



## International Marketing Review

Analyzing the cultural content of web sites: A cross-national comparison of China, India, Japan, and US

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### Article information:

To cite this document:

Nitish Singh Hongxin Zhao Xiaorui Hu, (2005), "Analyzing the cultural content of web sites", International Marketing Review, Vol. 22 Iss 2 pp. 129 - 146

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/02651330510593241>

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# Analyzing the cultural content of web sites

Analyzing the  
cultural content  
of web sites

## A cross-national comparison of China, India, Japan, and US

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Received February 2003

Revised July and

September 2003

Accepted October 2003

### Abstract

**Purpose** – To explore the depiction of cultural values on international web sites.

**Design/methodology/approach** – To measure cultural content on the web Singh and Matsuo's conceptual framework was used. Content analysis was used to study the cultural content on web sites from China, India, Japan and the US.

**Findings** – The results indicate that local web sites of India, China, Japan and US not only reflect cultural values of the country of their origin, but also seem to differ significantly from each other on cultural dimensions.

**Research limitations/implications** – This study validates the cultural value framework of Singh and Matsuo by successfully using it to analyze the cultural content on various country web sites. The study also provides evidence to international marketers and academics that instead of a “transnational web style” a culturally unique web style is emerging on the web.

**Practical implications** – Marketers need to culturally customize their international web sites as the web is emerging as global medium impregnated with local cultural values.

**Originality/value** – The paper extends the standardization versus localization debate to the web, a medium yet not explored in this context.

**Keywords** Internet, Globalization, National cultures, Localization

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

The internet is inherently global in nature, as it is globally accessible and crosses national boundaries to allow consumers around the world to participate equally. Today the global online population is estimated to be around 407 million and by 2005 it is expected to reach one billion ([www.nua.net/survey/](http://www.nua.net/survey/)). According to International Data Corporation, currently 60 percent of the online population resides outside US and it is expected to generate 46 percent of global e-commerce spending by 2003. It seems that the major obstacle for companies extending their e-business globally is to understand global consumers and to overcome cultural barriers and language differences on the web (Violino, 2001). However, there is not enough evidence in the literature supporting the use of localized-specialized approach to web communications (Singh *et al.*, 2003). Previous cross-cultural studies on the web have explored issues like



web site interactivity, site quality, navigation, and their perception by international consumers (Luna *et al.*, 2002; Simon, 2001; Tsiriktsis, 2002). These studies conclude that international consumers prefer locally adapted web content, but do not provide any guidance, theory, or frameworks to achieve web site localization, nor do they show the emergence of localized-specialized approach to web advertising. None of the studies to our attention have investigated how cultural values are depicted on the web sites of different countries, and how can marketers develop culturally adapted web sites. To address this deficit in the literature we propose to study the web as a cultural document, and analyze whether the web is a culturally neutral medium or a cultural document impregnated with local cultural values. Such an investigation into the cultural aspect of web communication will provide us with insights into whether standardized or localized approach is more suitable when communicating with international online consumers over the web.

Specifically, the research goal of this study is to explore the depiction of cultural values on the local web sites and to investigate whether the cultural content in a web site really depicts the prevalent cultural values of the country in question. To analyze the depiction of cultural values on the web we use the cultural value framework for web site analysis proposed by Singh (2003), Steenkamp and Jan-Benedict (2001) has called for testing cultural value frameworks in the literature not only in different cultures but also in different contexts, to improve generalizability and to uncover boundary conditions. Thus, another contribution of this study is that we validate the cultural value framework for web site analysis proposed by Singh (2003) not only in four different national cultures (China, India, Japan, and the US), but also in two different industry web sites (electronic and automotive).

### **The importance of culture**

Culture is viewed by many as the “soft” aspect of international marketing. Its importance is at best seen secondary to other elements of international marketing strategy (Mooiji, 2000). Even today multinationals are puzzled as to what extent standardization versus localization strategies make business sense. However, there is a general agreement in the marketing literature that the job of marketers is to identify and satisfy consumer needs. But are not consumer needs a product of culture, society, and societal expectations that influence the consumer? In fact, culture prescribes broad guidelines for acceptable ways of behaving and acting in particular situations (Feather, 1995), it influences how we interact and socialize with other members of the society (Rokeach, 1973), and the valences we attach to different situations (Feather, 1995). It is a powerful force shaping our motivations, lifestyles, and product choices (Tse *et al.*, 1989). For example, people in high power distance societies have lower expectations about responsiveness and empathy, but higher expectations for assurance and tangibles; while people in high uncertainty avoidance cultures value responsiveness and reliability (Donthu and Bonghee, 1998; Furrer *et al.*, 2000) in service encounters. Mooiji (1998) claims that advertising reflects a society’s values and that effective advertising and marketing is inseparably linked to the underlying culture of the group to which it is targeted. It has been shown that advertising, which reflects local cultural values, is more powerful and persuasive than culturally insensitive advertising (Mueller, 1987; Zandpour *et al.*, 1994). Several researchers, therefore, have emphasized the use of country-specific cultural values appeal when developing

international advertising campaigns and communication material (Albers-Miller and Gelb, 1996; Han and Shavitt, 1994). Thus, it is important that marketers pay close attention to the values of a particular culture, as cultural values determine the modes of conduct and end states of existence for individuals (Pollay, 1983).

