

# **Website Cultural Customization: Web Design and Marketing Perspectives**

Marek Lutr

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Bachelor Thesis  
2013



**Tomas Bata University in Zlín**  
Faculty of Humanities

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Univerzita Tomáše Bati ve Zlíně

Fakulta humanitních studií

Ústav anglistiky a amerikanistiky

akademický rok: 2012/2013

## ZADÁNÍ BAKALÁŘSKÉ PRÁCE

(PROJEKTU, UMĚLECKÉHO DÍLA, UMĚLECKÉHO VÝKONU)

Jméno a příjmení: **Marek LUTR**

Osobní číslo: **H10424**

Studijní program: **B7310 Filologie**

Studijní obor: **Anglický jazyk pro manažerskou praxi**

Forma studia: **prezenční**

Téma práce: **Kulturní přizpůsobení webových stránek z hlediska webdesignu a marketingu**

Zásady pro vypracování:

Zjistěte, které světové jazyky jsou nejpoužívanějšími jazyky internetu.

Zaměřte se na problémy při globalizaci webových stránek z hlediska kulturní kompatibility, webdesignu a marketingu.

Vysvětlete různé způsoby adaptace webových stránek cílové kultuře a objasněte jejich výhody a nevýhody.

Na základě kulturních charakteristik Hofsteda a Halla odvodte doporučení pro přizpůsobení webových stránek daným kulturám.

Analyzujte, jaké procento nadnárodních společností ve zvoleném odvětví používá kulturně adaptované webové stránky, a vysvětlete, jaké webové elementy byly za tímto účelem použity.

Rozsah bakalářské práce:

Rozsah příloh:

Forma zpracování bakalářské práce: **tištěná/elektronická**

Seznam odborné literatury:

Hofstede, Geert H. 2001. *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.  
Mooij, Marieke K. de. 2010. *Global marketing and advertising: Understanding cultural paradoxes*. Los Angeles: SAGE.  
Janouch, Viktor. 2010. *Internetový marketing: Prosadte se na webu a sociálních sítích*. Brno: Computer Press.  
Singh, Nitish, and Arun Pereira. 2005. *The culturally customized Web site: Customizing web sites for the global marketplace*. Burlington: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann.  
Yunker, John. 2003. *Beyond borders: Web globalization strategies*. Indianapolis: New Riders.

Vedoucí bakalářské práce:

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Ústav anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Datum zadání bakalářské práce:

**30. listopadu 2012**

Termín odevzdání bakalářské práce:

**3. května 2013**

Ve Zlíně dne 30. ledna 2013

  
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## **ABSTRAKT**

Hlavním cílem této bakalářské práce je analýza kulturně specifického marketingu se zaměřením na webové stránky mezinárodních společností. Práce je rozvržena do dvou částí. Teoretická část práce rozebírá současné trendy a vyhlídky lokalizace, popisuje klíčové pojmy a pětistupňovou klasifikaci webových stránek dle jejich kulturní adaptace Dr. Singha. Popisuje rovněž Hofstedovy a Hallovy kulturní dimenze, jejich hodnoty v jednotlivých zemích a implikace pro kulturně ohleduplný webdesign. Praktickou část tvoří studie kulturní adaptace webových stránek největších světových automobilových výrobců. Na praktických příkladech jsou rovněž popsány specifické marketingové styly vhodné pro jednotlivé kultury.

Klíčová slova: webové stránky, kultura, marketing, lokalizace

## **ABSTRACT**

The main objective of this bachelor thesis is an analysis of culturally specific marketing which is focused on websites of international companies. The work is divided into two parts. The theoretical part of the paper discusses current trends and prospects of localization, describes key concepts and Dr. Singh's five-level classification of websites on the basis of their cultural adaptation. It also describes Hofstede and Hall's cultural dimensions, their values in different countries and implications for culturally sensitive web design. The practical part comprises a cultural adaptation study of websites by world's largest automotive manufacturers. Practical examples are used to describe specific marketing styles appropriate to individual cultures.

Keywords: websites, culture, marketing, localization

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor PhDr. Katarína Nemčoková, Ph.D. for her continuous support, kind guidance, inspiration and valuable advice she gave me during the preparation of this thesis.

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## INTRODUCTION

During the last few decades the Internet has transformed from a small American experimental network into the world's most powerful global medium. Within this relatively short time span it has become a unique and infinite source of information, the most frequently used means of communication as well as a highly efficient advertising tool. In addition, there is no doubt that the Internet has also contributed to the expansion of international business. Present day companies must make every effort to resist the increasing competition. One of the possible strategies for dealing with it appears to be global expansion—the reinforcement of the company's position by gaining new customers from foreign markets. However, this is easier said than done, of course. It should be noted that company globalization is a complicated process and there are definitely many hurdles on the way to international success. Apart from others, distinct culturally-dependent advertising practices need to be taken into consideration. Research shows that different cultures give preference to specific styles of advertising. The question is, whether cultural awareness is sufficiently incorporated into the marketing strategy of present-day corporations that are active on the international market.

In the past, culture was often perceived as an inferior factor in advertising and the advertising style was more or less uniform. However, modern research has shown that culturally sensitive advertising can be very beneficial for acquiring new customers as well as keeping the old ones. For this reason, it seems obvious that companies respecting target countries' cultural preferences might gain competitive edge over those who ignore them.

Supposing a commercial website can be considered as a cultural document, it is possible to assess the level of companies' cultural adaptation effort on the Internet. My research was primarily based on a theoretically-sound, rigorously-tested framework for designing culturally customized websites introduced by the research team of Assoc. Professor Nitish Singh, PhD., Saint Louis University. Recommendations for culturally sensitive advertising used in this framework were derived from five empirically validated cultural dimensions pioneered by anthropologists Prof. Geert Hofstede and Edward T. Hall, PhD. Similarly to the Singh's research, my study, which was carried out in January 2013, was also country-based, thus concentrating on dominant cultures of selected countries. It reveals that culturally sensitive advertising gradually starts to be a part of companies' globalization strategy. Moreover, it reveals remarkable differences among specific styles of advertising used in different cultures.

## **I. THEORY**

# 1 HISTORY AND PROSPECTS OF WEBSITE LOCALIZATION

## 1.1 Introduction

This section shows interesting figures regarding changing trends in the number of international Internet users and languages used on the Internet. As Yunker (2003, 1) remarks, the Internet can be viewed as a technological device connecting computers, but it is language that establishes connection among people. Having mentioned that, though, it is important to realize that the Internet was not originally designed for multilingual audience. Since it originated from an internal U.S. military network in the late 1960s, no one at that time would probably guess that it would one day turn into a global medium connecting people from all over the world.

## 1.2 International Web Audience

Over the past decade we have witnessed an immense rise in the number of Internet users in Asia. As illustrated in Figure 1.1, between 2000 and 2010, the number of Asian Internet users rose by 710.8 million, whereas in Europe the increase was only 375 million and 86.1 million in North America. Most recent data from June 30, 2012 show that Asian users have exceeded the 1-billion mark with 1,076,681,059 users (Internet World Stats 2012). According to Internet World Stats, Asian countries still have quite low Internet penetration rate of only 25 percent (Ibid.). In other words, there is still quite a low percentage of population with access to the Internet connection, which implies that the rapid growth of Asian Internet users is expected to continue. This trend is most probably mainly caused by the constantly increasing standard of living in China. The rising buying power of the Chinese might explain why this country is becoming a popular destination of foreign investors. This can also imply the increasing need for properly localized Chinese versions of websites that are ran by overseas companies.

