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Website Design and Localisation: A Comparison of Malaysia and Britain

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the local cultural values on Malaysian and British websites selected from different sectors. In recent years, a number of studies have addressed the issue of local culture in website design, but most of the studies have focused on USA representing western cultures, whereas Chinese and Japanese cultures have been the main focal point of Asian cultures. This study intends to fill this gap, focusing on less-debated cultures: Malaysia and Britain. It applies Hofstede's individualism/collectivism, and power distance, and Hall's high/low-context cultural dimensions, and analyses how these cultural values are reflected in Malaysian and British websites. A content analysis of the websites highlights considerable differences in representing local cultural values on the local websites.

Keywords: culture, website, design, Hofstede, Hall

INTRODUCTION

According to the latest Internet users' statistics released by Internet World Stats

(2008), there are over 1.26 billion people with Internet access. Amongst those Internet users the primary language is English (30.01 %), followed by Chinese (14.7%), Japanese (6.9 %), Spanish (9%), German (4.9%), Korean (2.7%) and Arabic (3.7%). At the same time, Asian language users provide the largest share of with 37%, followed by Europe (27%) North America (19%) Latin America (10%) and the small remainder is shared between Africa, the Middle East and Oceania/Australia.

This increasing multinational dimension of Internet users necessitates a better understanding of how websites differ across cultures in e-commerce (Cyr & Trevor-Smith, 2004). To some extent, culture dimensions can be applied to identify differences amongst cultures that may have an effect on website design.

A number of studies on the relationship between website design and cultural dimensions have been conducted. Marcus & Gould (2000) conducted a study on cultural dimensions and global web user interface design and examined the various global websites by applying each of Hofstede's cultural dimensions. Similarly, Wurtz (2005), using high/low-context dimensions, analysed various McDonald's websites across the world. A further study conducted by Sing and Baack (2004) performed a content analysis of U.S. and Mexican websites. Besides this, Lo (2005) conducted a study on the cultural impact of the design of e-commerce websites from China and the U.S.

This study follows the same fashion, but discusses less-debated cultures in this arena: British and Malaysian. Secondly, this study applies Hofstede's (1984, 1991) and Hall's (1976) cultural dimensions individualism/collectivism, power distance and high/low-context dimensions respectively. It explores how these local cultural values are reflected in both British and Malaysian websites. It further identifies variations between these two cultures by examining three comparable organisations' websites from each culture and answers whether there is a need for website versions adapted to particular cultures.

CONSIDERATIONS OF CULTURE

To find a precise definition of culture is complex (Hall, 1976) as the word *culture* has several meanings (Abdullah, 2005). Nevertheless there have been many attempts, thus scholars have produced hundreds of definitions of culture (Mead, 1998). Yet, it appears that there is no standard definition. However, Hofstede's (1984) definition is perhaps the best known to many researchers who have relied on his work in order to make meaningful comparisons between national groups. He defines culture as:

the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group or category of people from another.....Culture, in this sense, includes systems of values; and values are among the building blocks of culture”.

Based on extensive research (Hofstede, 1984, 1991), it is suggested that culture may be differentiated by five major dimensions. Hofstede, using factor analysis, developed indices ranging from 0-100 to measure five cultural variables by surveying more than 116, 000 employees of IBM in more than 72 countries (Yap, Das, Burbridge & Cort, 2006). In his original conceptualisation, he (Hofstede, 1980) initially included four dimensions: *power distance*, *uncertainty avoidance*, *individualism/collectivism* and *masculine/feminine*. A fifth dimension was subsequently added relating to *long-term versus short-term orientation*.

Two of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, power distance and individualism/collectivism, are used in this study. These dimensions seem to be most frequently used across culture studies, especially in differentiating Western and Asian cultures. Furthermore, prior work (e.g. Jarvenpaa and Tractinsky, 1999) suggests that individualism/collectivism affects the way people form trust, and hence may have an effect on website perception and design. Additionally, the strengths of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions are unique and significant as no one has performed such an intense and varied research on cultures. Moreover, the dimensions individualism/collectivism and power distance are unique in cross-cultural studies summarising the differences between individualism and collectivism on decision making, personality and customer behaviour. Therefore, these cultural dimensions may affect website design and consequently are applied in this study.

Alternative dimensions have been used by others in an attempt to classify culture. This study also employs Hall’s (1976) categorisation of culture. He divides culture into two dimensions: high-context (H/C) and low-context (L/C) cultures. According to Hall (1976), 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). Sharing these views, Mead (1998) describes how in low-context (L/C) cultures, the environment is less important, and non-verbal behaviour is often ignored, and so communicators have to provide more explicit information. A direct,

“blunt” style is valued, and ambiguity is disliked in management communications. In contrast, members of high-context cultures depend heavily on the external environment, situation, and non-verbal behaviour in creating and interpreting communications.