The advent of the internet has created a new media that may be especially sensitive to the values of a particular culture (Table I). The need to understand cultural differences by multinational corporations and the impact of culture on global business through information technology has been increasingly recognized in the information system literature (Myers and Tan, 2002). Studies have found that culturally sensitive web content enhances usability, accessibility, and web site interactivity (Fock, 2000; Simon, 2001). According to Luna *et al.* (2002), culturally congruent web content decreases cognitive effort to process information on the site, and represents an environment where demands are clearer, leading to easier navigation and favorable attitude toward the web site. This is because categorizing, processing and interpreting culturally congruent communication is facilitated by cultural schemas, which store information in simple, broad and culturally consistent categories (D'Andrade, 1992). These cultural schemas are intersubjectively shared, thus everybody in the group knows the schema, and everybody knows that everyone else knows the schemas (D'Andrade, 1987). The cultural schemas we develop are a result of adaptation to the environment we live in, and the way we have been taught to see things in our culture. Thus, web users from different countries prefer different web site characteristics that meet their distinct needs in terms of navigation, security, product information, customer service, shopping tools and other features (Luna *et al.*, 2002; Simon, 1999, 2001; Tsiriktsis, 2002). Nonetheless, in the academic literature, very few studies have explored the importance of culture in web communications. Few studies (Singh and Matsuo, 2002, Singh, 2003, Singh *et al.*, 2003), have extended the literature on cultural

Characteristic	Cultural implication of the characteristic
The web is a general open network having global accessibility	The web is viewed by people across cultures thus lending itself to vast cultural variability
Inherent interactive nature of the web	The interactive nature of the web makes it an ideal medium to create culturally sensitive dialogue
Web is characterized by hyperlinks and self-search option	Hyper links and self-search options rely on consumer motivation to browse, therefore if web content is not customized for global customers on individual bases the interactive efforts might be wasted (Fock, 2000)
Web technologies can help capture customer data that can be used for mass customization	Using customer databases and software country specific profiles can be created and used to make the web sites culturally adapted
Media convergence and broad-band technology make web an ideal medium to interact with audio, video, graphic and text	Media convergence on the web can be used to develop country-specific themes, pictures, videos, and sounds to create localized web sites
On the web the capacity to hold the visitors attention "the flow state" is an important challenge	The web sites that are culturally congruent or closely match the social perceptions of users are more likely to engage the users (Simon, 2001)

**Table I.**  
Characteristics of the web  
that lend it to be a  
cultural document

value appeals to study cultural content on the web. Furthermore, there is not enough evidence supporting either emergence of global internet culture (transnational web style) or culturally adapted web content.

To fill this void in the literature, this study content analyzes the depiction of cultural values on the web sites of China, India, Japan, and the US to determine whether local web sites of companies from these countries depict local cultural values, and provide important insights into web site adaptation.

### **Cultural value frameworks**

To study the web as a cultural document we need a conceptual framework that is grounded in theory, integrates diverse cultural perspectives, is empirically validated, and explains culture-level variation in the depiction of values, beliefs and symbols of a society. Several cultural frameworks and dimensions have been proposed in the literature to study both individual-level and cultural-level variation in the cross-cultural context. While individual level cultural frameworks proposed by Inkeles and Levinson (1969), Triandis *et al.* (1985), and Rokeach (1973) have been instrumental in analyzing how individuals differ in their values and beliefs (Schwartz, 1994), they do not provide adequate basis for analyzing how societies present their commonly shared assumptions, symbols and beliefs. Past researchers have emphasized that when the goal is to study how the cultural value context relates to differences across cultures in themes in popular media and advertising, then one should use culture-level typologies (Schwartz, 1994; McCarty, 1994). Since the present study relates to the issue of cross-cultural themes in popular media (the web), thus we focus on culture-level typologies.

One of the earliest studies to present a general framework for studying culture-level variation was by Parson and Shils (1951). However, this classification scheme has not been vastly validated or used in empirical analyses of culture. Similarly, work by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) has not been extensively validated and the meaning equivalence of their items across cultures has not been effectively investigated (Smith and Schwartz, 1997). More recently, Trompennars (1994) proposed a framework that derives from works of Parson and Shils (1951) and Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961). This framework is interesting but does not seem to present anything substantially different from past research. Furthermore, some of his dimensions lack content validity (Hofstede, 2001), and his framework has not been extensively applied to business research. Another culture-level classification to be considered here is the one by Schwartz (1994). Schwartz (1994) derived his culture-level value types from previous work on universal human values (Rokeach, 1973). However, the literature shows significant correlations between cultural-value types of Schwartz and empirically derived dimensions of Hofstede (Hofstede, 2001; Schwartz, 1994), so it is questionable how much additional value the framework provides compared to Hofstede's work. Hofstede's cultural framework is one of the most widely used culture-level type classification in the advertising and marketing. He has proposed four independent dimensions to study culture holistically: individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity-femininity. Several studies have operationalized Hofstede's dimensions to study cultural values in the advertising material (Albers-Miller and Gelb, 1996; Cheng and Schweitzer, 1996; Cho *et al.*, 1999). However, only the framework of Singh (2003) has operationalized Hofstede's framework to study cultural values on the web. Singh (2003), framework has been empirically validated and shows adequate reliability (Singh *et al.*, 2003).

