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Author(s): Ahmed, Tanveer; Mouratidis, Haralambos; Preston, David
Title: Website Design and Localisation: A Content Analysis of Malaysian Universities Websites
Year of publication: 2008
Citation: Ahmed, T., Mouratidis, H., Preston, D. (2008) 'Website Design and Localisation: A Content Analysis of Malaysian Universities Websites' Proceedings of Advances in Computing and Technology, (AC&T) The School of Computing and Technology 3rd Annual Conference, University of East London, pp.119-127
Link to published version:
http://www.uel.ac.uk/act/proceedings/documents/ACT08.pdf

Website Design and Localisation: A Content Analysis of Malaysian Universities Websites

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Abstract: Design of a neutral and universal website for all countries and cultures is yet a challenging task. It appears that there is a need for a local website to address a particular culture. To some extent, culture dimensions can be applied to identify differences amongst cultures that may have an effect on how people make decisions. This study is a form of continuation of the previous study (Ahmed, Mouratidis and Preston, 2007). It applies simultaneously Hofstede's individualism/collectivism, power distance and Hall's High/Low-context cultural dimensions as the main guideline to examine the evidence of the Malaysian culture on selected local universities' websites. A content analysis of Malaysian universities' web pages highlights a considerable reflection in representing its cultural values on the local websites.

1. Introduction

Web visitors increasingly represent a complex multinational cultural community and online commerce is growing at an extremely rapid pace. It has been estimated that world-wide online population has crossed over 1.093 billion people with Internet access. At present a majority of web users are from non-English speaking language zones. Because of these shifting figures and anticipated even larger numbers of web users from diverse cultures, there is a need for cultural understanding in website design in the targeted market. A number of studies on the relationship between website design and cultural dimensions have been conducted including: Marcus & Gould (2004), Sheridan (2001) and Sing and Baack (2004). Much of these studies focused on analysis of various websites (mainly in the USA) in an effort to identify relationships between Hofstede's cultural dimensions and website design characteristics. This study applies an approach for cross-cultural, visual web design which incorporates both Edward Hall (1976) and Hofstede (1984, 1991) theoretical frameworks. It attempts to explore how cultural values are reflected in Malaysian universities websites and whether there is a need for website version adapted to a particular culture.

2. Considerations of culture

Culture has received various definitions in the literature. In this paper, Hofstede's (1984) definition is used. Hofstede defines culture as *"the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human groups or category of people from another…..Culture, in this sense, includes systems of values; and values are among the building blocks of culture.* (p.21) Based on extensive research (Hofstede 1984, 1991), it is suggested that culture may be differentiated by five major dimensions. *power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism, masculine/feminine* and *long-term versus short-term orientation*. Hofstede's (1991)

theory is undoubtedly the most extensive and comprehensive culture study undertaken to date. 'It is probably the most widely cited in cross culture research' (Burgmann, Kitchen & Williams, 2006, p. 62). Two of the above mentioned Hofstede's cultural dimensions, power distance and individualism/collectivism are used in this study as they seem to be most frequently used across culture studies.(Cho, Kwon, Gentry, Jun, & Kropp 1999). Furthermore prior work suggests that individualism/collectivism affects the way people form trust, e.g. Jarvenpaa & Tractinsky (1999) hence may have an effect on website perception and design. Therefore, these cultural dimensions may affect website design and consequently are applied in this study.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 (p.91). 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). Sharing these views, Mead (1999) describes that in low-context 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 (p.29). 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 countries and Latin American are identified as high-context cultures. Consequently, high-context cultural dimension is frequent in collectivist cultures (Hofstede, 1991, p.60) and high power distance cultures (Wurtz, 2005), whereas low-context cultural dimension is associated with individualistic and low power distance cultures.

3. Choice of Malaysia

Hofstede categorised Malaysia primarily a collectivist and an extremely large power distance (P/D) culture. *(see Table 1)*.

Source: Hofstede (1991)

Country	Individualism Score	Power Distance Score
Malaysia	26	104

Table 1: Cultural Values for Malaysia Culture

In the context of H/L context culture, although, Hall (1976) does not have figures for Malaysia, his research has however showed that Asian countries are predominantly identified as high-context (H/C) cultures. Consequently Malaysia is considered as a high-context (H/C) culture.

4. Methodology
4.1. Content Analysis of the Websites

A relatively simple technique using content analysis framework to analyse the local cultural values portrayed on Malaysian universities websites is applied. Several studies have used content analysis to understand communication phenomenon on the web, such as: Marcus and Gould (2004) and Sheridan (2001). 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 an appropriate technique for analysing the values, norms of behaviour, and other elements of a culture (Sing and Back, 2004) hence it was chosen to analyse cultural values as depicted on the web pages of Malaysian universities websites.