Hall’s (1976) model is built on qualitative insights rather than quantitative data, and does not rank different countries, but generally identifies western and northern European cultures as low-context cultures. The cultures in the Eastern Mediterranean, Asian and Latin American countries are, on the other hand, identified as high-context cultures. Consequently, high-context cultural dimension is frequent in collectivist cultures (Hofstede, 1991) and high power distance (P/D) cultures (Wurtz, 2005), whereas low-context (L/C) cultural dimension is associated with individualistic and low power distance cultures.

Choice of Malaysia and Britain

The choice of Malaysian and British websites for this analysis was based on three main factors. First, cultural value orientations between these two cultures differ significantly (Hofstede, 1991). Malaysia is primarily a collectivist and an extremely large power distance (P/D) culture. In contrast, Britain is generally an individualistic and low power distance (P/D) culture (see Table 1).

Table 1 Cultural values for Malaysian and Britain cultures

<i>Country</i>	<i>Individualism Index Score</i>	<i>Power Distance Index Score</i>
Malaysia	26	104
Britain	89	35

Although Hall (1976) does not have figures for Malaysia, he has noted that Asian countries are predominantly identified as high-context (H/C) cultures. Consequently, for the purpose of comparison, Malaysia is considered a high-context (H/C) culture and Britain a particularly low-context (L/C) culture. Second, the majority of the studies completed focus mainly on the U.S. representing western cultures, such as Aoki (2000), Chai and Pavlou (2004) and Sing and Baack (2004). At the same time, China and Japan have been chosen to represent Asian cultures (e.g. Cyr & Trevor-Smith, 2004; Liu, Marchewka & Ku, 2004). This study attempts to fill this disparity by looking at two separate cultures from different parts of the globe. Finally, my personal interaction,

interest and knowledge of both these cultures motivated me to select Malaysia and Britain.

METHODOLOGY

Websites Content Analysis

We used a relatively simple technique using a content analysis framework to analyse the local cultural values portrayed on Malaysian and British websites. The content analysis procedure has been extensively used in the marketing and advertising literature to study cultural value appeals (e.g. Sing and Baack, 2004; Sing, Kumar & Baack 2005; Zahir, Dobing, & Hunter, 2002). Moreover, several studies have used content analysis to understand the communication phenomenon on the web, such as those by Marcus and Gould (2000) and Sheridan (2001). Besides this, content analysis procedures have been extensively used to study cultural value appeals in cross cultural advertisements (Cho, Kwon, Gentry, Jun, & Kropp, 1999). Since content analysis is regarded as an appropriate technique for analysing the values, norms of behaviour, and other elements of a culture (Sing and Baack, 2004) therefore it was selected to analyse cultural values as depicted on the web pages of Malaysian and British websites.

Although a number of different websites were analysed equally from Malaysia and Britain, due to constraint reasons only six different websites are illustrated and analysed in this paper. Three sectors - tourism, education and banking websites - are listed from Malaysian and British cultures (see Table 2). Subsequently, individualism, low power distance (P/D) and low-context (L/C) dimensions are applied to analyse British websites. Conversely, collectivism, large power distance (P/D) and high-context (H/C) dimensions are applied to analyse Malaysian websites due to their association with Malaysian culture.

Table 2 Selected Malaysian and British websites

Sectors	Malaysian websites	British websites
<i>Tourism</i>	<i>www.virtualmalaysia.com</i>	<i>www.visitbritain.com</i>
<i>Education</i>	<i>www.utm.my</i>	<i>www.lon.ac.uk</i>
<i>Banking</i>	<i>www.ambg.com.my</i>	<i>www.abbey.com</i>

APPLYING CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

Power Distance

The first of Hofstede's dimensions to be employed to perform website content analysis is power distance. This dimension relates to a culture's willingness to accept a difference in power over other members of a culture. Thus, according to Hofstede, Malaysia ranks highest in the power distance index, which means that Malaysians in general are willing to accept the fact that inequality in power is considered normal.

'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. This also signifies that Malaysians would be more likely to expect their elders to take the lead and be regarded as significant role models and wise elders' (Abdullah, 2005).

In terms of website design characteristics, a high power distance country like Malaysia displays customers and average citizens less prominently. Authority's role, pictures of important people in the company, and organisational charts are enforced as images or official certification logos. Additionally, special titles, e.g. Dato, Tan Sri, Tun or Dr, are displayed so that they can be effectively addressed and appropriately shown respect. Indication of awards, company hierarchy information and authority figures are the main features in communication media.