On the web, one challenge is to decide how the information should be presented to people from different cultures. The presentation, the tone, and even the type of information are important facets of communications to be considered (Fock, 2000). This perspective of advertising as a form of communication that is sensitive to communication differences between cultures has been used by many previous studies (Albers-Miller and Gelb, 1996; Fock, 2000). Therefore, Singh (2003) complements Hofstede's dimensions with the addition of Hall (1976) high and low context dimensions. Hall (1976) context dimension analyzes the contextual nature of communication and provides a good way of analyzing the information depicted on the web sites of different cultures. Thus, in summary Singh (2003) cultural framework is not only grounded in theory, and based on diverse cultural perspectives but has also been empirically validated, and presents a unique way to measure cultural values on the web. For this study we use Singh (2003) framework to analyze the depiction of cultural values on the web site of China, India, Japan, and the US.

### Content analysis

The content analysis procedure has been extensively used in the marketing and the advertising literature to study cultural value appeals (Albers-Miller and Gelb, 1996; Cheng and Schweitzer, 1996; Tse *et al.*, 1989). However, the use of content analysis to study information content on the web is still at an infancy stage, though few studies have used this technique to analyze the web content (Ju-Pak, 1999; Fock, 2000; Singh and Matsuo, 2002; Singh, 2003). To date the only comprehensive framework to conduct cultural analysis on the web, as per our knowledge, is the one proposed by Singh (2003). The coding sheet for the content analysis includes seven cultural dimensions and 35 cultural coding categories as proposed by Singh (2003) and is presented in the appendix. We use the cultural coding sheet to content analyze the depiction of local cultural values on the web sites of local Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and US companies.

### Hypotheses

As the main objective of this study is to examine whether local country web sites of companies depict local cultural values, an attempt is made to see the extent to which the web communication material reflects cultural value orientation of the country in question. To investigate this, cultural scores of Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and US web sites are calculated using the cultural coding sheet proposed by Singh (2003) and then compared with scores on individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power-distance, masculinity, and high and low contextuality reported in the studies by Hofstede (1980, 1991, 1993) and Hall (1976).

#### *Individualism-collectivism*

This cultural dimension explains the extent to which the society values group-norms or individual freedom. In collectivist societies the emphasis is on following group norms, group achievement, and strong group-ties, while in individualist societies the emphasis is on personal freedom, personal achievement, and individual decision-making. For example, in collectivist societies such as China, people are willing to sacrifice themselves for the greater benefit of the social unit or the society (Yau, 1988). Furthermore, collectivist societies emphasize in-group obligations, interdependence,

(Cho *et al.*, 1999; Han and Shavitt, 1994) and preserving the welfare of others (Gudykunst, 1998). Societal norms and societal pressure have been shown to have a significant impact on behavioral intention formation in collectivist societies (Lee and Green, 1991). Commercials in collectivist societies have been found to emphasize group-consensus appeals, family security, and family ties (Lin, 2001; Han and Shavitt, 1994).

Identity in individualist cultures is centered around “I-consciousness”, therefore people in individualist cultures value self-reliance, achievement, independence and freedom (Hofstede, 1980; Gudykunst, 1998). Commercials in individualist cultures have been shown to emphasize the independence theme in the form of individual determinism, independence, competition, autonomy and non-conformity (Albers-Miller and Gelb, 1996; Cho *et al.*, 1999; Cheng and Schweitzer, 1996; Mueller, 1987; Zandpour *et al.*, 1994).

Among the four countries studied in this paper, US scores highest on individualism (91) in Hofstede (1980, 1991, 1993), followed by India (48), Japan (46), and China (20). Thus, based on these scores we hypothesize that:

- H1. Local US web sites will depict highest levels of individualism-oriented features, followed by local Indian, Japanese and Chinese web sites.
- H2. Local Chinese web sites will depict highest levels of collectivism-oriented features, followed by local Japanese, Indian, and US web sites.

#### *Uncertainty avoidance*

This dimension determines the extent to which a society is risk-averse or can tolerate environmental ambiguity. Societies high on uncertainty avoidance tend to be more risk-averse, avoid ambiguous situations, and value security than adventure or risk. High uncertainty avoidance cultures are “tight societies” that value conservatism and traditional beliefs (Hofstede, 1980). Individuals in such cultures show preference for clear directions, instruction and rules (Gudykunst, 1998; Hofstede, 1980). There is a need for written or unwritten rules and predictability in such cultures (Mooiji, 1998). For example, Chinese have been shown to have a greater need for information and directions when using advertised products (Ji and McNeal, 2001). High uncertainty avoidance cultures also tend to use electronic media less often since this media is not well suited to reduce uncertainty (Straub *et al.*, 1997). A study on global internet use by Lynch *et al.* (2001) found Asian online consumers to be less secure, when shopping online. This could be because three major Asian countries including China, Japan, and Taiwan score high on uncertainty avoidance. Based on the above discussion it can be argued that internet being a new and technologically sophisticated medium has certain degree of uncertainty associated with it, and people from high uncertainty avoidance cultures need more reassurance and uncertainty reduction features to facilitate their online purchases. Among the four countries in our study, Japan (92) scores the highest on uncertainty avoidance, followed by China (60), US (43), and India (40) (Hofstede, 1980, 1991, 1993). Thus we hypothesize that:

- H3. Local Japanese web sites will depict highest levels of uncertainty-reducing features, followed by local web sites of China, US and India.