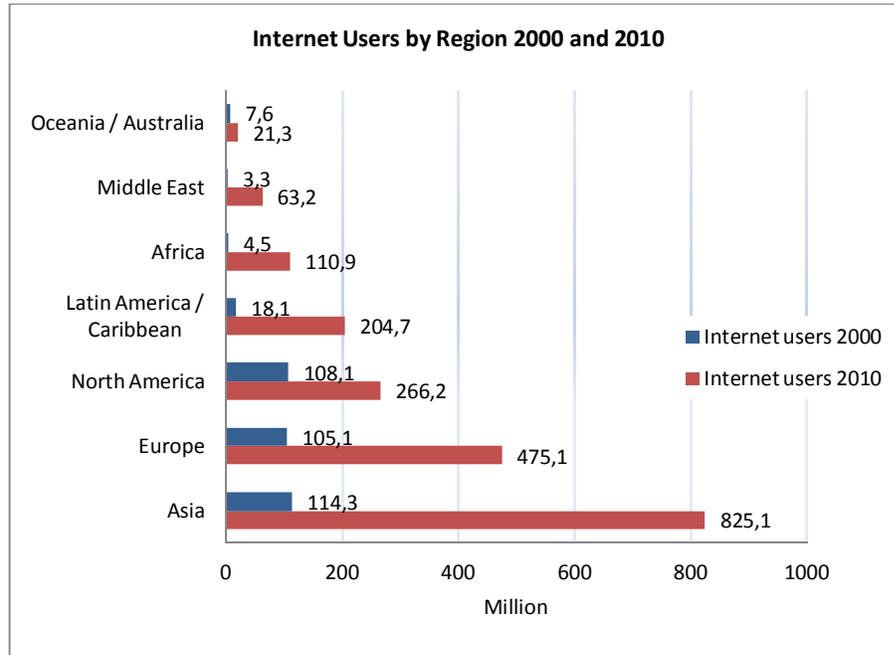


Figure 1.1. Internet Users by Region, 2000 vs. 2010 (Pingdom 2010)

### 1.3 Most Commonly Used Languages on the Internet

According to recent data, there are approximately 7,000 spoken languages in use in the world. However, only 10% of these languages are spoken by more than 100,000 people and there are ca. 150-200 languages used by more than 1,000,000 people (BBC 2013). Nevertheless, it is important to realize, that not all of these languages exist in written form and even lower percentage of them are present on the Internet.

The top ten most commonly used Internet languages are displayed in Figure 1.2. As apparent, although immediately followed by Chinese, English is still the leading language of the cyberspace. The third most widely used language on the Internet is Spanish with more than 165 million users. The top ten is completed by Japanese, Portuguese, German, Arabic, French, Russian and Korean (STAR TS Translation Services 2011). These languages cover 83% of all the Internet users. Therefore, in order to address as many international customers as possible, target markets using these languages are often recommended to be included in big companies' globalization strategy. Nevertheless, we also should be aware of the significance of other languages that until recently have been unknown to the Web world. All these aforementioned statistics only highlight the rising importance and good prospects of the website localization industry.

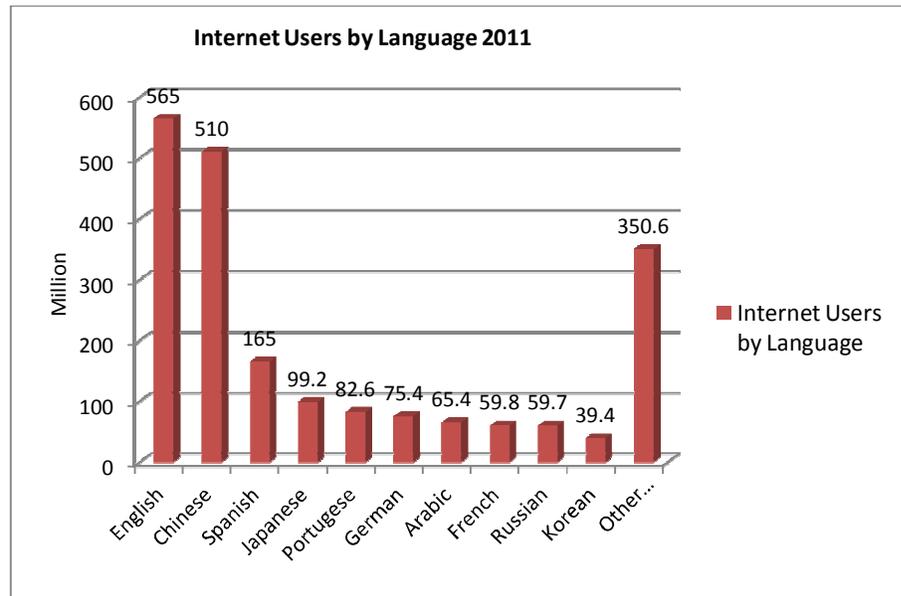


Figure 1.2. Internet Users by Language 2011 (STAR TS Translation Services 2011)

#### 1.4 New Challenges for Websites

In the past, size and the financial strength of a company were the most important factors in the pursuit of acquiring new global customers. Today, each company, regardless of its size, has almost equal opportunities to approach its customers via their company's web page. However, easy access to information also leads to growth of competition and consequent pressure on prices and profit margins. As Janouch (2010, 59) puts it, in general, the essence of effective advertising is basically convincing people that a product is meant for them. Singh and Pereira (2005, 2-3) further argue that a *customized and dynamic marketing strategy* is needed for a website so as to become invulnerable to competitive marketing actions. From what has been said so far, it is possible to conclude that for building customers' trust and loyalty a commercial website should be customized to the target culture. Different methods of cultural adaptation of websites will be described at the end of the following chapter.

## 2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF LOCALIZATION

### 2.1 Basic Terms

This section should clarify a set of fundamental terms regarding the process of website localization and further related terms.

#### 2.1.1 Website Usability

Website usability refers to the characteristics of websites related to the behaviour of users. This term replaced the commonly known expression “user-friendly” (Al-Badi and Mayhew 2010, 2). This factor above all determines how difficult it is for users to accustom to the website layout. Consequently, a usable website increases the speed of users performing tasks. Website usability can be enhanced by designing a well-arranged layout, clear navigation as well as respecting country-specific web design conventions. Conversely, aggressive advertising banners and pop-up windows are considered to have a disruptive effect, since such elements can draw away visitors’ attention or even confuse them.

#### 2.1.2 Website Accessibility

It is more than obvious that each commercial website should be designed so that it allows easy access for as many visitors as possible. Unfortunately, in this respect, usually, little is done for people with sight problems, since website elements used to facilitate browsing for those are often forgotten (Ibid., 4). Such features for example include resizable text, contrast colours of text and web page background, text-to-speech screen readers, text only browsers, or screen magnifiers. All dynamic content and images throughout the website should be assigned *Alt-text* attributes. These, for a common user invisible attributes, can be read by special software tools used by people with sight difficulties, and provide them with information about web graphics, dynamic content or their function.

#### 2.1.3 Website Readability

One of the most important web content parameters is website readability. It is a parameter that deals with reading comprehension of a website (Al-Badi and Mayhew 2010, 6). Experienced web designers, copywriters or web marketing specialists are well aware of the fact that writing for the web must be different from writing for printed sources. Studies have shown that Internet users usually approach online texts differently

than hardcopies. Moreover, it has been proven that reading from computer screen is considerably slower than reading printed materials (Ibid.). Therefore, in most cases reading web pages word by word is avoided. Instead, there is a tendency to scan the page content. This phenomenon seems to be characteristic for the majority of Internet users across cultures.

#### **2.1.4 Local Content vs. Localized Content**

These two terms are often incorrectly interchanged. However, As Yunker (2003, 58) claims, “local content is content created specifically for [the target] market”, whereas “localized content is anything that was created outside that market and now must be adapted (and often translated) for that market”. Nowadays, there are basically two options for companies with international presence on how to deal with management of their localized websites. These are either managed from one place or entrusted to companies’ foreign subsidiaries.

