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A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Websites from High-Context Cultures and Low-Context Cultures

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore and identify the strategies used by High-Context cultures in utilizing the Internet—a largely Low-Context medium—for communication and marketing purposes. It is hypothesized that individuals in High-Context cultures are more likely to adopt the visual effects offered by the Internet to convey their messages efficiently than their Low-Context counterparts. How might High-Context cultures make the most of the potentials offered by the Internet generation of today? Assuming that visual communication is a high priority in the design of High-Context websites, how do the visual methods used on websites vary according to the communication styles in different cultures? Using Hall's High- and Low-Context dimensions as the main parameters, an exploratory analysis of McDonald's websites identified five different strategies by which visual communication is used to support High-Context communication traits.

Introduction

A popular cultural framework was proposed by Edward Hall (1976, 2000), in which he stated that all cultures can be situated in relation to one another through the styles in which they communicate. In some cultures, such as those of Scandinavians, Germans, and the Swiss, communication occurs predominantly through explicit statements in text and speech, and they are thus categorized as Low-Context cultures. In other cultures, such as the Japanese and Chinese, messages include other communicative cues such as body language and the use of silence. Essentially, High-Context communication involves implying a message through that which is not uttered. This includes the situation, behavior, and para-verbal cues as integral parts of the communicated message.

These differences in communication styles across cultures are expected to pose challenges to the ways in which websites communicate their messages most optimally. How do websites created for a target group in a High-Context culture differ from those created for Low-Context culture audiences? What strategies do High-Context cultures use to compensate for lack of context on websites that were created in cultures where the norm is to communicate in a manner that is high in content and low in context?

This article presents a set of preliminary results describing the tendencies by which communication through websites is adapted to various cultures. The underlying premise of the article is that when customizing a website to appeal to a different culture it is not enough merely to translate the text; the overall communication strategy should be appropriate to the audience as well. The study identifies whether and how variables that characterize High- and Low-Context cultures are reflected on websites. It further attempts to draw parallels between face-to-face communication and communication on the web by looking at communication rules and patterns in High-Context cultures and comparing and contrasting them to the communication style of websites in Low-Context cultures.

Cultural Awareness in Web Design

At about the same pace as the popularity of the Internet increased, visions flourished of the World Wide Web as a tool for bringing the world together. The marketing world in particular quickly embraced the Internet as an ideal medium for reaching beyond domestic markets in order to disseminate products to hitherto foreign markets. The localization strategies for this may have been simple at first—first generation websites, which were simple and text-based, needed a mere translation to be cross-cultural. However, the development of Flash and the implementation of video and sound have brought new potentials to the web and set new standards for efficient and effective web communication.

Nowadays a website is not just a collection of text; it is a conglomerate of images, multimedia, interactive features, animated graphics, and sounds. From a marketing-strategic perspective, a company that defines itself as cross-culturally aware knows (or should know) that creating appealing and efficient websites for other cultures is no longer just a matter of language and modification of time- and date-formats. Cross-cultural web design nowadays requires dealing with design issues that include culture-specific color connotations, preferences in layout, animation, sounds, and other effects that are characteristic of today's generation of websites.

In order to do this successfully, the designer must study the target group of the website. While user participation is ideal in the designing process, a study of the design elements prevalent in the culture may also provide the web designer with some useful guidelines. Values and behavior indoctrinated through cultural influences may be reflected in design practices.

By understanding how communication styles may be reflected on websites, we come a step further towards identifying, and subsequently realizing the potentials of, the interactive nature of the Internet. This would be rewarding not only from the marketing perspective, but also for those organizations that are working on bringing the world closer together through dialogue. Intercultural communication competence, as Chen and Starosta (1998) note, is imperative for human progress, and it is by studying communication styles and understanding how to use them that we may be able to communicate more clearly, and promote dialogue between "us" and "them." The interactive and global nature of the Internet has fostered many visions of mutual understanding among cultures, although the means for achieving this are still at a very early, exploratory stage.

In this article, the findings of anthropologists Edward Hall and Geert Hofstede on cultures provide the basis for the analysis of websites. Their findings include a set of categories into which we can systemize cultures—for example, preferred message speed (Hall, 1976) and collectivism/individualism (Hofstede, 1980), both of which will be outlined below.

A number of studies on the relationship between website design and cultural dimensions have been conducted. Studies similar to the present one include Marcus and Gould (2000) and Sheridan (2001), who analyzed both commercial and non-commercial websites in an effort to identify relationships between Hofstede's cultural dimensions and visual presentation on the web in order to deduce guidelines for web design. The present study differs from the previously mentioned studies by being one of the first to approach cross-cultural, visual web design with Edward Hall's theoretical framework, rather than Hofstede's, as its point of departure. Hall's focus on communication in his cultural model is particularly relevant with regard to web design, as will be shown.

A Note on Cultural Frameworks

The research conducted by Hall and Hofstede, which led to the formation of their oft-cited cultural dimensions, is frequently criticized for being outdated (the dimensions were proposed in the 1970s and 1980s, respectively), and especially archaic in their practice of utilizing geographical borders between nation-states as boundaries for cultures. By contrast, in the light of the accelerating process of globalization, cultures are increasingly recognized as fluid and amorphous entities (see, e.g., Morley & Robins, 1995)—never absolute, but constantly in transition. (For a more extensive list of criticisms of Hofstede, see Lübke, this issue.)