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### *Power distance*

According to Hofstede (1980) the power distance dimension explains how different societies treat inequalities in social structure. The emphasis in high power distance societies is on social status, referent power, authority, and legitimacy, while the emphasis on low power distance societies is on egalitarian, equal rights, and less hierarchy. People in high power distance societies tend to obey the elderly and show respect towards authority figures. For example, Chinese are highly influenced in their purchasing by opinion leaders and authority figures (Ji and McNeal, 2001), and a study by Mueller (1987) of Japanese advertisements (Japan is a high power distance society) showed extensive use of status appeal. In such high power distance societies individuals may show deference to authority by refraining from using media that do not allow them face-to-face contact (Straub *et al.*, 1997, p. 4). Based on the previous studies showing high power distance societies depicting higher power distance related appeals, it can be hypothesized that web sites of high power distance societies will also depict features relating to status appeals, referent power, and hierarchy. China (80) and India (77) score highest on power distance followed by Japan (54) and US (40) (Hofstede, 1980, 1991, 1993). Thus we hypothesize that:

- H4.* Local Chinese and Indian web sites will depict highest levels of power-distance oriented features, followed by local Japanese and US web sites.

### *Masculinity*

This dimension explains how gender roles are allocated in different cultures. "Masculine" cultures value assertiveness, ambition, success, and performance. To such cultures, big and fast is beautiful, and clear gender roles are the norm. On the contrary, feminine cultures value beauty, nature and nurturance, and ambiguity of gender roles. Appeals emphasizing a product's superior performance and capacity to accomplish goals are common in masculine cultures (Cheng and Schweitzer, 1996). Masculine cultures are direct, decisive, and emphasize mastery over nature (Hofstede, 1980) unlike feminine cultures they are less inclined towards fantasy, imagery, and oneness with nature appeals. Based on these studies it is expected that the web communications from masculine cultures will also depict masculine value orientation. In Hofstede (1980, 1991, 1993), Japan scores the highest on masculinity (95), followed by US (62), India (56), and China (50). Thus, we hypothesize:

- H5.* Local Japanese web sites will show the highest levels of masculinity-oriented features, followed by US, India, and China.

### *High- and low-context cultures*

According to Hall (1976, p. 91) "a high context communication or message is one in which most of the information is already in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. High-context cultures emphasize harmony, beauty, and oneness with nature (Cho *et al.*, 1999). Advertisements in high-context cultures are characterized by indirect verbal expressions, and are implicit, indirect, polite, modest, and even ambiguous (Mooiji, 1998; Mueller, 1987). Direct comparisons are not viewed favorably (Mueller, 1987). A low context communication is just the opposite; i.e. the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code. Thus, the use of

direct, explicit, and confrontational appeals in the form of discounts, sales promotions and aggressive selling is common in such cultures (Culter and Raj Shekhar, 1992). Mueller (1987) found that low-context cultures such as the US make explicit mention of competitor products and emphasize a hard sell orientation.

Thus, while communication in high-context cultures is implicit, indirect and deeply embedded in the context, the communication in low-context cultures is more direct, less implicit and more informative. According to the study by Hall (1976) and Hall and Mildred (1990), US is a low-context culture, and China and Japan are high-context cultures. India is neither too high nor low context. Thus, we hypothesize:

- H6.* Local U.S. web sites will show highest levels of low-context oriented features, followed by local Indian, Japanese, and Chinese web sites.
- H7.* Local Japanese and Chinese web sites will show highest levels of high-context oriented features, followed by local Indian and US web sites.

### Methodology

This study adopts a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to achieve triangulation and to interpret the data meaningfully. Part one of the study uses content analysis to evaluate the cultural content in the local web sites of Chinese, Indian, Japanese, and US companies. The degree of depiction of each cultural value category is evaluated as “Not Depicted” to “Prominently Depicted” on a five-point likert scale. Two coders from each of the four countries were trained for a day in the coding scheme. The following day they were given a practice session on a pilot sample.

Part two of this study uses a MANOVA to analyze how local web sites of Chinese, Indian, Japanese, and US companies differ in the depiction of cultural values and also to measure the degree of depiction of cultural values on these web sites. The seven cultural dimensions proposed in this study act as dependent variables, and the country and the industry to which local company web sites belong act as independent variables in a MANOVA design. To analyze group-differences by each cultural dimension, a post hoc analysis is also done in this study.

### Sample

Web sites of local Chinese, Indian, Japanese, and US companies served as the sample for this study. Three main sources were used to generate the sample: 25 local Japanese and 26 local US companies were selected from the Forbes list of top 500 US and International companies at [www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com). The sample of Indian (21) and Chinese (21) local companies was selected from the Yahoo local Indian and Chinese web directory. To control for industry effect only electronic and automotive companies were included in the sample. Thus, a total sample of 93 web sites was used in the current study. On average, 15-20 web pages per web site were content analyzed for all the 35 cultural categories identified in the cultural value framework (Appendix).