Applying this distinctiveness, in the context of website design, is clearly evident on a Malaysian university website (see Figure 1). The main feature of the web page is a photograph and statement by the Chancellor to the students. Additionally, the website's design illustrates a welcome message from the Vice Chancellor, usage of special titles such as Dato, Tan Sri, 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.



Figure 1 A Malaysian University website

In contrast, Britain has a low power distance culture and members will strive for an equal distribution of power within the culture. Confirmation of this can be found on a British university website (see Figure 2), where there is no sign of hierarchy and a balanced use of web page is designed to provide information to all students, staff and other website visitors on an equal basis.

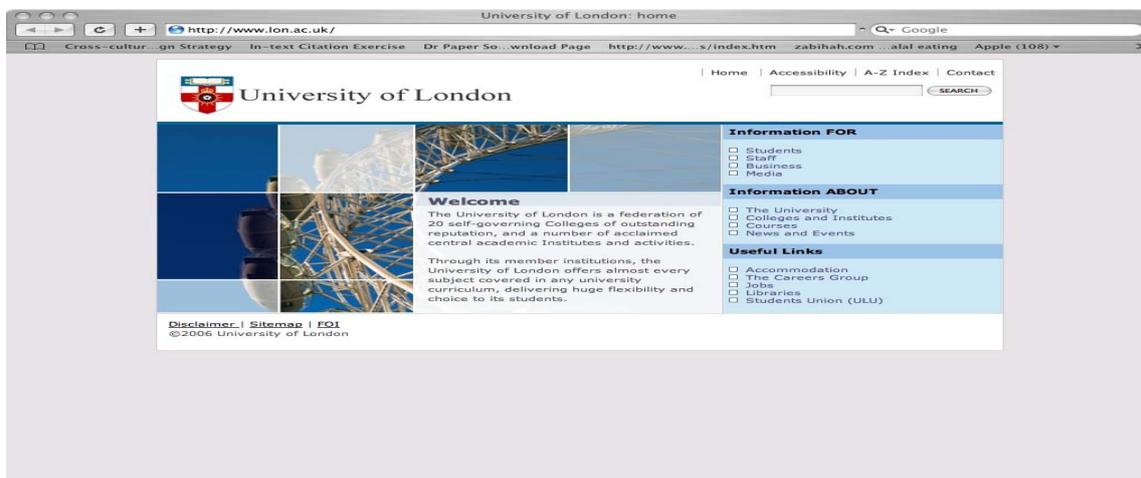


Figure 2 A British University website

Individualism and Collectivism

Hofstede (1991) ranks Malaysia as a collectivist culture where people are integrated from birth into strong, cohesive groups that protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. From a Malaysian perspective, Abdullah sums this up as follows:

‘Malaysians tend to have a high concern for others, keep other people in mind, promote a sense of oneness with other people and consider the group as a basic unit of survival. The “we” orientation influences an individual to want to be in an environment where he feels “belonged” and “integrated”. Malaysians generally prefer to do things together in the spirit of a “happy family”. This “we” consciousness is carried over into the Malaysian workplace regardless of ethnicity. Hence, Malaysians enjoy group work and derive their identity from being part of a collectivity’ (2005). Hofstede (1980) further points out that, in collectivist societies such as Malaysia, there is an emotional dependence by individuals on organisations and society; thus people need forums, places, or clubs where they can share their concerns, views, and emotions (Singh and Baack, 2004). Conclusively, this dimension within the context of website design depicts community relations, clubs and chat rooms, newsletters, family themes, pictures and symbols of national identity, and loyalty programmes. Evidence of these elements is noticeable on the Malaysian tourism website (Figure 3), such as links to community, importance of major events, and pictures of congregations. This represents an attempt to provide a family-orientated activity.