It is acknowledged here that rigid categorizations of populations foster stereotypes, and also that the world has moved on since the 1970s and 1980s. Thus far, however, there has been no convincing demonstration that relative differences with regard to the prevailing norms in cultures do not exist in practice, and on the basis of this that Hall and Hofstede's cultural parameters should be discarded completely. On the contrary, the qualitative study of local(ized) websites around the world presented in this article shows that in spite of these important criticisms, communication patterns today still resonate with the cultural dimensions proposed decades ago.

High-Context and Low-Context Cultures

High Context Cultures

Japan
Arab Countries
Greece
Spain
Italy
England
France
North America
Scandinavian Countries
German-speaking Countries

Low Context Cultures

Source: Hall, E. and M. Hall (1990)
Understanding Cultural Differences

Figure 1. High/Low Context by culture

In order to distinguish among cultures, Hall (1976) proposed a set of parameters to help situate cultures along a dimension spanning from the High-Context/low-content category to the Low-Context/high-content category (Figure 1). In this article, the two categories will be referred to as either High-Context or Low-Context, or HC and LC.

Characteristics of HC and LC Communication

Hall observed that "meaning and context are inextricably bound up with each other" (Hall, 2000, p. 36), and suggested that to understand communication one should look at meaning and context together with the code (i.e., the words themselves). By context, we refer to the situation, background, or environment connected to an event, a situation, or an individual. When communication is HC, it is not only the non-verbal and para-verbal communication that comes into play. HC communication draws on physical aspects as well as the time and situation in which the communication takes place, not to mention the relationship between the interlocutors. The closer the relationship, the more HC the communication tends to be, drawing on the shared knowledge of the communicating parties.

By using scales meant to conceptualize the difference between High- and Low-Context

communication, Gudykunst et al. (1996) identified HC communication to be indirect, ambiguous, maintaining of harmony, reserved and understated. In contrast, LC communication was identified as direct, precise, dramatic, open, and based on feelings or true intentions.

Non-verbal Communication

HC communication was identified by Hall as involving "more of the information in the physical context or internalized in the person" (Hall, 1976, p. 79); greater confidence is placed in the non-verbal aspects of communication than the verbal aspects. Communication in LC cultures was identified by Hall as "just the opposite [of HC communication]; i.e. the mass of information is vested in the explicit code" (Hall, 1976, p. 79).

Face-to-face communication in HC cultures is thus characterized by an extensive use of non-verbal strategies for conveying meanings. These strategies usually take the shape of behavioral language, such as gestures, body language, silence, proximity and symbolic behavior, while conversation in LC cultures tends to be less physically animated, with the meaning depending on content and the spoken word.

Directness vs. Indirectness

Hall adds that those who use LC communication style are "expected to communicate in ways that are consistent with their feelings," whereas a person from a HC culture will set the context and the setting and let the message evolve without referring to the problem directly. In the event of a conflict arising, HC cultures tend to use indirect, non-confrontational, and vague language, relying on the listener's or reader's ability to grasp the meaning from the context. LC cultures tend to use a more direct, confrontational, and explicit approach to ensure that the listener receives the message exactly as it was sent. Choe (2001) illustrates this difference in the following passage:

If a North American supervisor is unsatisfied with a subordinate's sales proposal, the response will probably be explicit and direct: "I can't accept this proposal as submitted, so come up with some better ideas." A Korean supervisor, in the same situation, might say: "While I have the highest regard for your abilities, I regret to inform you that I am not completely satisfied with this proposal. I must ask that you reflect further and submit additional ideas on how to develop this sales program." (p. 5)

Thought Patterns and Language

Based on the work of Kaplan (1966) and Chen and Starosta (1998), Choe (2001) outlines the main differences between the thought patterns of HC cultures and LC cultures. Thought patterns "refer to forms of reasoning and approaches to problem solution and can differ from culture to culture" (Choe, 2001, p. 3).

LC cultures tend to emphasize logic and rationality, based on the belief that there is always an objective truth that can be reached through linear processes of discovery. HC cultures, on the other hand, believe that truth will manifest itself through non-linear discovery processes and without having to employ rationality.

In conversations, people in LC cultures will shift from information already stated to information about to be given, while HC communication will jump back and forth and leave out detail, assuming this to be implicit between the two interlocutors. These patterns of linear versus circular thinking may in some ways reflect the way monochronic cultures perceive the concept of time compared to polychronic cultures—as a linear sequence of progressing happenings from start to deadline, versus the circular or sporadic patterns that are evident in the cycle of the year, month and life. (See Lee's discussion of monochronic and polychronic cultures, this issue.) HC cultures are thus characterized by indirect and cyclical approaches in their conversation and

writing styles, often communicating without mentioning the subjects directly, whereas LC cultures will get straight to the point.

Cultural Variables

Although they are not necessarily a result of the HC and LC communication characteristics, it is worth looking into those variables that characterize HC cultures and LC cultures in connection with the analysis outlined in this study.

