Chapter 2.14
An Exploratory Study of the Design Preferences of U.S. and Chinese Virtual Communities

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing popularity of electronic commerce, businesses are starting to recognise that developing a good virtual community can help to generate more profits. Virtual communities can be an instrument for building relationships with customers, and retaining customers' loyalty. Of interest are the similarities and differences in the design preferences of virtual communities across cultural groups. This paper, therefore, examined the design preferences of virtual communities in two cultural groups. The design preferences studied are Web design, tools used, and types of virtual communities preferred. Content analysis was employed to study 20 of the most popular Chinese and U.S. virtual communities. The study found that there are differences in the preference for the type of virtual communities and the tools used by Chinese and U.S. communities. The findings challenge aspects of Web site design across these cultural groups thought to be dissimilar based on prior research, indicating that designers of virtual communities must treat cultural differences with caution. Implications for research and practice are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Over 100 million non-English speakers are now accessing the Internet from all corners of the

world. In the near future, the number of non-U.S. users is expected to outnumber the U.S (Robbins & Stylianou, 2001). Global businesses are beginning to recognise that developing good virtual communities to meet customers' multiple social and commercial needs can lead to customer loyalty and hence greater profits (Armstrong & Hagel, 1996). In order to attract customers from different cultural groups, virtual communities should be designed to accommodate their varied preferences. It is therefore important to study how virtual communities can be better designed to suit the different cultural groups of customers.

Prior research into virtual communities has focused on the community types (Armstrong & Hagel, 1996; Chaudhury, Mallick, & Rao, 2001), tools used (Chaudhury et al., 2001; Preece, 2000) and Web site design (Preece, 2000). However, there has been little work into cultural preferences in the choice of tools and types of communities preferred. Although many have suggested that Web sites (in general) should be designed to suit different cultural preferences (Chen, 2002; Fink & Laupase, 2000), our understanding of the cultural preferences in virtual community Web site design remain limited. The aim of this study is, therefore, to explore the design preferences of U.S. and Chinese virtual communities in hope of filling this gap in our knowledge. In terms of practice, the findings of this study can help virtual community designers better understand design choices across cultures and hence develop virtual communities that can attract and sustain membership.

In the next section, we review prior research with a focus on the culture issue relating to virtual community Web site design, as well as tools used and community types. The methodology employed is then discussed. Result and analysis is then presented. Discussion and conclusion follow.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Concept of Virtual Communities

There are a number of definitions of the term virtual communities in the literature. Toomey, Mark, Tang, and Adams (1998) describe virtual communities as spatially distributed people who are able to meet each other, form relationships, and pool their resources through computer-mediated support. Igbaria's (1999) definition of virtual communities is focused more on the communication side of the communities, where virtual community is "a term normally used to describe various forms of computer-mediated communication, particularly long-term, textually mediated conversations among large groups." Virtual communities are considered different from traditional communities as they are "more active and discerning, less accessible to one-on-one processes and provide a wealth of valuable cultural information" (Evans, Wedande, Ralston, & Hul, 2001). This paper, therefore, defines virtual communities as communities formed by people who can be from a different space/time zone and culture, interact together, share resources and interest, and build-up relationships through computer-mediated communication.

The Culture Issue

Yap (2002)suggests that each virtual community has its own culture, as it provides a virtual space for people who have the same belief and interest to group together, and also share their knowledge. However, people in the virtual communities may be from different places around the world, sharing different real-world cultures. For instance, a virtual community can be formed by people from North America and Asia, who have different beliefs and behaviour patterns (Fink & Laupase, 2000). It can be assumed that over time, people

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