

Website Design Guidelines: High Power Distance and High-Context Culture

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to address the issue of offering a culturally adapted website for a local audience. To date, the vast majority of studies in the website design arena have examined mainly Western and American (low power distance and low context) culture, disregarding possible cultural discrepancies. This study fills this gap and explores the key cultural parameters that are likely to have an impact on local website design for Asian-Eastern culture, in a high power distance and high context, correlating with both Hofstede's and Hall's cultural dimensions. It also reviews how website localisation may be accomplished more effectively by extracting the guidelines from two different yet compatible cultural dimensions: high power distance and high context.

Keywords: Culture, Design, Hall, Hofstede, Website

INTRODUCTION

With the rise in ownership of computers and with Internet usage growing daily, the Internet is fast becoming the primary port of call for information, shopping and services. In addition, Internet users are increasingly from non-English-speaking countries (Payne, 2004). The recent Internet World Stats (2008) report reveals a phenomenal Internet usage

growth between 2000 and 2008. It shows a notable Internet growth in Africa, the Middle East and Asia of 1030.2%, 1176.8% and 363.4% respectively. These figures are expected to rise further. In this scenario companies that want to extend their businesses to the global market can no longer ignore the non-English sector (Lo & Gong, 2005) and should therefore consider the impact of culture's role when extending to a wider audience. This accentuates the need for website localisation as an important element for e-business success and to achieve this, relevant cultural guidelines need to be taken into account when designing a website.

The implication of cultural influence on website design has been taken up by a number of authors including: Aoki (2000), Burgmann, Kitchen & Williams (2006), Chai, & Pavlou (2004), Cyr & Trevor-Smith (2004), Fink & Laupase (2000), Jarvenpaa & Tractinsky (1999), Liu, Marchewka, Ku, & Catherina (2004), Marcus & Gould (2000), Sheridan (2001), Singh & Baack (2004), Wurtz, (2005) Singh, Kumar & Baack (2005), and Singh & Pereira (2005), to name but a few. The most popular of the discussions on cultural differences seem to focus on languages and colours. In addition, the majority of the above-mentioned studies applied Hofstede's and/or Hall's dimensions separately and lack the implementation of more than one culture dimension existing at the same time. This present research is an attempt to fill this disparity and extracts the website guidelines for both dimensions cooperatively, mainly from our previous studies (Ahmed, Mouratidis & Preston, 2007; 2008a; 2008b). The following sections sequentially describe the characteristics of the selected cultural dimensions, research method and the set of guidelines formed in this study.

HOFSTEDE AND HALL'S CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

There is no universal definition for the word "culture" even though many scholars have studied cultures thoroughly for years and have published several classic theories, many of which are not well known in the web design community. However, Hofstede's (1997) definition is renowned particularly in the web design arena. He defines it as: "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (1997, p.5).

Hofstede's focus was not on the definition of culture as "refinement" of people, but rather on essential patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting. This makes his work especially useful when applied to site design and usability (Marcus, 2003). Hofstede developed a model of five dimensions of national culture that helps to explain basic value

differences: power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long/short term orientation. The dimensions are measured on a scale from 0 to 100, for 75 countries and regions. Although his country scores were originally produced in the early 1970s, many replications of Hofstede's study on different cultures have proved that his data are still valid. In the second edition of his book *Culture's Consequences* (2001), Hofstede describes over 200 external comparative studies and replications that have supported his indexes.