Collectivism vs. Individualism

The collectivism vs. individualism dimension was proposed by Geert Hofstede (1980), and suggested as an alternative to the HC/LC dimension. The two dimensions, however, correlate: HC cultures tend to be collectivistic while LC cultures tend to be individualistic.

Collectivistic cultures prioritize group welfare over the goals of the individual. The family's history often has an influence on the way people see an individual, whereas personal accomplishments will play a minor role. Individuals in collectivistic cultures tend to be interdependent with others and will usually have built a network of deep-rooted relationships and personal, loyal ties. Values in collectivistic cultures include training, physical condition, and the use of skills.

LC cultures, however, tend to be individualistic, where emphasis is put on the goals and accomplishments of the individual rather than the group. Individuals are expected to be independent of others and look after themselves. When accomplishing goals, consideration of others is often limited to include only oneself and one's immediate family. Personal values include personal time, freedom, and challenge. (For a complication of the individualism/collectivism axis, see Lee and Choi, this issue.)

Power Distance

Another of Hofstede's dimensions, which is tied to the HC/LC dimension as well as to the collectivism/individualism dimension, is the power distance dimension. This refers to the extent to which less powerful members expect and accept unequal power distribution within a culture (Marcus & Gould, 2000). The characteristics of cultures with high power distance include many hierarchical levels, autocratic leadership, and the expectation of inequality and power differences, and are affiliated with HC cultures, such as Japan. In contrast, low power distance cultures are characterized by flat organization structures, consultative or participative management style, and the expectation of egalitarianism, especially evident in LC cultures such as the Scandinavian countries.

Polychronic versus Monochronic Time Perception

Hall (1976) noticed that the perception of time is culture-specific. He identified cultures belonging to either end of the spectrum as being either polychronic or monochronic, where HC cultures are polychronic and LC cultures are monochronic. Monochronic cultures view time as an important, almost tangible phenomenon; they are generally oriented towards planning and scheduling, so as to promote efficiency, while people in polychronic cultures believe that everything will happen "when it's time."

Message speed

A final dimension worth considering, as proposed by Edward Hall and Mildred Reed Hall (1990), is that of the message speed preferred by a given culture, i.e., fast versus slow messages, which are respectively tied to LC and HC cultures. Messages that are quickly and easily decoded and acted on are categorized as fast messages, and include headlines, TV commercials, and prose. Slow messages, which take a little more effort to act on and decode, include books, TV documentaries, and poetry.

A fast message sent to people who are geared to a slow format will usually miss the target. While the content of the wrong-speed message may be understandable, it won't be received by someone accustomed to or expecting a different speed. The problem is that few people are aware that information can be sent at different speeds. (Hall & Hall, 1990, p. 4)

Hall and Hall (1990) note a connection between message speed and relationship building: "In essence, a person is a slow message; it takes time to get to know someone well" (1990, p. 5). Fast message cultures such as the United States are usually adept at creating quick contacts, but may also be perceived as superficial. Slow message cultures such as many European cultures and Arab countries may take their time to build relationships, but this generally results in these being deep-rooted and long lasting.

Hypotheses

The characteristics of HC and LC cultures outlined above raise questions regarding the contrasts between the characteristics of HC cultures and the Internet, which was developed in LC cultures. Some of these can be formulated into the following hypotheses, and provide a focus for the subsequent analysis in this paper.

Hypothesis 1

Given that High-Context cultures place strong emphasis on the personal relationship between the communicating parties, we can hypothesize that:

H1: HC cultures will, to a higher degree than LC culture websites, implement strategies for assimilating human presence on their websites.

HC cultures can be expected to emphasize imagery and other, non-textual forms of communication to provide context in general. We can perhaps also expect that HC cultures draw on the many potentials of the Internet by integrating animation and other communicative effects in their websites. These effects—such as multi-media, flash animations, and interactive functions—have the potential to provide a sense of human representation or interaction.

Hypothesis 2

H2: High-Context cultures are likely to use more imagery and less text than their Low-Context counterparts.

The indirect nature of High-Context communication, the predominance of preferred slow message speed, and the prominent use of symbolism in HC communication anticipates that images, animations, and other non-textual media will be considered of high importance on HC websites. By comparison, websites created for the Low-Context market are expected to be richer in text and with fewer occurrences of animations, heavy images, and other effects, to ensure that LC websites are kept as practical and direct sources of information.

Hypothesis 3

H3: The imagery chosen on HC culture websites will reflect values characteristic of HC cultures, such as family values, whereas LC culture values will be present on LC culture websites.

How might the influence of collectivistic or individualistic values be reflected on websites in terms of the imagery chosen? In the light of the high correlation between collectivism in High-Context cultures, and individualism in Low-Context cultures, we might expect a tendency towards representing individuals by themselves in those websites belonging to LC cultures, while group pictures of individuals would be more common on websites belonging to more HC cultures.

Hypothesis 4

H4: The pages making up Low-Context websites are expected to be consistent in their layout and color schemes, whereas pages in High-Context websites are expected to be diverse.