Due to constraint reasons only five universities websites are illustrated and analysed in this paper. Subsequently, collectivism large power distance (P/D) and high-context (H/C) dimension were applied to analyse Malaysian websites due to their association with Malaysian culture.

Numbers	Universities
1	University Pendidikan Sultan Idris
2	University Tecknologi Malaysia
3	University Malaysia Kelaton
4	University Sains Islam Malaysia
5	University Malaysia Pahang

Table 2: Selected Malaysian Universities websites

4.2. Applying Cultural Dimensions

4.2.1. Power Distance Hofstede, ranks Malaysia highest in power distance index, which means that Malaysians in general are willing to accept the fact that inequality in power is considered normal. This dimension relates to a culture's willingness to accept a difference in power over other members of a 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. This also signifies that Malaysian would be more likely to expect their elders to take the lead and be regarded as significant role models and wise elders' (Abdullah, 1996, p. 105)

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, 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 Figures 2,3,4,5, and 6)*. One of the main features of the webpage 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. This reflects that the less powerful members of the organization and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that the power is distributed unequally. It suggests that a society's level of inequality is endorsed by the followers as much as by the leader an acceptance of power distance. Similarly, official certifications and logos are apparent on all of the chosen websites. These elements clearly reflect Malaysian willingness to accept a difference in power over other members of a culture.

4.2.2. Collectivism/Individualism

Hofstede (1991) ranks Malaysia as a collectivist culture where people are integrated from birth into strong, cohesive groups that protects them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. From a Malaysian perspective, Abdullah (1996) sums up this 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 (p.104).

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 Back, 2004). Conclusively, this dimension within the context of website design depicts community relations, clubs and chat rooms, newsletters, family theme, pictures and symbols national identity, and loyalty programs. Evidence of these elements are noticeable on the chosen websites (*see figures 2,3,4,5, and 6)* such as links to community, importance of major events, pictures of congregations etc. This represents an attempt to provide a family orientated activity.

4.2.3. High/Low-Context

As mentioned previously, Malaysia is an example of a high-context culture, in which 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 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. As a consequence 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. Evidence of these elements are clearly visible on Malaysian universities websites therefore verifying these attributes. More often than not, the layout of the web pages rely on nuance, reflects more metaphors, images and rely on indirect nonverbal cues to differentiate approach to explain its features and build on relationships.

5. Conclusion and future work

We applied only two of Hofstedes's dimensions,i.e. individualism/collectivism, power distance and Hall's low/high context culture and concentrated on only one domain, university websites.

This epigrammatic analysis is designed to take a brief insight into the understanding of cultural dimensions and their reflection on website designs. However, the findings of this study confirm that there are a considerable amount of depiction of cultural values on local Malaysian university websites.The results are yet quite significant as they show that cultural values presented in the local websites match the research of both Hofstede (1984, 1991) and Hall's (1976) cultural dimensions. Furthermore, it supports previous studies (Ahmed, Maruditus and Preston 2007) stressing the need to adapt cultural values.

On the basis of this and of the previous study results indicate that effective website designs need to be adapted to the cultures of the countries exposed to their marketing communications. There is also a concern on the subject of the quantity of websites