### Reliability

The percentage of agreement method was used to determine the coefficient of inter-coder reliability for 35 category items used in the framework. The inter-coder reliability for US web sites was 82 percent, for Japanese web sites it was 80 percent, for

Chinese web sites it was 85 percent, and for the Indian web sites it was 88 percent. To check the intra-judge reliability, the coders coded a random sample of 25 percent of each of the US Indian, Chinese and Japanese web sites again after a month. An intra-judge reliability score of 88 percent, 90 percent, 89 percent and 85 percent was achieved for US, India, China and Japan, respectively.

## Analyzing the cultural content of web sites

### Results

The results (Table II) indicate significant differences in the depiction of cultural values across the web sites of the four countries, with local web sites depicting local cultural values. The multivariate test results of MANOVA show that country main effect is highly significant with a wilks lambda of 0.019 ( $F = 31.96$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ), but the industry main effect is nonsignificant. Prior to conducting post hoc tests, the data were subjected to homogeneity of variance test and the assumption was satisfied. The test of between-subject effects and the post hoc tukey test reveal that most of the hypotheses are supported (Table II).

#### *Individualism-collectivism*

On collectivism dimension, Japanese and Chinese web sites were significantly higher in the depiction of collectivist values compared to US and Indian web sites (mean: Japan 3.27, China 2.92, India 2.66, and US 2.36;  $F = 11.00$ ,  $p < 0.00$ ). Thus,  $H1$  is supported. On the individualism dimension the post hoc tests revealed that US web sites showed the highest levels of individualism-oriented features, followed by India, Japan and China, thus lending support to  $H2$  (mean: US 4.07, India 2.34, Japan 2.29, and China 1.73;  $F = 137.12$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ).

#### *Uncertainty avoidance*

Contrary to the proposed Hypothesis 3, on the uncertainty avoidance dimension, the Indian web sites scored significantly higher than US and Japanese web sites, and thus Hypothesis 3 is not supported.

#### *Power distance*

On power distance dimension Indian, Chinese and Japanese web sites scored significantly higher than US web sites. A closer look at the mean values (mean: China 3.45, India 3.63; Japan 3.57, and US 2.36;  $F = 25.81$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ) indicates that the degree of depiction of cultural values follows the order proposed in  $H4$ .

Values	Main effects <sup>a</sup>		Interactions <sup>a</sup> C X I	Tukey test <sup>b</sup> Group comparisons <sup>c</sup>
	Country (C)	Industry (I)		
Collectivism	11.00**	ns	4.81**	Jp > In & US; Ch > US
Individualism	137.12**	4.75*	ns	US > Jp, In & Ch; Jp & In > Ch
Uncertainty avoidance	7.58**	ns	ns	In > US & Jp
Power distance	25.81**	ns	ns	In, Jp & Ch > US;
Masculinity	6.70**	ns	5.51**	Jp & In > US
High-context	114.19**	4.21*	3.61*	Jp > US, In & Ch; Ch > US & In
Low-context	29.00**	ns	ns	US > Jp & Ch; In > Jp & Ch

**Notes:** <sup>a</sup> $F$ -values; <sup>b</sup>comparisons that are significant at  $< 0.05$  level are reported; <sup>c</sup>Jp = Japan, In = India, Ch = China, and US = United States, \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

**Table II.** Summary of manova results ( $F$ -values) on the seven cultural values

*Masculinity*

The mean values and the post hoc tests reveal that both Japan and India were high on masculinity as proposed in *H5*, followed by China and US (mean: Japan 3.03, India 3.03, China 2.61, US 2.46;  $F = 6.70$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ). Thus, *H5* is supported.

*High and low context*

On Hall's high context dimension also the results followed the proposed pattern in the degree and order of depiction of cultural values. The post hoc revealed that, on high context dimension, Japan scored significantly higher than all other countries, followed by China, US and India (mean: Japan 4.10, China 3.63, India 1.96, and US 2.00;  $F = 114.19$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ), thus *H6* is supported. Finally, as predicted in *H7*, US and India scored significantly higher than Japan and China on low contextuality (mean: US 3.13, India 3.04, China 2.09, and Japan 1.92,  $F = 29.00$ ;  $p < 0.000$ ).

To further analyze how various cultural categories under each of the seven cultural dimensions differed across the four countries, we conducted an ANOVA testing by cultural categories (Table III). The results reveal that under collectivism dimension features like clubs, newsletters, family theme, and country-specific symbols are prominently depicted on local Chinese and Japanese web sites. Under the individualism dimension the most common features found in highly individualist country web sites were, product uniqueness and web page personalization. High power distance societies like Japan and India prominently depicted features like hierarchy information, pictures of important people, and a prominent vision statement. Masculinity on the web sites was most prominently depicted via features like, clear gender roles and emphasis on product effectiveness. Japanese web sites scoring highest on high contextuality prominently depicted features like soft-sell approach, and liberal use of aesthetic drawings. On the other hand, low-context culture like US used hard sell approach and company rankings to lure customers to the web sites. Thus, a detailed cultural category level analysis clearly shows how the web sites of each country differ on each cultural category item used in the framework.

**Discussion**

The results indicate that local web sites of India, China, Japan and US not only reflect cultural values of the country of their origin, but also seem to differ significantly from each other on cultural dimensions. In the following discussion we provide a country-by-country analysis of differences in the depiction of cultural values on web sites.