#### **2.1.5 Locale**

This term is commonly used in localization industry to determine the specific combination of language and country of localization projects (Yunker 2003, 16). The importance of locales can be visible especially in localization projects conducted for countries where more than one language is spoken. A typical example here would be Switzerland with its four official languages (German, French, Italian and Romansh). So, for instance a Czech company wanting to address the maximal number of Swiss citizens would have to create other four foreign language versions of their web pages with identical content. Furthermore, some languages (such as English and Spanish) are often spoken in multiple countries. However, these languages often have their regional variants which can be very different. For example Spanish language is renowned for having many regional variants, some of which are quite divergent from one another, particularly in pronunciation and vocabulary. Differences can be found between European Spanish and the one spoken in the Americas. In addition, even American and European Spanish have their regional dialects.

For both languages and countries unique codes were created and standardized. Pairs of language/country codes are widely used in many different disciplines, for example for purposes of libraries, but, more importantly, they are also used by webmasters for the declaration of different language and country versions of websites.

The full list of language and country codes can be found in the ISO 639 standard. Selected language/country pairs are presented in Table 2.1:

Table 2.1. Examples of language/country pairs according to ISO 639-2

en-UK	English U.K.
en-US	English U.S.
de-DE	German Germany
de-AT	German Austria
de-CH	German Switzerland
fr-CH	French Switzerland
It-CH	Italian Switzerland
rm-CH	Romansh Switzerland
fr-FR	French France
fr-CA	French Canada
es-MX	Spanish Mexico
es-ES	Spanish Spain
es-EC	Spanish Ecuador
zh-CN	Chinese China (Simplified)
zh-TW	Chinese Taiwan (Traditional)
cs-CZ	Czech Czech Republic

By convention, the first half of the pair, which should be written in lowercase, stands for the language, whereas the second, written in uppercase, marks the country. Hyphen is used as a separator.

### 2.1.6 Website Localization

Most authors define localization as the “process of modifying a product for a specific locale” (Yunker 2003, 17). However, in the case of website localization they sometimes have different views on what it actually comprises. According to Yunker, this process simply involves making any necessary changes to the source website that needs to be adapted for a selected locale including graphics, layout and colours. However, other scientists, such as Singh and Pereira (2005, 12) describe website localization as a translational matter only. They divide websites into five categories according to their level of adaptation. These will be detailed in Chapter 2.2.

### 2.1.7 Website Internationalization

Since some websites are designed as very culturally dependent, it would be very uneasy, or even pointless to have them localized. Internationalization is a process of rebuilding such websites or designing new ones that are culturally and technically neutral so they can be easily translated or adapted for as many target locales as possible (Al-Badi and Naqvi 2009, 116). Companies usually choose internationalization, since it considerably reduces the time and resources needed for localization. By browsing through different language versions of commercial websites it can be easily recognized if the websites of a particular company have undergone the process of internationalization. The design and content of localized versions that originated from a common internationalized model usually appears identical or very similar.

### 2.1.8 Website Globalization

This term covers the whole process of creating adapted versions for all selected locales while completing two complementary processes of website internationalization and website localization (Singh and Pereira 2005, 7). We usually talk about website globalization in case of larger projects comprising localization into several locales; nevertheless, some extensive projects of large international companies can cover as many as 50 or more locales. The process of website globalization can be visualized as shown in Figure 2.2:

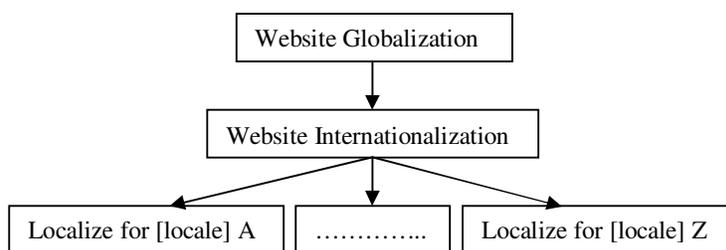


Figure 2.2. Website Globalization Visualization

(Al-Badi and Naqvi 2009, 116)

## 2.2 Five Website Adaptation Levels

Singh and Pereira (2005) expand classification of websites to five categories according to the extent of website adaptation to the target market. Several comprehensive studies

(Simon 2001; Luna et al. 2002; Singh et al. 2004), which examined the perception of localized websites as well as buying intention of their users in different countries, emphasize the importance of country-specific web content, as will be detailed later. The five categories are distinguished as follows:

### **2.2.1 Standardized Websites**

“[Standardized websites] have the same web content for both domestic and international users” (Singh and Pereira 2005, 10). In other words, there is only one standardized monolingual version to serve customers from all over the world. Still considered the Internet language number one, English is usually chosen for such websites. As for project costs, designing a monolingual and culturally independent website is thought to be the most inexpensive solution.

### **2.2.2 Semi-Localized Websites**

These websites are similar to standardized websites. The only difference is that they also offer information about companies’ foreign subsidiaries. Nevertheless, these websites are still monolingual with no effort to reach out to international consumers in terms of translation (Singh and Pereira 2005, 10). Very often one central U.S. website serves for both U.S. and international customers.

### **2.2.3 Localized Websites**

These websites offer “country-specific web pages with translation, wherever relevant” (Singh and Pereira 2005, 12). Locally specific content is usually considered irrelevant to foreign users, thus it remains untranslated. Also, it is necessary to mention that companies’ product portfolio may vary in different countries, therefore it would be useless to translate web pages of products or services that are not meant for customers in the target country.

### **2.2.4 Highly Localized Websites**

According to Singh and Pereira (2005, 13), these websites are “country-specific [web pages] with translations wherever relevant, and include relatively high levels of localization in terms of country specific information”. Highly localized sites for example must be adapted to the target country in terms of currencies, time, date, number formats, address formats, etc. Nevertheless, there are no efforts made to meet cultural preferences of target country users.

### 2.2.5 Culturally Customized Websites

It has been proven by several researches that advertising reflecting local cultural values is more powerful and persuasive than culturally insensitive advertising owing to enhanced usability, accessibility and interactivity for the target web audience (Singh and Pereira 2005, 14-18). Dutch cultural scientist, Marieke de Mooij in her book *Global Marketing and Advertising* (2010, 2) argues that no matter how the Internet contributed to globalization, it did not evoke the convergence of local customer behaviour, and using various examples from divergent parts of the world she explains the importance of meeting the needs of particular local cultures.

Culturally customized websites exhibit complete adaptation to the culture of the target market. In the past, the significance of culture in international marketing was often viewed as secondary in comparison to other aspects. However, modern marketing strategies put the consumer in the first place (Singh and Pereira 2005, 17). For a successful business, there is a general agreement that companies should adapt to customers' needs and not vice versa. However, still a very low percentage of present-day international companies have their websites culturally customized. On the other hand, this alternative represents the most expensive solution for reaching international customers, since truly culturally customized websites need to be rebuilt from the ground up. When designing websites for a high number of diametrically different cultures. Since the web content is usually very changeable, periodical maintenance is needed, which increases web globalization expenses even more.

### 3 CULTURAL ISSUES

#### 3.1 Introduction

Since this chapter is going to discuss cultural adaptation of websites, it may be useful to define culture first. Probably the simplest definition of culture we may find would be, as Singh and Pereira put it, “shared values” (2005, 28). Dutch professor Geert Hofstede (2013) offers a little more elaborate definition, as follows: “Culture is the collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from others”. Of course, culture cannot be considered as an exact scientific discipline and Hofstede himself admits that each individual is different and not all people in a given society are programmed in the same way (Ibid.). On the other hand, we cannot deny the influence of culture on people’s perception and decision making. Apparently, people from different cultures would perceive the same symbols, colours and pictures in a different way, and obviously, different would be also their reactions to such elements. Given that websites can be considered as a cultural document, it is highly likely that Internet users from different cultures will show different preferences as for web page appearance, writing style, but also sociologic issues such as individuals’ relationship to the community, reverence for authorities or gender equality.

