror stories abounded about people getting targeted in smear campaigns that were launched under the shroud of anonymity.

In contrast, Twitter anecdotes are heartwarming. One well-known case is a woman who posted on Twitter the photo of a park her father sent in an e-mail attachment before he died. Twitter was immediately abuzz with people comparing parks.

So far, people are flocking to Twitter in positive ways, reaching out in direct, public and interactive communication, debunking the stereotype of Japanese as shy and insular, said Noriyuki Ikeda, chief executive of Tribal Media House, which consults on social media marketing.

"Twitter is turning out to be like a cocktail party," he said. "Japanese see how fun it is to network and casually connect with other people."

Twitter is also proving a good business tool. Companies are exploring Twitter as a way to reach consumers and get feedback, a function that holds potential in Japan, where broadband connections are widespread and cheap, and mobile phones outnumber the population.

Retailer Tokyu Hands uses Twitter to answer queries from customers, while clothing chain Uniqlo has used Twitter in marketing by setting up a virtual line where people tweet with each other and get freebies.

Motohiko Tokuriki, chief executive of consultant Agile Media Network, who has nearly 200,000 followers, believes Twitter is on its way to be chosen the hit new word of the year, a coveted honor that draws great publicity here.

"It's telling that Twitter was translated as 'mumbling' in Japanese," he said. "They love the idea of talking to themselves," he said.

Twitter may even offer Japan's Web entrepreneurs global opportunities that have so far eluded them because it's the first digital "global-standard" outside of search engines like Google or Yahoo to catch on here, said Toru Saito, chief executive of Loops Communications, which specializes in social networking businesses.

That means software applications Japanese develop for Twitter could win acceptance from a global market. Japanese mobile software products have tended to be for Japanese up to now.

"I'm getting so many queries, including those from abroad," Saito said.

Rocky Eda, corporate communications manager for Digital Garage, which supports Twitter's Japan operations, is thrilled people are embracing Twitter.

"In finding fulfillment in expressing what's on your mind for the moment, Twitter is like haiku," he said. "It is so Japanese."

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