This study only focalises on one of Hofstede's dimensions, the power distance (high) dimension. Power distance relates to a culture's willingness to accept a difference in power over other members of a culture. Thus, according to Hofstede, countries that rank highest in power distance index mean they in general are willing to accept the fact that inequality in power is considered the norm. 'Seeing that power is distributed unequally, it tends to suggest that a society's level of inequality is endorsed by the followers as much as by the leaders. This also signifies that elders take the lead and be regarded as significant role models and wise elders (Abdullah, 2005, p. 105). This cultural dimension seems to be most frequently used across culture studies, especially in differentiating Western and Asian cultures (Cho, et al. 1999). Moreover, the power distance dimension is unique in cross-cultural studies, summarising the differences between cultures on decision making, personality and customer behaviour. This cultural dimension can therefore affect website design and thus is applied in this study. This study also employs Hall's (1976) categorisation of culture. Hall divides culture into two dimensions, high-context and low-context cultures. A high-context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalised in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. On the other hand, a low-context communication is just the opposite; i.e. the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code (Hall, 1976, p.91). Hall's (1976) model is built on qualitative insights rather than quantitative data, and does not rank different countries, but generally identifies Western/Northern European cultures as low-context cultures. The cultures in the Eastern Mediterranean, Asia and Latin America are, on the other hand, identified as high-context cultures. Similarly, a high-context culture is frequent in high power- distance cultures (Wurtz, 2005).

A number of studies have applied these dimensions, such as Marcus & Gould (2000). They conducted a study on cultural dimensions and global web user interface design and examined the various global websites. They also applied each of Hofstede's cultural

dimensions on different websites. Similarly, Wurtz (2005) applied high/low context dimensions on a cross cultural analysis of websites from high and low-context cultures. In another study Singh & Baack (2004) applied Hofstede's dimensions on the content analysis of U.S and Mexican websites. More recently, Singh and Pereira (2005) differentiated website designs from various countries and structured a framework for each of Hofstede's and Hall's high and low-context cultural dimensions separately.

The majority of the above-mentioned studies applied Hofstede's and/or Hall's dimensions separately and lack the implementation of more than one culture dimension. Therefore, there is a need to analyse and construct the guidelines for both dimensions simultaneously. This study highlights this issue and constructs the website design guidelines where both dimensions exist at the same time.

RESEARCH APPROACH

This study is based on the website content analysis because this approach offers four primary advantages: it is unobtrusive, it accepts unstructured material, it is context sensitive and thereby able to process symbolic forms, and it can also deal with large volumes of data (Krippendorff, 1980). All of these advantages seem to apply equally to the web (Hashim, Hasan, & Sinnapan, 2007). This approach is also significant to our study since it reveals international differences in communication contents and identifies the intentions, focus or communication trends of a character, group or institution (Weber, 1990). This approach further looks directly at the communication and provides valuable cultural insights over time through analysis of text or transcript. This method has also been used extensively by a numbers of researchers (e.g. Singh & Baack 2004; Singh, Kumar & Baack 2005; Zahir, Dobing & Hunter, 2002) in the marketing and advertising literature to study cultural value appeals. Several other studies have used content analysis to understand the communication phenomenon on the web, such as Marcus & Gould (2000) and Sheridan (2001) etc. Besides this, content analysis procedures have been extensively used to study cultural value appeals in cross cultural advertisement (Cho et al. 1999), since content analysis is regarded as a valuable technique for examining cultural artifacts (Neuendorf, 2002). Hence, this study follows this approach and sets the website guidelines for high power distance and high-context cultures.

WEBSITE DESIGN GUIDELINES

This study constructs the guidelines on the basis of the content analysis performed on the various websites from different sectors - education, banking and tourism - mainly derived from our previous studies (Ahmed, Mouratidis & Preston 2007; 2008a; 2008b). In light of these analyses and the current observations in this paper, we aim to construct a website design model for both high-power-distance and high-context cultures (see Figure 2). Although a number of secondary features of local cultural values have been identified, the proposed guidelines are based on the most frequently sighted components. Such elements are discussed below at length and should be taken into consideration when designing websites for high power distance and high-context cultures.