##### 3.1.1 Colour Perception

This section offers a brief insight into perception and preference of colours across different cultures. To begin with, it should be noted that uniform colour shades are not being recognized by all cultures throughout the world. As Singh and Pereira (2005, 40) state, it is cultural vocabulary that causes limitations to colours people can discriminate. There are languages that identify colours that are not recognized in western culture. For example, a long list of words to describe colours of snow is used by Eskimos; likewise in India, several shades of brown colour can be discriminated. On the other hand, some primitive cultures, such as Ibibio people in Nigeria are said to recognize only as few as four colours (Ibid.). More important, in some cultures there are fundamental differences in the meaning of colours. So to avoid possible problems, web designers should respect this, and make necessary changes in the choice of colours or their combinations, if necessary.

An interesting fact is that some colours in different cultures express a completely opposite meaning. A commonly cited example is the case of white. While in many

European countries it indicates purity, innocence or virginity, and is chosen as a typical colour of wedding dress, in India, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan or Japan it is a colour of death and is usually worn on funerals. The variety in the meaning of red colour is also very interesting, though. In China, Hong Kong and Taiwan it is a colour of celebration, good luck, joy and fertility, but also Communism; on the contrary, in Africa it is a colour of death, bloodshed and mourning clothes; in the U.S. it signifies excitement, passion, sex, but also warning (e.g. red stop signs and fire trucks); and in the U.K. it is used to demonstrate authority or power of the government (Yunker 2003, 484). In Brazil, red cars are made illegal, because they are thought to cause more accidents.

Moreover, many cultures use different colours to describe the same moods and emotions. For example British “green with envy” is expressed in German as “yellow with envy” (*gelb vor Neid*) and in Czech as “pale with envy” (*bledý závistí*). Despite the fact that various cultures perceive certain colours differently, some corporations obviously prefer brand colour consistency to cultural preferences. Thus, for example, Coca-Cola maintains red, FedEx white or Samsung blue all over the world.

### 3.1.2 Visual Perception

Another important feature of culturally customized websites should be correct spatial orientation in web pages. This term covers textual orientation, as well as the position of navigation elements and graphics. For example, by ancient tradition, oriental scripts, such as Chinese, Japanese and Korean are read from top to bottom (however, this rule does not hold true for websites, where the reading direction is from left to right), Arabic is read from right to left (except for numbers which are read from left to right), and European languages are read from left to right (Singh and Pereira 2005, 33). Furthermore, special attention needs to be paid to text justification. For example, texts on Arabic websites should be justified to right with page scrollbar positioned on the left of the page. Also, the position of navigation elements might be important to some cultures. In oriental cultures, these are usually centred.

### 3.1.3 Symbolism as Part of Marketing Strategy

According to Singh and Pereira (2005, 41), symbols can be viewed as carriers of cultural information which is passed from generation to generation. They argue why it is necessary to pay attention to culture-specific signs, symbols, icons, rituals and myths while designing a customized marketing strategy. Not respecting these aspects might result in cross-cultural misunderstandings, or cause embarrassing situations. Generally, religious

symbols, symbols of animals are recommended to use cautiously. For instance, in Arabic or some oriental cultures pictures of animals may not be accepted positively. An advertisement made by a company which tried to promote their eyeglasses in Thailand by featuring animals wearing glasses was classified as very unsuccessful. In this country, “animals are considered to be a form of low life” (The Culturocity Group, llc 2007).

Similar symbols across different cultures can evoke completely opposite emotions. For example, the swastika is a symbol that has been used in India for over 5,000 years to represent positive meanings of fertility, sun, power, and strength (Mobius.com 2012). Sadly, in the 1920s it was adopted by the German Nazi party to become the symbol of racism and white supremacy of the Nazis. Similarly, the use of hand gestures is typically not recommended. For example, “the icon depicting the OK sign using the thumb and index finger is perfectly acceptable in Canada. However, this same symbol is considered an obscene gesture in parts of South America” (Wintranslation.com 2012).

Another important issue to consider in cross-cultural advertising is the use of proper human models. Some cultures might for example show some reservations to advertisements featured by actors of a different ethnic group. According to the University of Nebraska research done with Afro-Americans from different classes and background, the “[Afro-Americans] showed better recall of ad content and had more positive affect toward the ad when Black actors were included in advertisements” (Association for Consumer Research 1997).

Last but not least, while designing culture-sensitive websites, designers should be aware of possible problems that can arise when using icons. Icons are used to facilitate navigation on the web page. Yunker (2003, 183) notes that the meaning of some commonly used icons in western-world web pages, including the *shopping cart* icon or the *home* icon with a depiction of a house, might be unknown to certain cultures. For example, in France, the term *home page* is not used. Instead, the *welcome page* is preferred. The issue of the *mailbox* icon is also problematic, since physical appearance and colour of mailboxes may differ from country to country.

### 3.2 Culture-Sensitive Web Design

Based on their empirical research, Singh and Pereira (2005, 53) provide a methodology to achieve successful cultural customization for websites. As a base for their framework they use Hall’s and Hofstede’s established classification of countries according

to their cultural values and preferences. Despite the fact that cultural classification of countries can be somewhat inaccurate, (especially for multicultural countries, such as Western English-speaking countries, Australia, India, Netherlands and others), Hall's and Hofstede's work has been validated by several researches and has been used by many web marketers and web designers to help them create effective, culturally sensitive websites. These cultural values comprise: individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, masculinity-femininity and high-low context.

### 3.2.1 Countries and their Cultural Preferences

According to Singh and Pereira (2005, 71), by considering countries' rankings in the five aforementioned cultural values, we can find certain cultural similarities and differences across global cultures, and consequently, develop a successful strategy for designing a truly culturally sensitive website. First of all, it is necessary to provide definitions of these values and outline preferences of individual countries:

**“Individualism-Collectivism** [is] a belief in the importance of the goals of the individual (individualism) versus the goals of the group (collectivism)” (Ibid.). In other words, this value indicates social cohesion. Based on Hofstede's research, countries such as the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Canada, New Zealand, Italy, Belgium and Denmark tend to be highly individualistic, whereas in Central and South America, East Asia countries and Indonesia, collectivism is preferred.

**“Uncertainty Avoidance** [is an indicator that shows] the importance of predictability, structure, and order (high uncertainty avoidance) versus a willingness for risk-taking and an acceptance of ambiguity and limited structure (low uncertainty avoidance)” (Singh and Pereira 2005, 93). Cultures with high values of uncertainty avoidance are risk-averse and do not look for conflicts and ambiguous situations (Ibid.). This might also explain their reluctance to use electronic media. Countries showing high levels of uncertainty avoidance are Greece, Portugal, Guatemala, Uruguay, El Salvador, Belgium and Japan. Countries low on uncertainty avoidance include Singapore, Jamaica, Denmark, Hong Kong, Sweden, Ireland and the United Kingdom.

**“Power Distance** [is] a belief in authority and hierarchy (high power distance) versus the belief that power should be distributed (low power distance)” (Singh and Pereira 2005, 111). In low power distance cultures there is a tendency to egalitarianism, while high power distance cultures seem to show more respect towards elders and authorities.

Countries with high scores of power distance include Malaysia, Panama, Guatemala, Philippines, Mexico, Venezuela and China, whereas countries low on power distance are considered Austria, Israel, Denmark, New Zealand, Ireland and Norway.

“**Masculinity-Femininity** [is] a belief in achievement and ambition (masculine) versus a belief in nurturing and caring for others (feminine). Masculine cultures value assertiveness, material possessions, and success, while feminine cultures place more value on helping others, preserving the environment, quality of life, and nurturance” (Singh and Pereira 2005, 125). Japan, Hungary, Austria, Venezuela, Switzerland, Italy and Mexico are thought to be the world’s most masculine countries, while Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Denmark, Costa Rica and Finland are on the opposite side of the scale.

**High-Low Context:** According to Edward T. Hall (1976), context is inherent to every culture and can be perceived as a carrier of meaning, values and symbols that are very well understood in that particular culture. High-context cultures tend to put emphasis on group harmony and consensus. Also, intuition or feelings are preferred to reason and abundance of unnecessary words is not perceived positively. “Words are not so important as context, which might include the speaker’s tone of voice, facial expression, gestures, posture—and even the person’s family history and status” (College of Marin 2012).