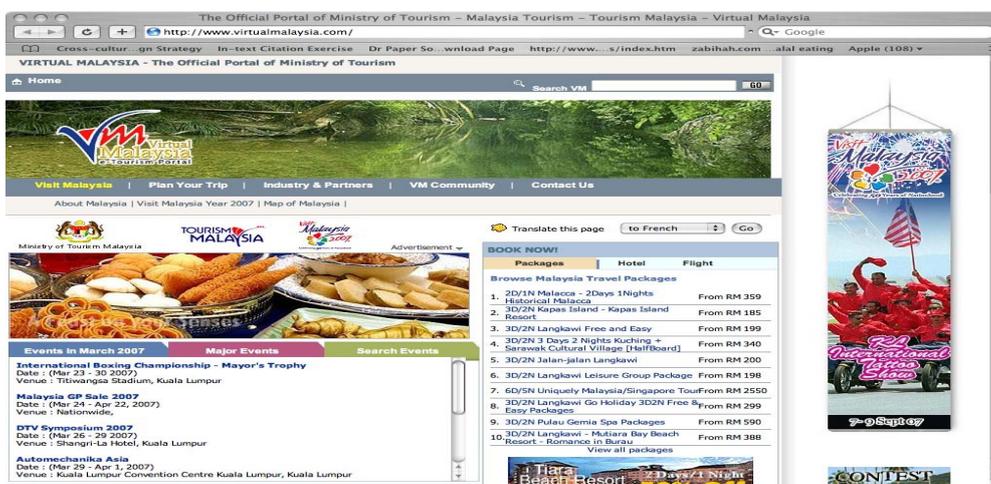


Figure 3 Malaysian tourism website

In contrast, Britain is a highly individualistic culture, where members are expected to look after themselves and their immediate families. Members are guided by individualised beliefs and goals rather than by those of a group. They are expected to think for themselves, make their own decisions and live their lives as they see fit. Confirmation of this can be found on a British tourism website (Figure 4), where there is

less emphasis on family themes, events, community links and partners compared to the Malaysian website. In general, these links denote ways of bringing people together. Thus, the British do not consider the necessity of highlighting these group-orientated links on their local website.

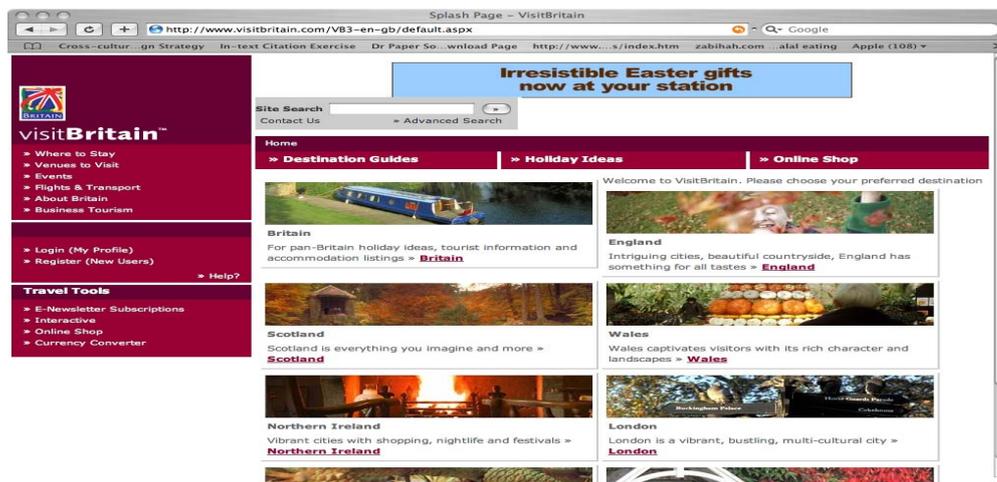


Figure 4 British tourism website

High/Low Context

As previously mentioned, an alternate method to analyse website design apart from individualism/collectivism and power distance is the high/low-context dimension and this is used in this study. According to anthropologist Edward Hall (1976), Malaysia is an example of a high-context culture, in which the 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.

In the Malaysian 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 in the Asian context. 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. Due to the preference for implicit and non-verbal communication, signs are very important for Malaysians (Fink and Laupase, 2000); moreover, 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).

The Malaysian bank website (see Figure 5) verifies this, whereby the layout of the web page relies on nuances, pictures and other non-verbal cues to differentiate, and build

on relationships to sell the product.