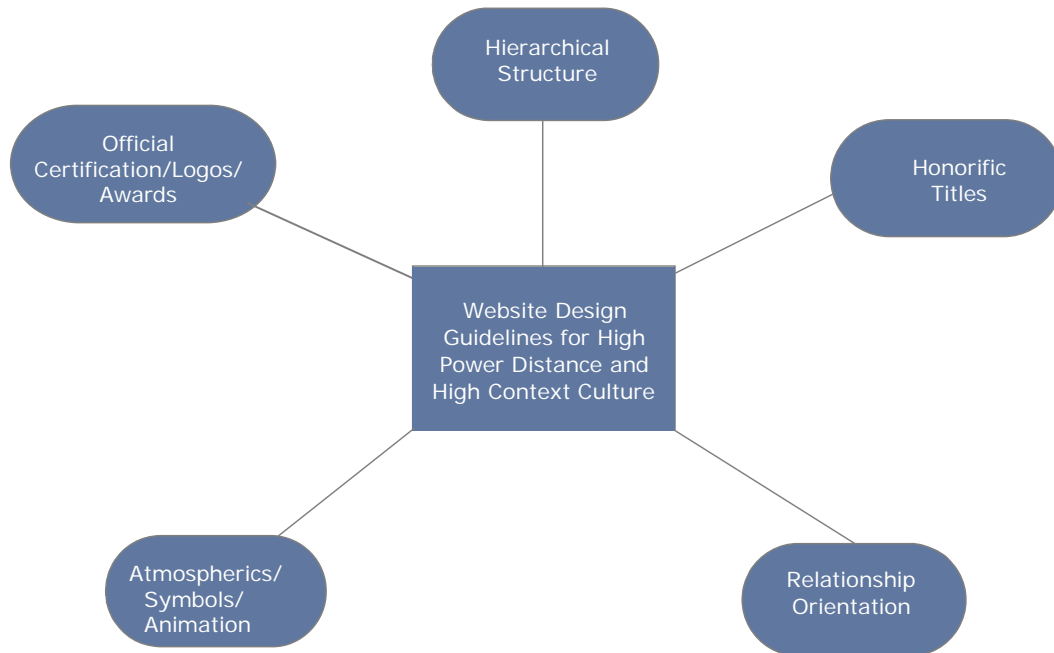


Figure 1: Website Design Guidelines for High-Power-Distance and High-Context Culture

Hierarchical Structure

A high power distance culture is based on the hierarchical relationship with organisations. Each member of an organisation has a position according to his/her rank, title or status. This position signifies the power one holds in the organisation. People value this information so that they can determine a person or organisation's credibility and trustworthiness (Gould, Zakaria & Yusof, 2000, p.168). A high power distance country displays customers and average citizens less prominently. Authority roles are

enforced by images such as official certification logos (Sheridan, 2001). In larger power distance cultures, individuals tend to value hierarchy, and this means that they are more likely to show respect for superiors and expect them to take the lead (Abdullah, 2005, p.215). Malaysia is an example of a high power distance culture and a majority of the websites reflected this cultural aspect; for instance companies' hierarchy information and authority figures were the main features in communication media such that pictures of important people in the company were displayed clearly so that they could be effectively addressed and appropriately shown respect. Similarly, the main feature of the web pages was a photograph and statement by the Chancellor to the students (see Figure 3). Additionally, the website's design illustrates a welcome message from the vice chancellor, and a link to the office of the deputy vice chancellor. These elements clearly reflect Malaysian willingness to accept a difference in power over other members of a culture. Consequently, when designing a website for a high power distance culture, a website needs to include a prominent organisational chart that clearly describes and emphasises the level of hierarchy so that people can understand the basic structure and chain of command of the company.



Figure 2: A Malaysian University Website

Honorific Titles

'In a high power distance culture the value of respect for elders is seen in the use of correct honorifics and titles to acknowledge them. Seeing that power is distributed unequally, it tends to suggest that a society's level of inequality is endorsed by the

followers as much as by the leaders' (Abdullah, 2005, p.105). Evidence of this aspect was found in our previous study based on website content analysis on Malaysian websites, where special titles, e.g. Dato, Datuk, Tunku, Tan Sri, Tun or Dr were displayed on almost every website so that they can be effectively addressed and appropriately shown respect. This aspect is also visible on the above website (see Figure 3).