*China.* One of the most striking feature of the local Chinese web sites was the recurrent images of the family theme. Similar findings have been reported in print and media advertising in China (Ji and McNeal, 2001; Tse *et al.*, 1989). Family is seen as the source of identity in the Chinese culture, this is reflected in complex family terminology wherein there are separate words for older brother, younger sister, and maternal and paternal uncles. Chinese web sites also showed high levels of power distance-oriented features, especially prominent were vision statements by the company heads, and "pride of ownership appeal". The importance of hierarchical relationships in Chinese society can be traced back to Confucius's five cardinal relations between sovereign and minister, father and son, husband and wife, old and young and friends (Ji and McNeal, 2001). Another unique characteristic of Chinese web sites was the use of soft-sell

Categories	Mean values				F-value	Group comparisons Tukey test
	China	India	Japan	US		
<i>Collectivism</i>						
Community	2.95	2.67	3.68	4.04	9.9**	Jp > US > In & Ch
Clubs	2.48	1.76	3.00	1.69	8.0**	Jp > US & In
Newsletter	3.86	3.00	3.56	3.08	3.5*	Ns
Family	3.57	2.62	3.40	1.50	24.1**	Jp & Ch > In; Jp, In & Ch > US
Symbols	3.76	3.14	2.92	1.73	19.4**	Jp, In & Ch > US; Ch > Jp
Loyalty	1.33	2.24	2.52	1.85	5.5**	Jp & In > Ch
Local web sites	2.52	3.24	3.84	2.69	8.5**	Jp > US & Ch
<i>Individualism</i>						
Privacy	1.05	1.81	2.08	3.81	120**	US > Jp, In & Ch; Jp & In > Ch
Independence	2.29	2.14	1.40	3.92	46.9**	US > Jp, In & Ch; Ch & In > Jp
Uniqueness	2.48	3.14	3.28	4.15	19.1**	US > Jp, In, Ch; In & Jp > Ch
Personalization	1.14	2.29	2.40	4.42	106**	US > Jp, In, Ch; In & Jp > Ch
<i>Uncertainty avoidance</i>						
Customer service	3.29	3.95	3.96	4.31	10.8**	US, In & Jp > Ch
Navigation	3.86	3.81	3.84	3.96	0.88	Ns
Local stores	3.76	3.90	3.80	3.62	0.63	Ns
Local terminology	4.19	2.86	3.04	1.92	22.6**	Ch > Jp, In & US
Free trail	3.14	3.33	2.92	3.04	0.68	Ns
Testimonial	2.05	3.71	2.12	1.69	18.6**	In > Jp, Ch, US
Tradition	3.81	2.29	3.64	2.23	18.5**	Jp > In & US; Ch > In & US
<i>Power distance</i>						
Hierarchy	3.00	3.52	4.04	2.31	13.3**	Jp > US & Ch; In > US
Pictures of CEO	3.19	3.62	4.04	2.77	6.4**	Jp > US & Ch; In > US
Quality	3.57	3.81	3.56	2.27	13.8**	Jp, In & Ch > US
Vision	4.10	3.67	3.84	2.62	13.6**	Jp, In & Ch > US
Pride of ownership	3.95	3.76	2.60	2.35	26.6**	In > Jp & US; Ch > Jp & US
Titles	2.71	3.43	3.36	1.88	13.4**	Jp, In & Ch > US
<i>Masculinity</i>						
Games	1.86	2.43	2.48	1.92	3.0*	Jp & In > Ch
Realism	2.62	2.86	2.72	2.88	0.58	Ns
Effectiveness	3.19	3.81	3.48	3.19	4.1**	In > US
Gender roles	2.81	3.05	3.40	1.85	10.6**	US > Jp, In & Ch
<i>Low context</i>						
Rank	2.67	3.43	1.88	3.35	21.2**	US, In & Ch > Jp; US > Jp & Ch
Hardsell	1.81	3.14	1.84	3.38	23.2**	US > Jp & Ch; In > Jp & Ch
Superlatives	2.76	3.19	2.08	3.15	11.0**	US, In & Ch > Jp
Terms and condition	1.29	2.43	1.88	2.65	17.1**	US & In > Jp > Ch
<i>High Context</i>						
Politeness	3.33	1.95	4.16	2.04	46.6**	Jp > US, In & Ch; Ch > US & In
Soft sell	3.43	1.52	4.04	2.00	61**	Jp > US, In & Ch; Ch > US & In
Esthetics	3.95	2.10	4.56	1.92	61.3**	Jp > US & In; Ch > US & In

**Notes:** \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; Tukey comparisons that are significant at  $< 0.05$  level are reported; Jp=Japan, In=India, Ch=China, and US=United States

**Table III.**  
ANOVA results for  
cultural categories

approach, and emphasis on esthetics and tradition. In high-context cultures like China and Japan, effective communication is not seen as boastful but rather as indirect, modest and even vague (Lin, 2001). High context nature of communication was also evident by relative lack of terms and conditions of use and online contracts. This is consistent with the Chinese tradition that relies on personal goodwill, and informal societal relationships in “guanxi” when doing business.