Low-context cultures, on the other hand, prefer logic, straightforwardness, action and facts. Precise word formulations and explanations are valued. To the high context group belong namely East Asia countries, Malaysia, Indonesia, South Europe, South America, Africa and Middle-East, whereas typical examples of low context cultures are Australia, Austria, Canada, Germany, the U.S.A, the U.K., New Zealand, Switzerland, Denmark, Netherlands and North Europe. For better illustration and easier comparison of Hofstede’s and Hall’s cultural values, the data of selected countries are presented in Table 3.1:

Table 3.1. Hofstede-Hall Values – Selected Countries

Country	Individualism- collectivism	Uncertainty avoidance	Power distance	Masculinity- femininity	Context
Arab World**	38	68	80	52	High
Australia	90	51	36	61	Low
Austria	55	70	11	79	Low
Brazil	38	76	69	49	High
Czech Republic	60	60	35	45	Low
China	20	60	80	50	High
South Africa	65	49	49	63	High
Germany	67	65	35	66	Low
India	48	40	77	56	High/Low
Indonesia	14	48	78	46	High
Japan	46	92	54	95	High
Malaysia	26	36	104	50	High
Sweden	71	29	31	5	Low
United Kingdom	89	35	35	66	Low
United States	91	43	40	62	Low

Estimated values

\*\**Arab World*: Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates

Source: Hofstede (2001) and Hall (1976).

### 3.2.2 Implications for Websites

Having understood all the aspects of Hall's and Hofstede's typology, it is now possible to make decisions on which web features would be appropriate for being incorporated into a website designed for a specific culture. Table 3.2 offers recommendations on website features that need to be taken into consideration while designing a culturally-sensitive website. These include both graphic design preferences and preferences regarding textual content, such as use of symbols, website interactivity, security policy, amount of information, complexity of message delivery, proper language, politeness, different selling approaches, individual or community-oriented marketing, etc.

Table 3.2. Web Features with Respect to Cultural Values

	<b>Preferred Website Features</b>
<b>Collectivist Cultures</b>	Giving back to community, social responsibility policy, member clubs, product-based discussion groups, chat with interest groups, live chat with company people; newsletters, pictures of family, pictures of collective work, flags, local symbols, pictures reflecting uniqueness of a country; customer loyalty and membership programs; links to related local country-specific companies and local websites.
<b>Individualistic Cultures</b>	Good privacy statement, personal data protection statement; images showing self-reliance, self-recognition and achievement; statement of product uniqueness; gift recommendations, individual acknowledgements, greetings and web page personalization.
<b>Cultures High on Uncertainty Avoidance</b>	Elaborated customer service; guided website navigation – site maps, well-displayed links, direction buttons; emphasis on company’s tradition in connection with the country’s culture; contact information for local offices, dealers and shops, toll-free telephone numbers; use of country-specific metaphors, names of festivals, puns, local vocabulary, not just mere translation; offer of free trials or downloads of product that can be digitalized, free coupons to try products or services, free membership or free service information; transaction security, testimonials from customers, reliability seals, seals of trust and ethical business practices certification.
<b>Cultures High on Power Distance</b>	Company hierarchy information, organizational chart, information about country managers and their titles; pictures of executives, celebrities or important people in the industry; quality certification and quality assurance awards; company vision statement, as stated by the CEO or top management; pictures of satisfied customers being proud owners of the product offered.
<b>Cultures High on Masculinity</b>	Games, quizzes, tips and tricks, recipes, etc.; to-the-point information, technical attributes; accent on quality and durability; Clearly defined gender roles, separate pages for men and women, depiction of women in nurturance roles and ‘traditional’ positions of telephone operators, models, wives and mothers, depiction of strong men in high positions.
<b>High Context Cultures</b>	Politeness and indirectness, flowery language, use of indirect words like ‘perhaps’, ‘probably’, ‘somewhat’, etc. The company should give an impression of humility.  Soft-sell approach, i.e. use of affective and subjective impressions of intangible aspects of a product or service and use of entertainment theme to promote the product; attention to aesthetic details, use of bold colours and appealing topics of love and harmony.

<b>Low Context Cultures</b>	Hard-sell approach, i.e. aggressive promotions, discounts, coupons and product advantages using explicit comparison; use of superlative clichés e.g. ‘The number one’, ‘The top company’, ‘The leader’, ‘World’s best’; emphasis on prestige of the company, comparison with other companies and numbers showing growth and importance of the company; clearly defined terms and conditions of purchase, warranty, product return policy, etc.
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Adapted from Singh and Pereira (2005).

### 3.2.3 Criticism of Hofstede and Hall Cultural Theories

Despite the fact Hofstede’s cultural classification is perhaps the most extensive and most frequently cited work for assessing cultural differences, it is sometimes criticised due to the following reasons: Firstly, reservations are about the used methodology. Notwithstanding that the data was collected from more than 88,000 respondents from more than 70 countries, the sample comprised only middle class employees of a single company. Also, the use of attitude-survey questionnaires is by some scientists considered inappropriate (Kitamura 2009). Secondly, since Hofstede’s IMB research was performed between late 1960s and early 1970s, its present validity could be also challenged. Similarly, Edward T. Hall’s theory of Context is also often questioned because of the difficulty of being empirically tested. Some researchers also point out the complexity of categorising countries into two sharply different categories (Association for Business Communication 2007), while B. Hall (2005, 21) and others warn against cultural overgeneralization or exaggeration.

However, in defence of Hofstede’s, it is necessary to point out that even nowadays, his work is still probably the most extensive cross-cultural research ever done. Since culture develops over time, there might be certain shifts in countries’ values of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions. Nonetheless, they still can be certainly used as a helping tool for the purposes of assessing present-day culture-sensitive advertising. Also, the Hall’s Context theory should not be completely disapproved of. My research has confirmed that significant differences in the advertising style used in certain Low Context countries and those marked as High Context can be observed.

### 3.2.4 Cultural Untranslability

This linguistic concept is related to cultural perception of the same utterance in different cultures. According to Kitamura, dealing with it is especially important with the translations of texts where source and target cultures are very diverse, and it is a key to achieving ‘naturalness’ in translations (Kitamura 2009). For example, the utterance “She is a real individual” is considered as a compliment in the United States, since individualism is a valued personal quality. In Japan, though, the same statement would sound offensive, since Japanese social norms disapprove of individualism. To be culturally appropriate, the source text would have to be altered to e.g. “She is a considerate person” (Ibid.). However, changing one sentence in a marketing text, which was written for a culture with diametrically different cultural values, obviously cannot solve the problem of cultural incompatibility. Moreover, culturally-specific websites usually use distinctive graphics corresponding with the text. For this reasons, pure translation of such websites cannot be recommended. Instead, cultural customization is favoured.

In addition, a truly culturally-sensitive website should respect target culture customs, traditions, religion and holidays (Yunker 2003, 183). This implies designing special graphic decorations and rewriting texts. For example, Christmas or Halloween decorations on company’s websites might not be well accepted by other cultures which do not celebrate this customs.

## **II. ANALYSIS**

## 4 APPLIED CULTURALLY SENSITIVE WEB DESIGN

### 4.1 Introduction

In advertising, culture has often been perceived as an inferior factor. However, several recent studies analysing the behaviour of local consumers show that customized and dynamic marketing strategy is much more effective than the one ignoring the target culture (Singh and Pereira 2005, 17). This part of my thesis contains an analysis of the present state of website cultural customization in a selected field of industry and also analyzes distinct features of culture sensitive advertising that were found on websites of companies with international presence.

### 4.2 Website Cultural Adaptation Study

The focus of my study became 207 different language versions of websites by 20 world's leading automotive manufacturers according to the number of units produced in 2011. These are depicted in Table 4.1. The sample comprised 7 European companies (highlighted in blue), 3 U.S. companies (orange) and 10 companies from Asia-Pacific (yellow).