We might expect some similarities between the architecture of a website and the thought patterns belonging to a given culture. Logical, linear thinking patterns would imply linear navigation throughout the site, with a consistent layout throughout the pages of the site, thus promoting a structured and timesaving quality. Parallel thinking patterns would imply a complex, less discernible navigation, offering subtler clues as to where the links will guide the visitor. Priority should be given to the aesthetic experience of the website in HC cultures, rather than the informative function, which we would expect to be prioritized in LC cultures.

Method

The study was conducted as a cross-cultural, qualitative analysis of websites from countries categorized as belonging to either HC or LC cultures. The websites analyzed included ones from Japan, China, and Korea as representatives of HC cultures, while Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, and the USA provided representatives of LC websites. The differences between the two website samples were explored and sought to be explained in terms of Hall's dimensions.

The analysis in this project focuses on visual communication, dealing not only with the representation of the product featured on the website, but also of the website itself—mainly in connection with navigation. Visual communication here refers to the conveying of messages through all visual cues except written text.

Visual communication on websites is expressed through layout and the use of images, photographs, and animation. This analysis examines how the uses of these different communication tools differ between High- and Low-Context cultures. The present study is exploratory, and is based on the analytical model of visual communication on websites presented by Lisbeth Thorlacius (2002). This model in turn is shaped by Roman Jakobson's verbal communication model, and thus provides a systematic and comprehensive approach for identifying the various communicative functions present on websites.

The analysis was carried out by the author between November 28th and December 19th, 2003. The inevitable cultural bias of the author in conducting the analysis should of course be kept in mind, especially in a study such as this one, which involves a high level of interpretation. Thus, some functions mentioned in Thorlacius' model were problematic and eventually disregarded, as they required cultural insight beyond the author's cultural competences. These include the expressible and the inexpressible aesthetic functions, which are extrapolations of Jakobson's poetic function and originate in the feelings and senses of the receivers.

The cross-cultural analysis of websites is restricted to those of McDonald's multinational corporation, whose fast-food restaurants are to be found in 119 countries (http://www.mcdonalds.com/corp/about/mcd_faq.html). (Hermeking, this issue, observes that cultural differences in website design are most conspicuous with regard to non-durable products such as fast-food.) We can assume that a successful and globe-spanning company such as McDonald's has done extensive focus group testing of their websites and consequently customized each website to appeal to its user group in each target culture, to ensure that product communication is as efficient as possible. It is on the basis of these assumptions that McDonald's websites were chosen as suitable subjects for this study.

The branding of the product featured on a commercial website can influence the design of the site as a whole. McDonald's may choose to profile itself by emphasizing

its American identity, resulting in choices in the construction of the site that reflect Western values and interface design. For instance, the Pakistani McDonald's website (<http://www.mcdonalds.com.pk>) has chosen an interface design very similar to the Microsoft Windows 2000 desktop metaphor, with icons placed in the upper left hand corner of the screen and a "Start" button at the bottom left hand corner, which unfolds into a menu when clicked. In this way, McDonald's perhaps hopes to brand itself as something new, modern, and Western, appealing to youth and their identity as part of a new, globalized generation.



Figure 2. Pakistani website with Microsoft Windows metaphor as user interface

For this reason, issues such as culture-specific symbolism, colors, and metaphors on the websites have not been dealt with in this article, as such studies would require several informants originating from each studied culture. For discussion of issues of this nature, readers are referred to the work of Russo and Boor (1993) and Vanessa Evers (2001).

Results

The following examples illustrate different ways in which cultural influences are reflected in web design.

Animation

Animated effects on websites tend to be more prominent and elaborate in HC cultures than in LC websites, where such options are reserved for relatively subtle effects such as emphasizing active links or drawing attention to logos. Much of the animation on HC websites is centered on images of people. For instance, HC Latin American sites such as the Chilean and Brazilian ones use animation in connection with images of young people dancing or jumping. The same tendency can be found on the Chinese site, which displays the moving silhouette of a break-dancer. This form of illustration is not seen in the North American and European countries, and in particular Scandinavia, where the McDonald's sites are completely static, or where animation is minimal and

images are of individuals in relaxed situations. This tendency can perhaps be explained by the cultural values prevailing in those nations as proposed in Hypothesis 4, either reflecting the importance which is placed on one's health and physical condition in collectivist societies, or by the cherished nature of personal relaxation time by members of individualist cultures.

As with the rest of the findings in this analysis, there is bound to be a minority of examples that do not comply with the rest. If, for instance, we take the McDonald's site from Hong Kong, which we identify as HC, we are in fact presented with an image of a young person relaxing in a couch with his hat covering his eyes. According to the tendency, this image would be categorized as belonging to an LC culture website. This site also reveals that Britain has its influence on websites, as well as many other things, in Hong Kong, by providing the visitor with an alternative version of the Chinese site, one entirely in English. We can therefore consider the image of the relaxing person as an expression of British/LC cultural influence.

One interesting use of animation on HC websites is the assimilation of non-verbal, behavioral language, which is characteristic of HC face-to-face communication. An Internet function, animation, is used to communicate in alternative ways from text, by providing high context using cues that assimilate or derive from real-life conversations.