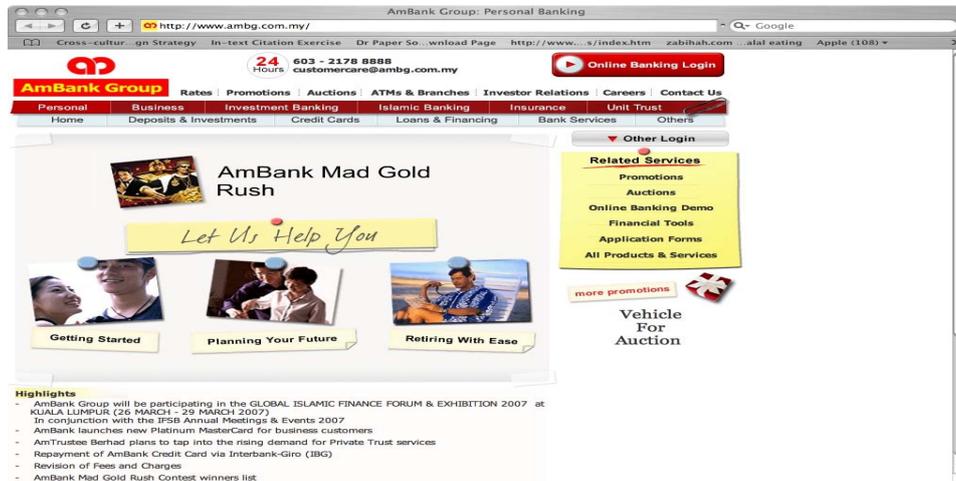


Figure 5 A Malaysian bank's website

As opposed to Malaysia, Britain falls into a low-context culture, where both verbal and written communication styles are direct and explicit. Information is often conveyed in a direct manner, specific and to the point (Abdullah, 2005) by the means of a more direct, confrontational, and explicit approach to ensure that the listener receives the message exactly as it was sent (Wurtz, 2005). British websites, therefore, reflect fewer metaphors and images and rely on a direct approach of words to explain their features and differences from other competitors (Figure 6).

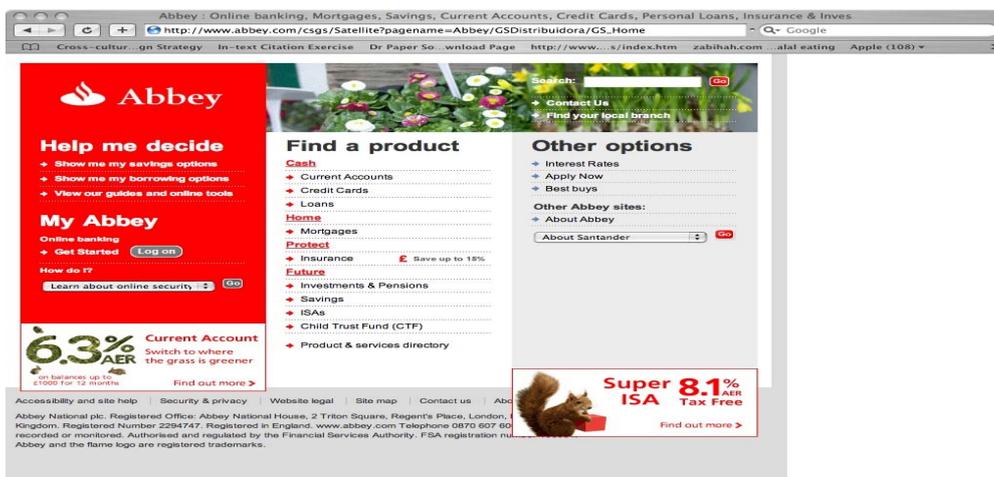


Figure 6 A British bank's website

All the above observations are briefly summarised below (Table 3) as a quick reflection on the local cultural characteristic found on the websites.

Table 3 Summary of observations

Culture Dimensions	Website Characteristics
Individualism	Focus on freedom, self actualisation and to the point information
Collectivism	Focus on social recognition, affiliation, national identity and family orientation etc
Low power distance	Focus on the task, equality and balanced information
High power distance	Focus on hierarchy, status and admiration
Low Context	Focus on practical and direct information, less use of animation
High Context	Focus on metaphors, images, nuance and building relationship

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

This brief analysis is designed to take a mere glance into the understanding of cultural variations of websites and their designs. However, the findings of this study confirm that there are considerable differences in cultural values on local Malaysian and British websites. The results are yet quite significant as they show that the cultural values presented in the local websites of the two varying cultures match the research of both Hofstede (1984, 1991) and Hall (1976) regarding the cultural differences between the countries. While only one dimension was applied on each site, nevertheless all three dimensions were evident from separate Malaysian and British websites.

Overall, this research illustrates that the web is culturally divergent. It supports previous studies stressing the need to adapt cultural values when cultural differences are high. Therefore, effective website designs need to be adapted to the cultures of the countries exposed to their marketing communications. However, the quantity of websites analysed in this paper might not be adequate to draw up meaningful conclusions to confirm Hofstede's and Hall's dimensions. Nevertheless, a number of websites were explored and analysed from both countries and the appearance of these dimensions was observable on these web page designs too. Finally, to achieve a more comprehensive result, the validity could be further enhanced through the involvement of participants from Malaysia and Britain as well as more selections of websites from other sectors.

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