*Japan.* Like China, Japan is also a collectivist and high context society. Japanese people value the feeling of *amae*, which means looking out for others in the group. This is reflected in the depiction of features like online clubs, family themes, and links to local companies. For example, the web sites of Fujitsu, and Olympus prominently depicted features like camera clubs and news clubs. They also depicted links to local web sites such as racket ball associations, travel agencies, and tours for seeing cherry blossoms. Japan also ranks high on the masculinity dimension, and Japanese web sites prominently exhibited clear gender roles. For example, men dominated all the important positions in the company, and women held most of the customer service positions. The Japanese web sites also scored high on Hall (1976) high context dimension. Most of the Japanese web sites were rich in colors, esthetics, elements of soft sell approach, and displayed a general feel of humbleness. Japanese love for beauty and esthetics is captured in two words, *shibui*, which refers to the quality of the beauty, and *mono-no-aware*, which symbolizes a merging of one’s consciousness with an object’s beauty (Gannon MJ Associates, 1994). Pictures of butterflies, cherry blossoms, other nature scenes, and cultural artifacts were common on Japanese web sites, epitomizing *shibui* and *mono-no-aware*. Japanese web sites also depicted politeness in the form of customary notes of thanks to the customers, greetings to the customers, and notes of best wishes for good health.

*India.* *H3* concerning the levels of uncertainty avoidance seems to be the only one not supported in this study. According to Hofstede (1980), Japan scores highest on uncertainty avoidance followed by China, US and India, but our study shows that Indian web sites seem to depict the highest levels of uncertainty-avoidance features. This could be attributed to religious factors in play in the Indian society. Hinduism, the main religion in India, advocates the philosophy that life is an illusion or “Maya” and the only pursuit worth considering is the quest for spiritual enlightenment. Intricately linked with this belief of “Maya” is the “law of karma”, which basically emphasis that all events in the life are predetermined by our previous acts in this and last life. That is why Indians seem to be less of risk-takers and believe more in destiny. For example, every act from childbirth to marriage in India is greatly influenced by astrology. Indian society is also a very hierarchical society, evidenced in high power distance score and prominent depiction of power-distance oriented features. Hindus assume that people are born to a particular class or “caste” based on a natural law, and thus the society has the famous “caste-system” where in the society is divided into high-class intellectuals, middle-class traders and low-class unskilled laborers. Even though, the class system is not officially practiced in India, it is deeply ingrained in the Indian psyche. For instance, most of the Indian web sites prominently depicted the titles of the employees. Titles help to identify the rank of an employee in the organization, and the last name of a person reveals which part of India he or she is from and what caste he/she belongs to.

*US.* Previous studies in print and television advertising have reported that US advertisements prominently depict individualism theme and low context dimension

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(Cheng and Schweitzer, 1996; Lin, 2001; Mueller, 1987). US web sites also showed high levels of individualism and low context communication; especially prominent were the independence theme, web page personalization, hard sell approach, and use of superlatives. In general, US web sites were found to be more direct, informative, logical, success-oriented, progressive, and with a less decorative atmosphere. For example, lack of tradition orientation and emphasis on success is depicted nicely on Intel's web site. Robert Noyce (Intel's co-founder) is quoted as saying, "Do not be encumbered by history, go off and do something wonderful".

### Implications

The main research question of the study was to investigate whether local web sites of China, India, Japan, and US are culturally neutral or impregnated with cultural values of the country in question. This study provides evidence to international marketers and academics that instead of a "transnational web style" with features, images and categories common across nations, a culturally unique web style is emerging on the web. Thus, marketers should be cautious when launching standardized or machine-translated web sites for their global audience.

Another contribution of this study is that by providing evidence of cultural adaptation on the web, the study enhances the validity of previous studies that have confirmed the use of localized-specialized approach to advertising in print and broadcast media but not on the web (Albers-Miller and Gelb, 1996; Culter and Raj Shekhar, 1992; Tse *et al.*, 1989). This study also validates the cultural value framework of Singh (2003) by successfully using it to analyze the cultural content on Chinese, Indian, Japanese, and American web sites. Marketers can use this validated cultural value framework as a practical tool to develop culturally adapted web sites, or analyze their international web sites to measure the degree of adaptation targeted toward a particular culture. The study of Chinese, Indian, Japanese, and American web sites in this study will specifically be useful for marketers when designing web sites for the respective cultures. For example, the results of this study provide evidence that when designing web sites for the Japanese audience marketers need to emphasize collectivist features and high context-orientation, as local Japanese web sites show these cultural values most prominently.

Another online trend with companies is to develop regional web sites for Europe, Asia-pacific, and Americas, but targeting regional clusters does not translate into country-specific web communication. Our study shows that even within a geographic region (Asia), there is considerable variation in the depiction of cultural values on the web. For example, compared to Japanese and Chinese web sites, Indian web sites were significantly lower (Table II) in the depiction of collectivist-orientation, and high context communication; while the Chinese web sites were low in the depiction of masculinity compared to Japanese and Indian web sites. Thus, grouping Japan, India, and China as eastern cultures with predominant eastern cultural value orientation may be a mistake, instead each country's culture should be carefully studied before developing country-specific web communication material.