Figure 3 and 4. Stills of animations of bowing men on introductory page and bowing

woman on contact page from the Japanese site (<http://www.mcdonalds.co.jp>)

Although this practice appears to be relatively rare, the Japanese McDonald's website illustrates how animation in the form of short videos can provide an alternative to communication through text and still images, to create the impression that the visitor is virtually met by a personal representative of the company (Figures 3 and 4). The videos are mainly used as short introductions on each page, but the most interesting ones are the one on the welcome page and the one on the contact information page.

The short video on the welcome page (Figure 3) shows four men in white clothes and caps, carrying a massive "M" and placing it on the floor, after which they quickly bow and hurry behind the logo. On the contact information page (Figure 4), we find a well-dressed woman stepping out from behind the logo towards us, and then taking a long bow. The video is then replaced with a large picture of the smiling woman, with her hands in her lap, as if waiting for interaction with the visitor.

A similar approach used by Kurosu and Kashimura on the interface of their cash dispenser (1997) involved an image of a bowing woman to signal that data were being processed. The bowing representatives of the company communicate an acknowledgement of the visitor, a "welcome" and an "at your service" statement.

The vividness of HC websites is often completed with the implementation of music and sound effects. Some sites play a limit of a couple of seconds of the "I'm lovin' it" jingle or background beat, and the Korean site has implemented the whole jingle (in Korean) to be played from beginning to end. This trend is supported in Vanessa Evers' research, which shows that 86.5 % of Asians (Chinese, Hong Kongese, Indonesians) strongly liked sound effects, whereas only 64.9 % of the Australian control group strongly liked sound effects (Evers, 2001).

Whether animation is used on websites is dependent on at least two issues other than the user's belonging to HC or LC cultures: the user's patience, which perhaps can be determined by time-orientation, and the user's technological access and limitations. The designer who decides to implement unsolicited animations and effects must assume that the user sees the necessity of them, and that the user is technologically able to process them to the user's satisfaction.

Promotion of Collectivistic and Individualistic Values

It is worth considering the values that are portrayed along with the product, and how these connect with those ideologies relevant to the target group culture. Values prevailing in HC cultures are generally tied to collectivism and those in LC cultures to individualism, hence we can assume that HC and LC culture websites manifest different values according to their ideologies.

Collectivist cultures tend to emphasize being in good physical shape and time spent with family and friends as their dominant values, whereas the notion of freedom and personal time valued in individualist societies implies relaxation and time spent by oneself. As noted above, images of individuals dancing or doing sports are more prominent on HC websites than LC websites, whereas in LC countries individuals tend to be portrayed in more relaxed situations or situations connoting holiday activities, such as a trip to the lake or listening to music.

It is particularly interesting to see how McDonald's uses different approaches to profess its slogan "I'm lovin' it." The slogan not only promotes the food, but a whole lifestyle. The Swiss-German site displays images of individuals enjoying themselves with music and relaxation (Figure 5), and offers an in-depth explanation of the philosophy behind the new slogan: "You're immediately at the center of attention—your individuality, your everyday life, situations in which you recognize yourself and

where you would like to see yourself."



Figure 5. Swiss website, featuring a girl listening to music on her own (<http://www.mcdonalds.ch>)

This definition is absent in sites such as the Indian one (Figure 6), where an image of a man running with a boy in a shopping cart is placed next to the slogan, creating a visual connection between the two texts. Both the man and the boy, with a Happy Meal on his lap, are laughing wholeheartedly as they speed down the supermarket aisle. The slogan seems to reflect the thought of both of the participants, and seems to reflect the fun of being together as a father and a son, uncle and nephew, or some other close relationship.



Figure 6. Indian website (late 2003) (<http://www.mcdonaldsindia.com>)

The Indian site certainly emphasizes a different enjoyable experience from the kind found in the Swiss-German site, which rather praises that time which is spent by oneself, for instance by listening to music with earphones large enough to block out the outside world.

We can further compare and contrast the two sites by examining their emphasis on social issues such as community work. It is interesting to see that despite McDonald's deep involvement with community work, the extent to which this is communicated is different depending on the collectivist or individualist orientation of the user's culture. On the Swiss-German site, a link to the Ronald McDonald fund is placed near the bottom of the page, as the last point on the menu. When clicked, the user is presented with a very short description of the Ronald McDonald fund, and a referral to the official Ronald McDonald Fund website.

Adhering to the image change connected with the new slogan, McDonald's India may have replaced a group photograph of happy employees (Figure 7) with one of a man and a boy, but in return, the "Community" link has been promoted to a much more prominent location on the home page, placed second on the menu of links (Figure 6). For being a low-content culture site, the information on community work can be considered very extensive, spread across four different pages.



Figure 7. Indian website (early 2003) (<http://www.mcdonaldsindia.com>)

Similar findings are shown in the research done by Leonardi (2002), who identified differences between websites designed for Hispanic and non-Hispanic Americans. There, the imagery of groups rather than individuals alone was identified as important for successful marketing of mobile phones to Hispanics.

Images of Individuals Separate or Together with the Product

If we examine Figures 8 and 9, and then compare them to Figure 10, we will notice one striking difference. Although all three images represent a man relaxing on the roof of a car, what distinguishes the pictures from the German site and Swiss site (8 and 9) from the picture on the Chinese site (10) is that the latter example includes the presence of a McDonalds product, which is missing in the first two sites.