analysed in this study, which may not be adequate to draw up meaningful conclusions to confirm Hofstede's and Hall's dimensions.
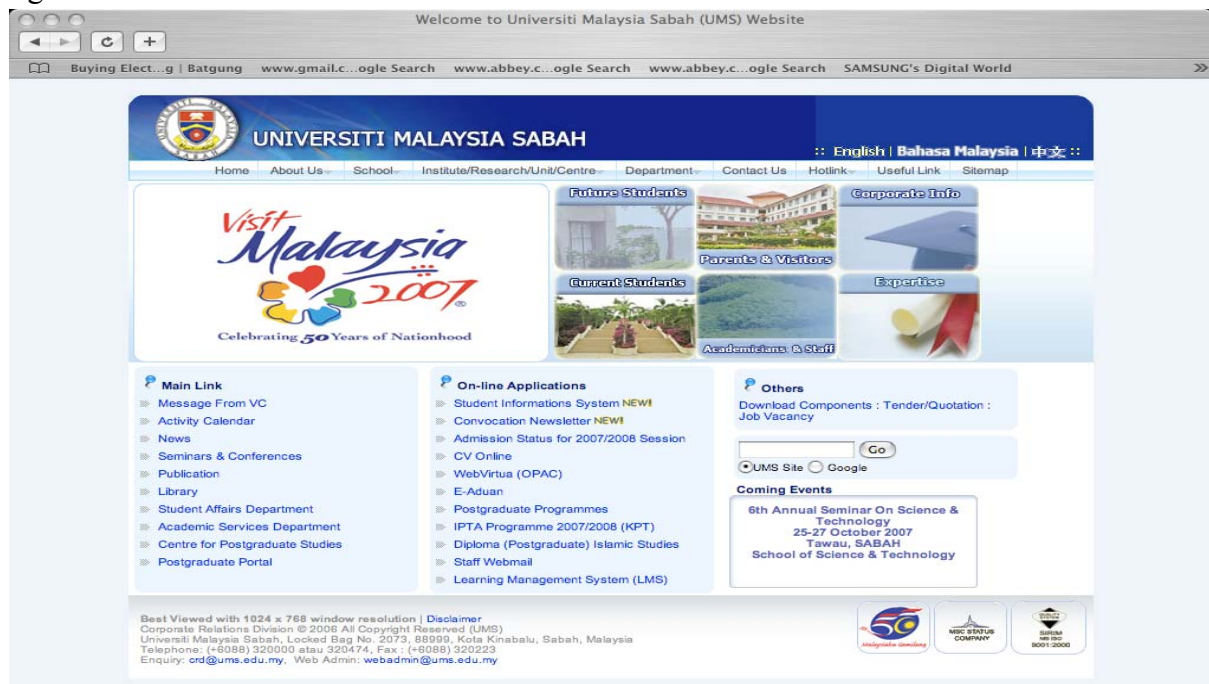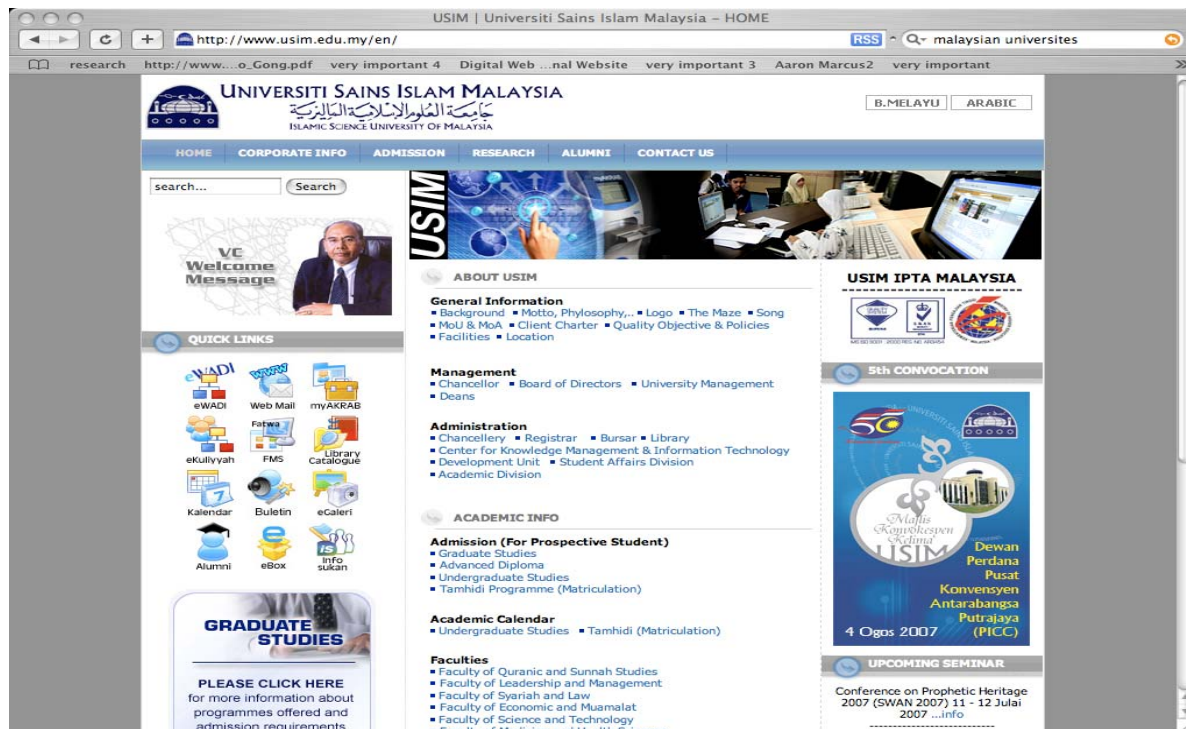
Figure 2:

Figure 3:

Figure 4:

Figure 5:

Figure 6:

Nevertheless, a number of websites were explored and analysed and appearance of these dimensions were observable on most of the web page designs too.

In this study, the results are based on the subjective interpretations therefore a supplementary quantitative study is needed. Through the involvement of Malaysian participants the focus should be on further exploration of communication strategies present on websites and to determine the implications that these cultural dimensions and others will have on consumers behaviour. Additionally, future research can be carried out on website(s) doing business globally, such as McDonalds, Sony and Apple etc from different countries and could be applied to bring to a close understanding of cultural considerations in their website designs.

Even with these limitations, this research serves as a good starting point for future work on the cultural analysis of web sites from a mixture of cultures and opens up an exciting opportunity for future research.

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