Future research can further test the cultural value framework of Singh (2003) in other countries and see whether the proposed cultural dimensions can be applied to studying cultural values in other cultures or do we need to expand their framework to make it more generalizable to other countries. In our study industry main effect seemed to be not all that significant, but possibly expanding this study to other industry segments could

reveal industry-wise differences in the depiction of cultural values. Furthermore, future studies can use different methodologies and samples to test whether web site localization makes sense. For example, conducting a survey of global online consumer perception of standardized versus localized web sites may provide further insights into standardization versus localization issue on the web. Web as a medium is constantly evolving with new interactive features being added, thus future research is needed to expand the cultural value framework of Singh (2003), to account for new interactive web features that may evolve in course of time. Moreover, Singh (2003) framework which we have validated in this study only accounts for cultural values and does not account for country-specific symbols, colors, icons, and codes. Future research is needed to further expand this framework to account for symbolic and other perceptual dimensions of culture that are difficult to account for in etic-level cultural inquiry.

In conclusion, the study shows that culture is an integral part of web communication and provides a starting point for future studies to explore the issue of web standardization or localization.

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### Appendix. Cultural categories for the framework (Singh, 2003; Singh et al., 2003)

*Dimension: collectivism*

*Categories:*

- *Community relations.* Presence or absence of community policy, giving back to community, social responsibility policy.

- *Clubs or chat rooms.* Presence or absence of members club, product-based clubs, chat with company people, chat with interest groups, message boards, discussion groups, and live talks.
- *Newsletter.* Online subscriptions, magazines, and newsletters.
- *Family theme.* Pictures of family, pictures of teams of employees, mention of employee teams and emphasis on team and collective work responsibility in vision statement or elsewhere on the web site, and emphasis on customers as a family.
- *Symbols and pictures of national identity.* Flags, pictures of historic monuments, pictures reflecting uniqueness of the country, country specific symbols in the form of icons, and indexes.
- *Loyalty programs.* Frequent miles programs, customer loyalty programs, and company credit cards for specific country, special membership programs.
- *Links to local web sites.* Links to country locations, related country specific companies, and other local web sites from a particular country.

*Dimension: individualism*

*Categories:.*

- *Good privacy statement.* Privacy policy and how personal information will be protected or used.
- *Independence theme.* Images and themes depicting self-reliance, self-recognition, and achievement.
- *Product uniqueness.* Unique selling points of the product and product differentiation features.
- *Personalization.* Features like gift recommendations, individual acknowledgements or greeting, and web page personalization.

*Dimension: uncertainty avoidance*

*Categories:.*

- *Customer service.* FAQ's, customer service option, customer contact or customer service e-mails.
- *Guided navigation.* Site maps, well-displayed links, links in the form of pictures or buttons, forward, backward up and down navigation buttons.
- *Tradition theme.* Emphasis on history and ties of a particular company with a nation, emphasis on respect, veneration of elderly and the culture, phrases like "most respected company", "keeping the tradition alive", "for generations", "company legacy".
- *Local stores.* Mention of contact information for local offices, dealers, and shops.
- *Local terminology.* Like use of country specific metaphors, names of festivals, puns, and a general local touch in the vocabulary of the web page not just mere translation.
- *Free trails or downloads.* Free stuff, free downloads, free screen savers, free product trails, free coupons to try the products or services, free memberships, or free service information.
- *Toll free numbers.* To call at any time around the clock.

*Dimension: power distance*

*Categories:.*

- *Company hierarchy information.* Information about the ranks of company personnel, information about organizational chart, and information about country managers.

- *Pictures of CEO's*. Pictures of executives, important people in the industry or celebrities.
- *Quality assurance and awards*. Mention of awards won, mention of quality assurance information and quality certification by international and local agencies.
- *Vision statement*
- *Pride of ownership appeal*. Web sites depict satisfied customers, fashion statement for the use of product, and the use of reference groups to portray pride.
- *Proper titles*. Titles of the important people in the company, titles of the people in the contact information, and titles of people on the organizational charts.

*Dimension: masculinity*

*Categories:*

- *Quizzes and games*. Games, quizzes, fun stuff to do on the web site, tips and tricks, recipes, and other fun information.
- *Realism theme*. Less fantasy and imagery on the web site, to-the-point information.
- *Product effectiveness*. Durability information, quality information, product attribute information, and product robustness information.
- *Clear gender roles*. Separate pages for men and women, depiction of women in nurturance roles, depiction of women in positions of telephone operators, models, wives, and mothers; depiction of men as macho, strong, and in positions of power.

*Dimension: high-context culture*

*Categories:*

- *Politeness and indirectness*. Greetings from the company, images and pictures reflecting politeness, flowery language, use of indirect expressions like “perhaps”, “probably” and “somewhat”. Overall humbleness in company philosophy and corporate information.
- *Soft sell approach*. Use of affective and subjective impressions of intangible aspects of a product or service, and more entertainment theme to promote the product.
- *Esthetics*. Attention to esthetic details, liberal use of colors, high bold colors, emphasis on images and context, and use of love and harmony appeal.

*Dimension: low-context culture*

*Categories:*

- *Hard sell approach*. Discounts, promotions, coupons, and emphasis on product advantages using explicit comparison.
- *Use of superlatives*. Use of superlative words and sentences: like “We are the number one”, “The top company”, “The leader”, “World’s largest”.
- *Rank or prestige of the company*. Features like company rank in the industry, listing in Forbes or Fortune, and numbers showing the growth and importance of the company.
- *Terms and condition of purchase*. Product return policy, warranty, and other conditions.

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