Table 4.1. Top 20 Car Producers by Production in 2011

	<b>Car Manufacturer</b>	<b>Company's Base Country</b>
1	G.M.	USA
2	VOLKSWAGEN	Germany
3	TOYOTA	Japan
4	HYUNDAI	South Korea
5	FORD	USA
6	NISSAN	Japan
7	PEUGEOT	France
8	CITROEN	France
9	HONDA	Japan
10	RENAULT	France
11	SUZUKI	Japan
12	FIAT	Italy
13	CHRYSLER	USA
14	BMW	Germany
15	DAIMLER - MERCEDES-BENZ	Germany
16	MAZDA	Japan
17	MITSUBISHI	Japan
18	DONGFENG MOTOR	China
19	TATA	India
20	GEELY	China

Source: International Organization of Motor Vehicle Manufacturers (2011).

The aim of the study was to analyze the present state of cultural adaptation of websites of the aforementioned car manufacturers and also test my hypothesis that the majority of localized versions of companies' websites in this selected field are not culturally adapted. It is important to mention that among the analysed companies there were noticeable differences in the number of target locales. Some producers appeared to rely merely on bilingual websites, while others presented an elaborated global gateway comprising more than 50 localized versions. Due to such an extensive number of websites, it was necessary to limit the number of websites tested, in order to make this research manageable. The focus was on websites designed for 14 countries showing extreme (highest or lowest) scores in the five aforementioned Hofstede and Hall's cultural characteristics including Australia, Austria, China, Germany, Greece, Guatemala, Japan, Mexico, Portugal, Taiwan, Thailand, United States, United Kingdom and Venezuela. Producer's base country websites were excluded from the study.

Websites were classified according to a five-level website cultural adaptation scale firstly introduced by Singh and Pereira (2005, 10). As explained in Chapter 2.2., the five levels of website cultural adaptation include:

1. Standardized Websites
2. Semi-Localized Websites
3. Localized Websites
4. Highly Localized Websites
5. Culturally Customized Websites.

Appropriate graphic content (pictures, videos and other interactive content related to target country, depiction of local ethnic groups, national symbols, colours used, etc.), as well as country-specific textual information were features examined in order to determine, whether a website was **culturally customized (CC)**. Another criterion was the usage of Singh and Pereira's recommended culture-specific website elements with respect to country's chart value of individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, masculinity-femininity or high/low context, as presented in Tables 4.1 and 4.2.

Table 4.2. Relevant Culture-Sensitive Website Features Tested in Respective Countries

Cultural Value	Countries Tested	Website Features Tested
<b>High Collectivism</b>	China, Taiwan, Thailand, Venezuela, Guatemala, Mexico	Community relations, family theme and symbols of national identity.
<b>Low Collectivism (High Individualism)</b>	United States, United Kingdom, Australia	Theme of independence and self-reliance, focus on achievement, product uniqueness and protection of personal information.
<b>High Uncertainty Avoidance</b>	Greece, Guatemala, Portugal, Austria	Customer support quality, contact information and navigation clarity, use of local terminology and payment security.
<b>High Power Distance</b>	Malaysia, Guatemala, Mexico, Venezuela, China	Presence of company hierarchy information, pictures of executives or celebrities, the mention of quality assurance and awards, vision statement, pride of product ownership, emphasis on depiction of proper titles of important people in the company.
<b>High Masculinity</b>	Japan, Austria, Germany, Venezuela, Taiwan	Presence of games, tips and tricks and other interactive content, straightforward information, product quality and durability statement and clear separation of gender roles.
<b>High Context</b>	China, Japan, Thailand	Text politeness and indirectness, humility of company philosophy and corporate information, soft-sell approach and aesthetics. Limited amount of speech in promotional videos.
<b>Low Context</b>	United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Germany	Hard-sell approach, use of superlatives, declaration of prestige or importance of the company, explicit comparison with competition, clearly defined purchase terms and conditions.

Adapted from Singh and Pereira (2005).

As **highly localized (HL)** were classified websites with either fully translated content (including videos and graphics) or with original content that showed no signs of culture-specific features. These websites were purely focused on company product portfolio and there were no depictions of company's country-specific promotion campaigns or philanthropic events. People models were either missing or they were representatives of culture-incompatible ethnic groups.

As **localized websites (L)** were marked such websites, that were language clones of a universal template with translations where relevant, or partially translated websites

that combined target language texts with texts written in another language (predominantly English). The English version of the GM-Avtovaz company website can be considered as a typical example of a localized website. GM-Avtovaz is a joint venture between American General Motors and Russian AvtoVAZ. The amount of information displayed on the English version has been substantially reduced in comparison with the domestic Russian version, as depicted in Figures 4.1 and 4.2.

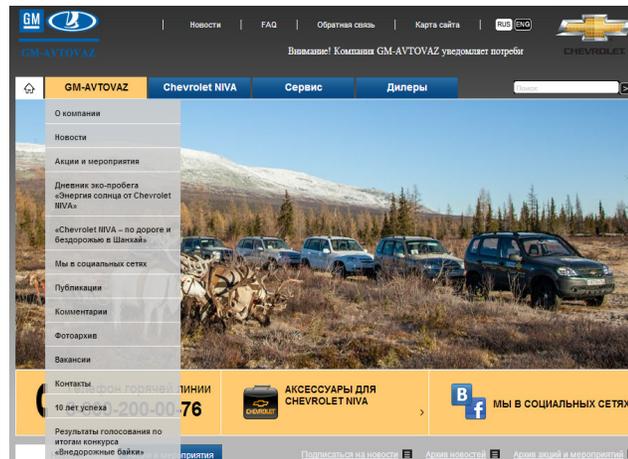


Figure 4.1. GM-Avtovaz Russia: Domestic Russian website.

[www.gm-avtovaz.ru](http://www.gm-avtovaz.ru)

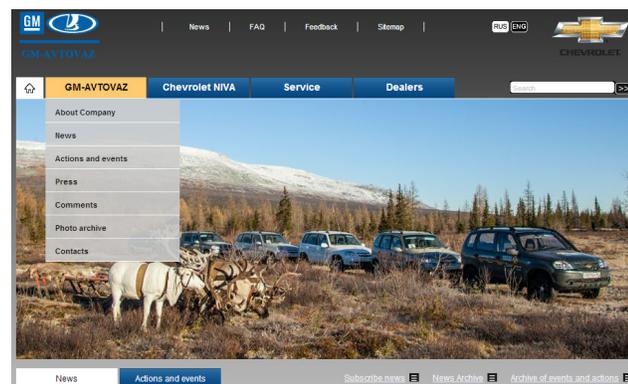


Figure 4.2. GM-Avtovaz Russia: English localized version.

[www.gm-avtovaz.ru/en](http://www.gm-avtovaz.ru/en)

As **Semi localized (SL)** were considered such websites that were designed to serve more than one country. These websites offered information about common product portfolio and local dealers for each particular country. For example, [www.chevroletcentroamerica.com](http://www.chevroletcentroamerica.com) is

a website that serves 20 Central America countries, as seen in Figure 4.3, including Guatemala, one of the countries tested.

Si necesitas más información o requieres de una prueba de manejo contacta al Distribuidor Chevrolet de tu preferencia

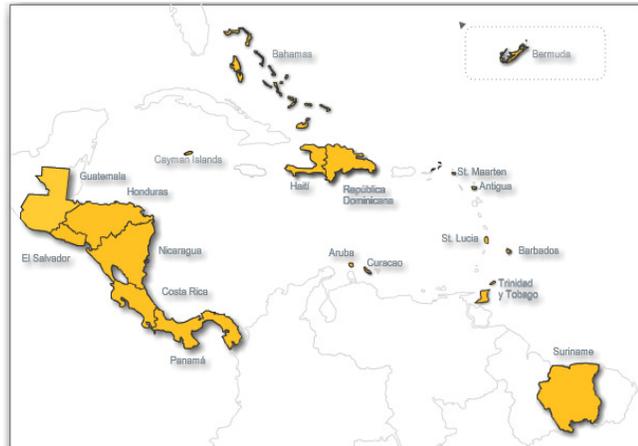


Figure 4.3. Chevrolet Central America: A semi-localized website.