Figure 8. Swiss site (<http://www.mcdonalds.ch>)

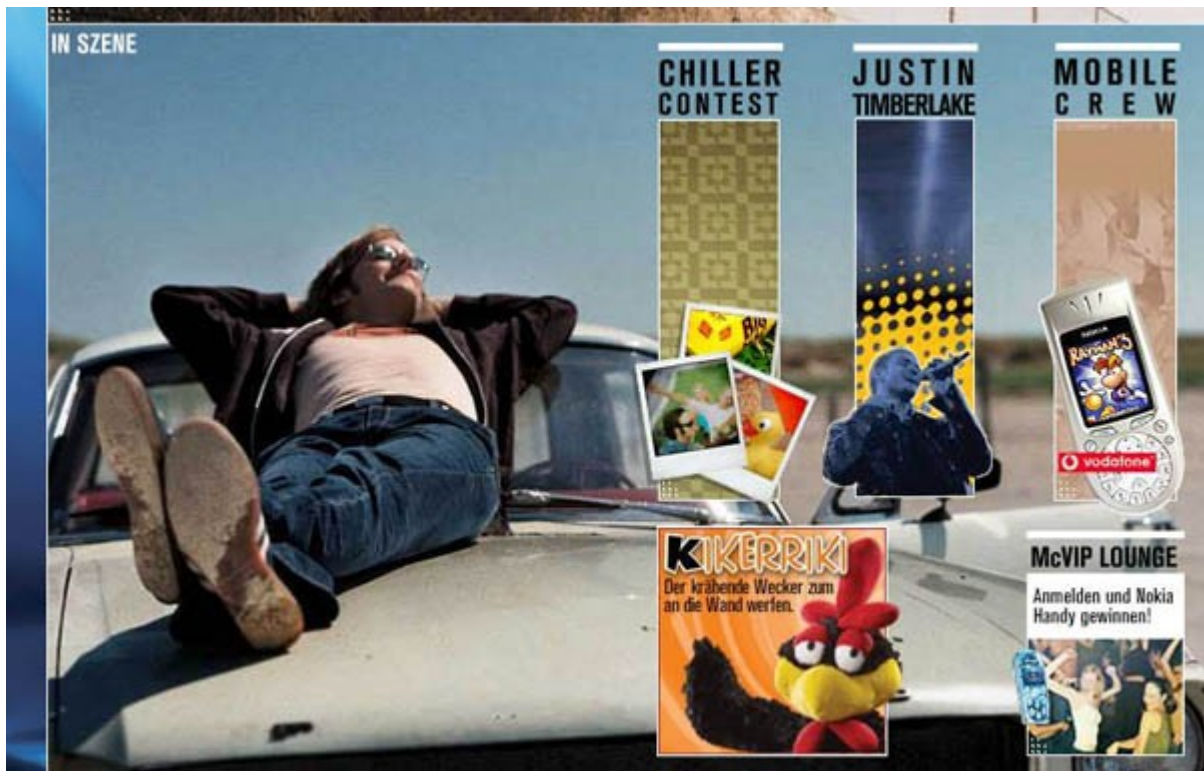


Figure 9. German site (<http://www.mcdonalds.de>)



Figure 10. Chinese site (<http://www.mcdonalds.com.cn>)

We might have expected the opposite to be true—that those sites created for LC cultures would be more inclined to make a direct connection between the individual and the product, whereas on HC websites the designer would rely on the user to grasp the connection between the two elements. We can perhaps explain this effect by referring to Marcus and Gould, who suggested that individualism and collectivism may influence the importance given to individuals versus products shown by themselves or in groups (Marcus & Gould, 2000). As we have seen, collectivistic societies place high importance on people and relations, whereas individualistic societies tend to value products and consumerism. When displaying a product together with an individual, it reflects the values of HC cultures by drawing focus away from what the product offers and towards what the person receives when enjoying the product.

The portrayal of individuals together with products is not, however, exclusively present in HC culture websites, just as images of individuals or products by themselves are not exclusively present in LC culture websites. Those HC culture sites that are especially heavy on illustrations will almost inevitably include a variety of both kinds of pictures. Rather, we can describe the trend as highly probable in HC sites, and expect that at least one image of an individual together with the product will be found on the homepage or main pages of an HC culture site. On LC sites the same would be described as an exception, where such images are saved for career pages or restaurant pages.

Transparency

Transparency refers to the extent to which the users are required to make an extra effort in order to find the information they are looking for. The term is borrowed from the usability field, referring to the apparentness and obviousness of the method of use of a website or other user interface. The McDonald's website from Denmark (Figure 11), a LC culture, can be described as a very transparent site, as it provides a detailed overview of the rest of the site on the homepage. The homepage features a large collection of links, and describes clearly what lies behind them through the use of headings, subheadings, and illustrations. This makes it possible for the visitor to find what he or she is interested in immediately.



Figure 11. Danish homepage (<http://www.mcdonalds.dk/>)

Most HC sites, in contrast, depend on links and information described by a limited amount of text, and sometimes with an illustration. This gives a less transparent overview of the content in the website compared to LC sites, and often requires that the user "chase" the information through exploration of the site and performing mouse-overs (placing the cursor over a link to reveal more content information before finally clicking it).