Similarly, in India, the last names of people are frequently used to determine what their caste is, which part of the country they are from, and what Indian dialect they speak; furthermore, it is common to use words such as Shiri (or Siri) and Shirimati to denote respect when addressing individuals. In Mexico too, titles have an important role in determining and establishing people's status and generally people with professional degrees are not addressed as Senor or Senora, but as licenciado, ingeniero, arquitecto, and doctor. Several Mexican websites prominently display the titles of important company people. In addition to plain titles, Mexican websites also emphasise the professional degree the person holds (Singh & Pereira, 2005, p.118). As a result, it is important to highlight the proper honorific titles of people when designing websites in a high power distance culture.

Relationship Orientation

According to Edward Hall, (1976) in a high-context culture, there is a need to build relationships before getting to serious business. The art of reciprocal obligations has to be understood as it is expressed in different forms. The use of appropriate symbols to accentuate certain meanings is often made with the context of showing respect through body postures and maintaining good relationships. It is difficult to separate business from private lives as they are often well integrated in the social fabric of ethnic-based relationships (Abdullah, 2005). A study carried out by Kang & Corbitt (2001) reflects that web designers from Singapore believe in building relationships to ensure trust and success, by the means of various trust building animations. Our previous study has verified this too, whereby the layout of the web page relies on nuances, and other nonverbal cues to differentiate and build on relationships to sell the product. An example of a high-context culture website is shown below in (Figure 4).

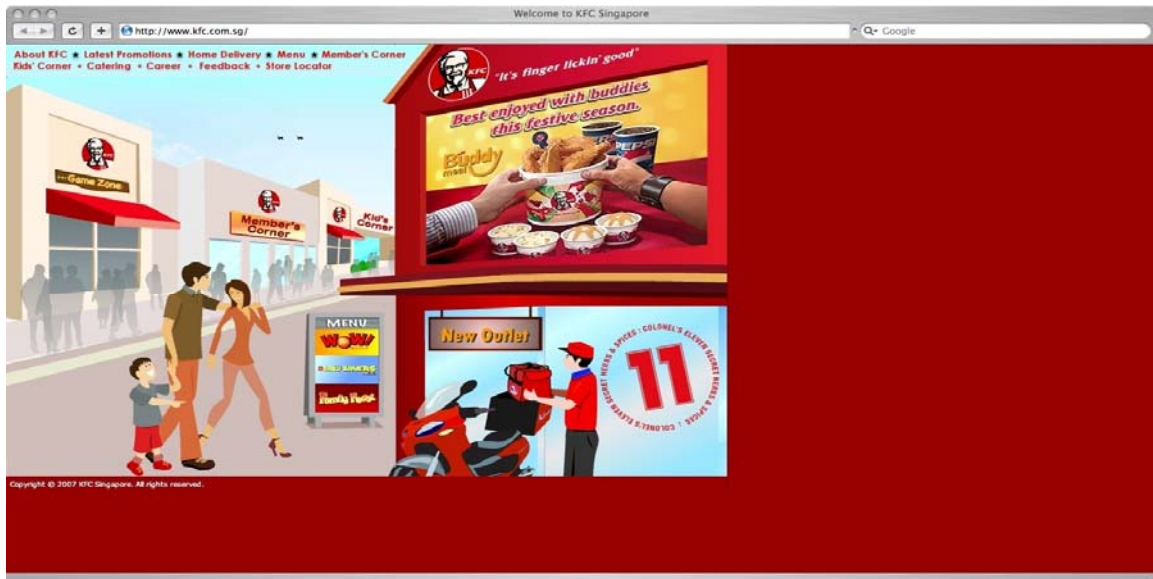


Figure 3: KFC Website (Singapore)

Official Certification/Logos/Awards

A high power distance culture focuses on experts, certifications, official stamps and logos etc (Marcus & Gould 2000). Evidence of this aspect was clearly reflected in our former study (Ahmed, Mouratidis & Preston 2007) too. A study by Singh & Pereira (2005) also reveals that in a high power distance country, awards, certifications and recognitions convey that the company's products are recognised by the society as being superior. Therefore, certifications, awards, and prizes are viewed as symbols of universal recognitions in high power distance societies (p.118). In our previous study a number of websites from Malaysia, a high power distance culture, frequently displayed these elements (see Figure 5) in which logos, official certification etc are clearly reflected. Thus, when designing websites for high power distance cultures an emphasis on official certifications, logos etc should be taken into consideration.

