

Chapter 17

Culture and Websites Interaction: Issues and Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing globalization of the business world, websites have become ever more important tools in international business. After the invention of websites, researchers have begun to analyze the websites as they have for traditional communication channels. Websites, as the communication medium of global firms, are not culturally neutral mediums. Website components should be analyzed very carefully in terms of their interaction with cultural issues to come up with culturally adapted websites. In this chapter, 114 studies on culture and websites are critically reviewed, and selected papers among them from a variety of areas such as marketing, communications, management, information technologies, and others, are analyzed in detail to consolidate the existing knowledge and approaches. This chapter aims to analyze how scholarly research on the interaction of culture and websites has developed. The studies are categorized according to the framework developed and selected. Forty of them are discussed in detail under some subcategories. A number of conceptual and methodological issues that deserve more attention are discussed to fulfill the high potential of websites. A state-of-the-art review of several innovative advances in culture and websites is provided to stimulate new streams for future research, and future research recommendations are proposed at the end of the chapter.

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INTRODUCTION

In the new millennium, companies affected by the globalization are more eager to extend their geographical reach to take advantage of global business opportunities (Leung et al., 2005). As the globalization process takes place within the companies, their websites also need to be operated worldwide, although it is not easy to communicate with different time zones and different places with 24-hour access (Robbins & Stylianou, 2003; Burgmann, Kitchen, & Williams, 2006). In fact, websites are truly global because wherever they are hosted, they are globally accessible and can easily cross national borders (Singh, Zhao, & Hu, 2005; Fletcher, 2006; Sinkovics, Yamin, & Hossinger, 2007; Usunier & Roulin, 2010). Additionally, they are important channels for companies to reach their consumers (Maynard & Tian, 2004; Gevorgyan & Manucharova, 2009). Audiences of websites have increased more than five times between 2000-2011, and now 32.7% of the world population could access the Internet, which equates to more than 2.2 billion people worldwide (Internet World Stats, 2012). With these figures, websites could easily reach to potential consumers more than any other distribution or communication channel.

Since the invention of websites in 1994, studies have been mostly conducted on design and usability of websites. However, the focus was not only engineering of websites, but also finding new avenues for globally communicating and disseminating information on the websites (Faiola & Matei, 2006). Easy and 24-hour access from all over the world, public relations, messages, hypertexts, images, sales promotions, direct marketing, interactive customer services, technical support, among others, make websites vital communication channels for global companies (Robbins & Stylianou, 2003; Cho & Cheon, 2005). The interactivity of websites, which traditional forms of communication do not possess, is an attractive feature of this new communication

medium. Especially for product-based multinationals (Okazaki, 2004; Tong & Robertson, 2008), websites provide an easier market penetration for global companies than do traditional channels. Moreover, with its unlimited and ever changing content and other visual elements, websites can provide a visual experience of brands for potential customers (Ferreira, 2007; Baack & Singh, 2007). They improve international marketing efforts and overall business success (Sinkovics, Yamin, & Hossinger, 2007).

In addition to the increasing globalization of the business world, the influence of culture on global business has become even more critical. Globalization forces companies to operate and organize their business across borders. Therefore, companies must communicate, manage, and execute many of their activities through newly developed communication technologies to a heterogeneous group of stakeholders. For instance, information and communication technologies (ICTs) are now crucial parts of global business. ICTs, websites in particular, are means used to communicate with global consumers both at home and in host markets, promoting and facilitating companies' branding and communicating efforts (Martinez-Lopez, Sousa & Gázquez-Abad, 2011).

From the very beginning of the World Wide Web, its global usage has increased exponentially, and it has become an important channel for international communication. Due to its global audience nature, the number of international participants and transactions increase each day as the World Wide Web evolves. Despite the fact they are associated with "worldwide" and "global," websites are still under the impact of cultural constraints. Therefore, interest in the impact of culture on websites has tremendously increased as the world business becomes more globalized.

Functions of websites such as e-commerce, control of information flow, information disclosure, and reduced communication expenses, all must be considered with firms' image and performance at the same time (Luna, Peracchio,

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