This tendency coincides neatly with the idea that, in LC cultures, it is the sender who does all the work in clarifying information and getting the point across, while in HC cultures, it is the receiver who has to work to retrieve the information. This finding also coincides with Hypothesis 2 proposed earlier in this article, in which it was

hypothesized that images would substitute for words on HC websites to a large extent.

An example of a site that relies on the exploration of the user is the Japanese McDonald's site. Here, a menu filling half of the interface serves to direct the user to news releases and new features. As a starting point, this menu consists of nine squares in different shades of gray, one of which is larger than the rest and featuring an image of the latest addition to the McDonald's Restaurant menu (Figure 12). When resting the cursor on one of the other squares, the image disappears, while the square touched by the cursor grows into a new image (Figure 13). When the cursor is moved away, the entire menu morphs back to a set of gray squares.



Figure 12. Japanese website; the cursor is placed nowhere on the area of gray squares (<http://www.mcdonalds.co.jp/>)



Figure 13. Japanese website; the cursor is placed on one of the gray squares, and an image appears (<http://www.mcdonalds.co.jp/>)

The attentive observer will notice that the graphic and its link, seen in the top left-hand square out of the nine, changes every five seconds or so between two new menu items and a promotion for World Children's Day. The menu therefore relies on the patience of the user and willingness to explore the site to find what he or she is looking for. Although menus like the ones described above illustrate how the Internet can provide the visitor with HC communication, they cannot be considered representative for HC websites. In most instances, menus like the examples above are supported by other, more LC versions. It seems that HC cultures might have grown accustomed to the way in which websites are designed in Western societies and adopted many of the same functional menu structures before exploring how communication on the Web can be reconfigured to conform to HC communication patterns. For this hypothesis to be confirmed or negated, however, would require longitudinal research on the development of HC website designs.

Linear versus Parallel Navigation around the Site

The differences in thought patterns between HC and LC cultures, as outlined in the beginning of this article, are clearly reflected in the design of websites. Whereas the Scandinavian sites are tabular and functional in their design (see Figure 14), the Asian sites rather seem to take a montage/layer-upon-layer approach in their layout, using many bright colors, fonts, and shapes (Figure 15).

The layer-upon-layer look is best perceived when looking at the sites in action. The designers behind the Asian sites seem keener on illustrations and links that constantly morph into new ones, where parts of information are hidden underneath other information on the same page. Their Scandinavian counterparts tile information side by side on one page, so that nothing covers anything else as a starting point. The Asian sites are also inclined to use pop-up windows, which are practically non-existent in the Scandinavian sites—compare the site from Taiwan, where virtually all links open up in new browser windows, and the Norwegian site, which consistently opens pages in the same window. This is consistent with similar contrasts documented by Bucher (2002) in his comparisons between German and Chinese websites.



Figure 14. Collection of Scandinavian sites (clockwise from top left: Finland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden)



Figure 15. Collection of Asian sites (clockwise from top left: Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Indonesia)

Summary

The observations discussed above are summarized in Table 1.

Parameter:	Tendency in HC Cultures	Tendency in LC Cultures
Animation	High use of animation, especially in connection with images of moving people	Lower use of animation, mainly reserved for highlighting effects e.g., of text
Promotion of values	Images promote values characteristic of collectivist societies	Images promote values characteristic of individualistic societies
Individuals separate or together with the product	Featured images depict products and merchandise in use by individuals	Images portray lifestyles of individuals, with or without a direct emphasis on the use of products or merchandise
Level of transparency	Links promote an exploratory approach to navigation on the website; process-oriented	Clear and redundant cues in connection with navigation on a website; goal-oriented
Linear vs. parallel navigation on the website	Many sidebars and menus, opening of new browser windows for each new page	Few sidebars and menus, constant opening in same browser window

Table 1. Summary of observations

Implications for Web Design

We are now able to draw parallels between the cultural variables identified at the outset of the article and the findings outlined above. Since many of the cultural dimensions and characteristics are strongly correlated, each variable may induce more than one tendency, and the tendencies may imply the influence of more than one variable.

Non-verbal communication such as body language may represent itself on HC websites through imagery and animated effects on the website.

Thought patterns are especially reflected in the navigation of the site, for instance through the subtle or obscure guidance and opening of new pages in new browser windows common on HC websites. Navigation reflecting the linear thought patterns that prevail in LC cultures is evident in the restricted number of new browser windows as well as apparent and specific navigational guidance.

The **collectivism/individualism** variable is reflected in the values that are reflected in the imagery of the website, such as images of individuals versus images of groups, products placed together with individuals, the situations in which the individuals are placed, and the extent to which emphasis is placed on community work.

The **power distance** dimension is apparent in the hierarchical structure of the website. High power distance is reflected in tall hierarchical website structures, either through the implementation of many pages with unstructured layout, or the opening of new browser windows for new pages, instead of in the same browser window. Low power distance is reflected in flat or shallow hierarchical structures, either through the implementation of few pages with coherent layout or the opening of pages within the same browser window.