[www.chevroletcentroamerica.com](http://www.chevroletcentroamerica.com)

As **Standardized (S)** websites were marked such websites that showed no localization effort whatsoever. A single monolingual website was used to serve all international customers. For example, Dongfeng Motor is one of three biggest Chinese producers of passenger and commercial vehicles, engines and auto parts. Although their products are available in many countries across the globe, their website is internationalized and contains no information about local dealers (see Figure 4.4).



Figure 4.4. Dongfeng Motor Corporation: A standardized website.

[www.dfmc.com.cn/dfmczg/main\\_en.aspx](http://www.dfmc.com.cn/dfmczg/main_en.aspx)

### 4.3 Study Findings

As mentioned earlier, the study comprised a thorough analysis of 207 websites of 20 vehicle manufacturers. 19 out of the 20 examined companies were found to target international customers. As apparent from Figure 4.5, highly-localized websites strongly dominated the Internet in this examined sample. The number of culturally customized websites was markedly lower. The values of localized, semi-localized and standardized websites were relatively insignificant. If we use a simpler division of the websites into two categories of culturally sensitive (CC) and culturally insensitive (S + SL + L + HL), only approximately one quarter out of the number of analyzed websites showed signs of adaptation to the target culture.

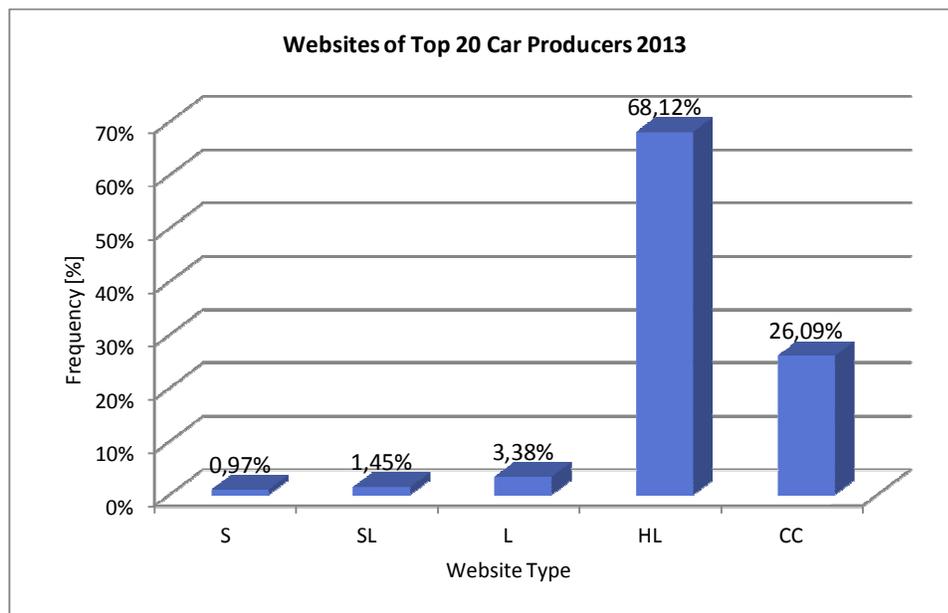


Figure 4.5. Frequency Distribution of Top 20 World's Car Producers<sup>1</sup>.

In general, a direct proportion between the level of website cultural adaptation and the size of the target market has been identified. Websites designed for large markets, such as China and the United States had the highest occurrence in the CC category, nevertheless there were certain individual cases of fully customized websites to be found on smaller markets, such as Thailand and Taiwan.

<sup>1</sup> Not all car manufacturers were present in each tested country. In case the brand was missing on that particular market, such country was excluded from the statistics.

To be able to analyze the change in companies' website customization effort over the last years, a similar study, carried out by Singh and Boughton in 2004, was chosen for comparison. Their study addressed websites of top 900 Forbes companies, while 597 out of which were targeting international customers (see Figure 4.6). As seen from the chart, the value of highly localized websites was apparently lower than in my recent study and surprisingly, none of the websites tested was found to fit the culturally customized category.

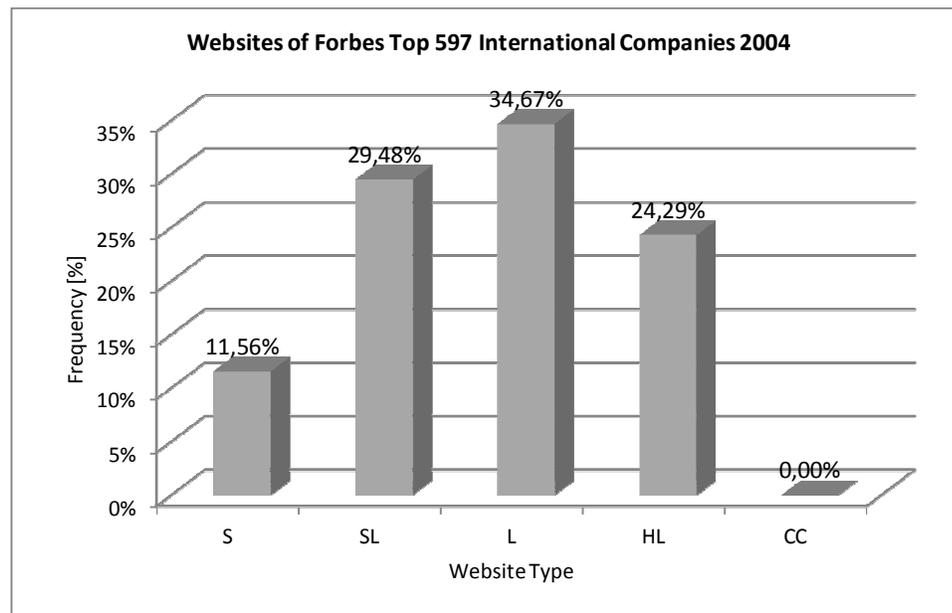


Figure 4.6. Frequency Distribution of Top International Forbes Companies.

Adapted from Singh and Pereira (2005).

Even though the samples tested in these two studies were slightly different, it is possible to observe a noticeable shift in companies' effort devoted to country-specific localization. However, in the view of the fact that my study addressed quite a low number of the largest (and richest) automotive companies, the percentage of websites in the CC category can be still considered very low. Moreover, websites targeting larger markets, such as China, the United States and the United Kingdom were generally found to show higher level of cultural customization than those meant for smaller countries. These were mostly marked as highly localized.

## 4.4 Observation of Culture-Specific Elements

This chapter enables better understanding of culture-sensitive web design by observation and critical evaluation of websites of present-day world's leading automotive producers. Concrete designs of culturally-customized websites from different cultures are displayed here for better imagination of Singh and Pereira's recommendations that are derived from Hall and Hofstede's country-specific cultural values. Wherever it was possible, contrasting countries with extreme levels of these cultural values were examined.

### 4.4.1 Collectivism

Many depictions found on East Asia websites demonstrated the importance of collectivism for their society. Very commonly there were observed group pictures of company workers or pictures of company managers helping the local community. For example, the Volkswagen Shanghai subsidiary is trying to help locals by organizing various philanthropic cultural events, such as summer camps for children, charitable football matches or concerts. These and many other local collective photos (see Figure 4.7) on the website only show that community giving is an inherent part of Chinese culture.



Figure 4.7. Volkswagen Shanghai: Corporate social responsibility.

[www.svw-volkswagen.com](http://www.svw-volkswagen.com)

Another proof of this cultural trait can be found for example on Thai Mitsubishi Motors website. The President together with the top management of the company are giving presents to students and teachers of 9 schools in Pathumthani province, the location of Mitsubishi Motors Thailand Co., Ltd. headquarters, as can be seen in Figure 4.8. To support education and care for good health of children is part of the corporate strategy (Mitsubishi-motors.co.th 2013). Depictions of similar activities on websites of automotive subsidiaries in individualistic countries were observed only scarcely.