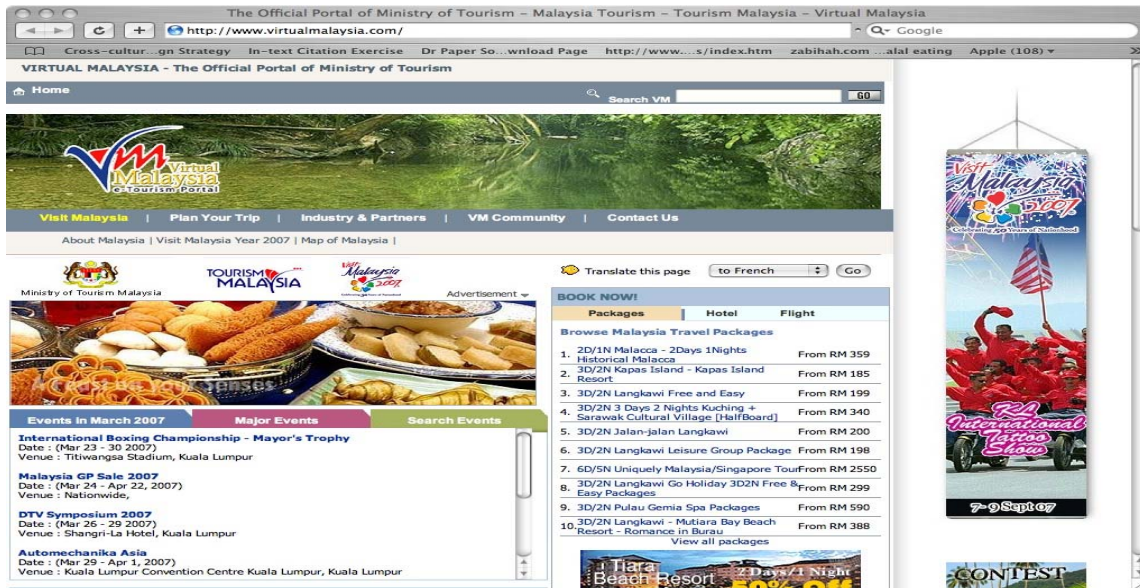


Figure 4: Malaysian Tourism Website

Metaphors/Animation/Symbols

In a high-context culture, due to the importance of preference for implicit, non-verbal communication, it is important to have news stories, signs and virtual presence (atmospherics) in communication patterns. Both verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication are considered important (Abdullah 2005). The indirect nature of high-context communication, the predominance of preferred slow message speed and the prominent use of symbolism in high-context cultures anticipate that images, animation, and other non-textual media is considered of high importance.

There is also evidence that websites in high context use more imagery (Wurtz 2005). Singh, Zhao & Hu's (2005) study also explores how the use of symbols and icons becomes specifically important when communication elements are embedded in this particular culture dimension. For example, Chinese websites frequently use colour, symbolism, animations and other metaphors (see Figure 6).



Figure 5: McDonald's Website (China)

Thus, when designing websites for high-context cultures, there needs to be a great emphasis placed on images, symbols and context for websites to appeal to their local audience.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

From a researcher's point of view, there is a need to provide specific versions of websites to address local cultures. As mentioned above, cultural recognition is important in high power distance and high-context cultures, because they tend to be motivated by externally focused, social needs such as affiliation, admiration and status. Accordingly, this theoretically driven framework is an effort to facilitate web designers in understanding the cultural values that exist in these cultures. However, the main body of the framework is formed only from the most important sub values originated in high power distance and high-context cultures. Therefore, it requires further expansion by applying additional sub cultural values as well as the authentication and validity from the local consumers, web designers and organisations. Nevertheless, this framework lays an implemental foundation for web designers and organisations to understand local cultural values and how to incorporate them into website localisation. Naturally, any branch of this framework individually or collectively can be primarily used in the website design process depending on the local culture. Consequently, the implementation of this framework can attract consumers and increase a company's presence in the local and global market.

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