The **time perception** variable, which is tightly bound with thought patterns, is apparent in the navigation of the site. It is also apparent in the transparency of the site, and whether the designer relies on the user's patience and willingness to explore the site to seek information.

The **message speed** dimension is apparent in the transparency/non-transparency of the site, implying the amount of effort expected from the visitor to understand navigational clues. The inclusion of a virtual, personal representative of the company, as illustrated on the Japanese McDonald's website, can perhaps also be considered a reflection of slow message speed in relation to the emphasis on relationships.

Discussion

The evidence presented here indicates that websites in High-Context cultures differ from websites in Low-Context cultures in a variety of ways, five of which are outlined in this article, and probably many more of which are yet to be discovered. It is evident that differences in communication styles between High-Context and Low-Context cultures do occur on the web. Moreover, the current study suggests that the multi-medial character of the Internet is helpful in terms of communicating online in a High-Context manner.

Let us now revisit our original hypotheses.

H1: HC cultures will, to a higher degree than LC culture websites, implement strategies for assimilating human presence on the website.

There are examples on the studied HC websites in which animations of people are present that aren't present in the LC websites. The most evident example of this was found in the Japanese website, which included animations of bowing McDonald's representatives. Animations of people, however, were more often not of McDonald's staff, but of youth, often engaged in dancing and sports, adhering in this way to the values attributed to collectivistic societies.

H2: High-Context cultures are likely to use more imagery and less text than their Low-Context counterparts.

While imagery is used to a great extent on both LC and HC websites, no doubt as a result of the sites studied being commercial in nature, there is evidence that HC websites are more likely to use images to convey information, in contrast to LC websites. This is most evident with relation to navigation elements. For example, links to other pages on the Japanese website were represented by images instead of text, in contrast to the Scandinavian websites which were more likely to opt for text rather than images to guide the visitor of the site.

The results also showed an unexpected finding in terms of imagery, however. The co-presence of products and people on HC websites showed a different strategy from that of LC websites, which were more likely to separate the product from the consumer. In this way, attention is either fully drawn to the product or the consumer on LC websites, whereas on HC websites the product is more often pictured together with an individual, thus giving the consumer a central place of attention and never focusing entirely on the product only.

H3: The imagery chosen on HC culture websites will reflect values characteristic of HC cultures, such as family values, whereas LC culture values will be present on LC culture websites.

The findings of the present study support what others, such as Leonardi (2002) and Marcus and Gould (2000), have found. There is a tendency for the values expressed in imagery to be consistent with those prevailing in the culture of the countries, and in the present study those values seemed especially expressive of collectivism and individualism. Examples of this were found in the lifestyles portrayed in the images,

with focus on family and physical activities on the HC websites, and free and personal time on their LC counterparts.

H4: The pages making up Low-Context websites are expected to be consistent in their layout and color schemes, whereas pages in High-Context websites are expected to be diverse.

The hypothesis regarding layout was substantiated through the website reviews. As the final tendency presented in the results section showed, the consistency in layout and opening of links in the same browser windows in LC websites is in contrast to the HC Asian websites where new pages would open in new browser windows, giving the visitor a multitude of starting points for further website navigation. While this may be connected to the power distance dimension in terms of the tall hierarchies present in HC cultures and flat hierarchies of the web pages in LC cultures, we might also recognize these differences as reflective of the preferred message speeds in each. The messages in hierarchical websites are likely to release their messages slowly, whereas those websites with flat structures release their messages quickly.

While these hypotheses are thus supported by the findings of the present study, there are a number of limitations to the study that imply the need for future research, and which would be able to validate the original hypotheses further.

First, the results are based on the subjective interpretations of a researcher from a Low-Context culture. Supplementary research should focus on further exploration of communication strategies present on websites. A quantitative study should be carried out to determine the validity of the results, either on the same McDonald's sites today, over time, or on websites from different companies. It could also be interesting for a researcher from a High-Context culture country to conduct a similar study, the results from which might give further indications as to the ways in which context is reflected in website design.

The results should, until tested against other forms of websites, be recognized as representative only of one kind of commercial site. This is not to say that there may not be some similarities between commercial websites and sites of other sorts. Similar studies of non-commercial websites are needed in order to test the extent to which the identified tendencies obtain in other genres of websites. We may assume that informational, non-commercial sites would show other sorts of tendencies. To what extent might we expect imagery to play a role on non-commercial websites? The present study has shown a tendency for HC cultures to develop image-rich websites that aim to create an experience for the visitor—a strategy often found within the branding and commercial industry. A study on non-commercial websites may in fact reveal a tendency for websites in HC cultures to be equally as rich in text as informational websites in countries considered to be LC.

The websites that were chosen for the study were selected from the relative placement of their countries along the HC and LC dimension in order to most clearly discern the differences between them. A study of websites from cultures placed more centrally on this dimension might give more ambiguous results. How far would such websites include elements characteristic of "typical" HC or LC websites, and in what ways would they differ from them?

Finally, the validity of the results could be further enhanced through the involvement of participants from the countries from which the websites originate, and the incorporation of users' perspectives in evaluating the appeal, usability, and cultural appropriateness of website designs.

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