Figure 4.8. Mitsubishi Motors Thailand: Corporate social responsibility.

[www.mitsubishi-motors.co.th](http://www.mitsubishi-motors.co.th)

#### 4.4.2 Individualism

On the contrary, websites culturally customized to countries high on individualism usually emphasised product unique quality, endurance and product benefits for an individual. This was especially observed with brands websites designed for large western markets such as the U.S. or the U.K. For example, Figure 4.9 is a screenshot from a U.S. commercial on a new Mercedes-Benz model. Its message is clear: possession of this new strong sports car will enable the young man to have everything he has ever dreamed about—fame, success, money, pretty women, freedom, excitement, etc. Also the slogan used in the advertisement “Something powerful is coming” might evoke individualistic need to set oneself apart from others by possession of something really special and powerful.



Figure 4.9. Mercedes-Benz USA: Male individualism.

[www5.mercedes-benz.com/en](http://www5.mercedes-benz.com/en)

Although much less common, individualism and self-reliance theme was also found to be demonstrated by female models. Figure 4.10, which was taken from the Chrysler U.K. website, is an example of this phenomenon. Despite her tiny figure (compared to the size of the car), the woman should probably give an impression of a “strong individual”. Dressed up in black high leather boots, dark trousers and leather jacket, she looks like she is not scared of anything, let alone of twilight in a deserted car park. Her new big MPV offers her necessary protection.

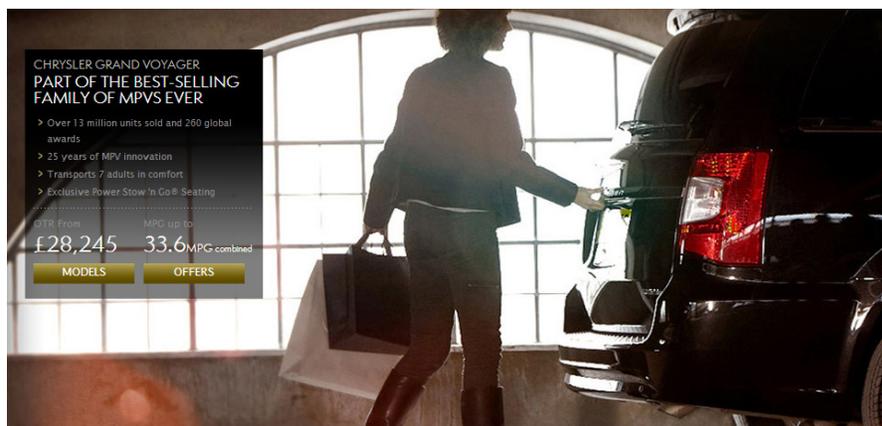


Figure 4.10. Chrysler UK: Female individualism.

[www.chrysler.co.uk](http://www.chrysler.co.uk)

### 4.4.3 High Uncertainty Avoidance

Generally, it is possible to say that no particular effort to meet the recommendations on high uncertainty avoidance has been made with websites from countries with high level of this property. Most websites across different cultures showed relatively clear contact information to local stores and good level of customer support. Some of them also offered free phone calls with live telephone operators (see Figure 4.11). Also, virtually all automotive producers offered free test drives. However, other important website features reducing uncertainty, such as instructional videos showing special functions of cars or breadcrumb trail (a depiction of the link path, see Figure 4.12) were usually missing. Some car producers were observed to deliberately not include product prices and payment possibilities. Use of local terminology and tradition theme was generally found very poor with the exception of Eastern-Asia websites.

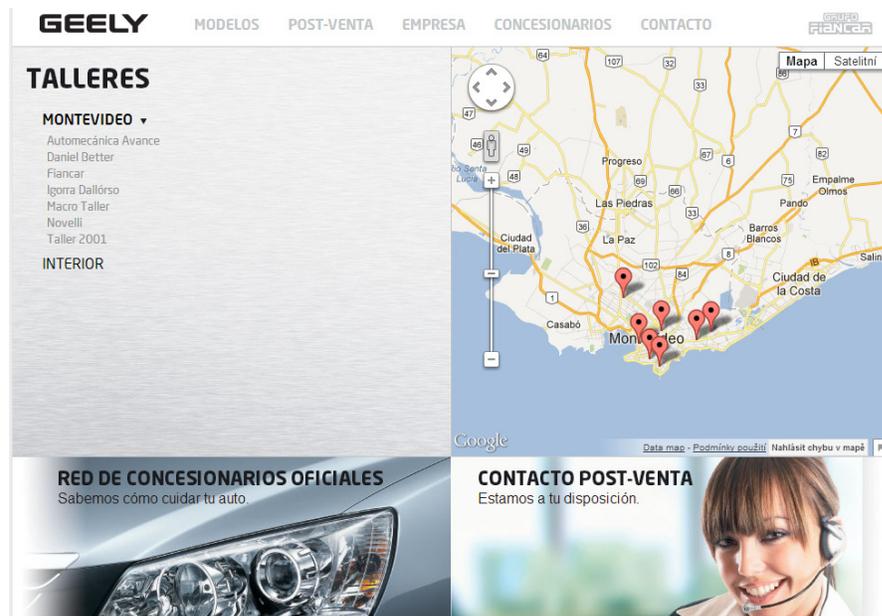


Figure 4.11. Geely Uruguay: Clearly depicted information about local dealers and live telephone operators.

[www.geely.com.uy](http://www.geely.com.uy)



Figure 4.12. Fiat Mexico: Breadcrumb trail navigation.

[www.fiat.com.mx](http://www.fiat.com.mx)

#### 4.4.4 High Power Distance

Numerous examples of website features that demonstrated the importance of social hierarchy and acknowledgement of authorities were found across different cultures. These were observed not only on websites designed for countries with high chart values of power distance, though. Namely pictures of celebrities were often displayed on websites regardless the countries' level of power distance. Depiction of famous people giving their recommendations for products are not unusual even on websites of companies selling in countries with low estimated value of power distance, as can be seen on the Czech Mitsubishi website (see Figure 4.13). The local theatre actress explains why she is loyal to this brand. In Figure 4.14 celebrities depicted on the Japanese Mercedes-Benz website share their positive experience using the cars from the current product line up.

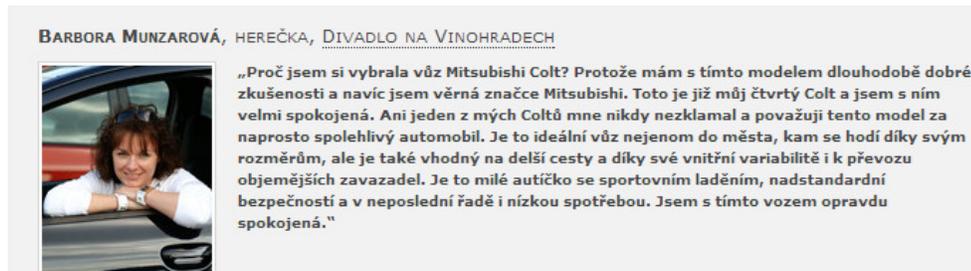


Figure 4.13. Mitsubishi Czech Republic: Recommendations by celebrities.

[www.mitsubishi-motors.cz](http://www.mitsubishi-motors.cz)



Figure 4.14. Mercedes-Benz Japan: Recommendations by celebrities.

[www.mercedes-benz.co.jp](http://www.mercedes-benz.co.jp)

Apart from recommendations by celebrities, less often, but still not rare, pictures of company executives were encountered. One such example was taken from the Chrysler website in Mexico, a country with high chart value of power distance (see Figure 4.15). In addition, by means of company’s clear vision and mission statement (Figure 4.16) and a depiction of important awards won (Figure 4.17) it seems possible to boost company’s status and authority.



Figure 4.15. Chrysler Mexico: Depiction of company’s CEOs.

[www.chryslerdemexico.com.mx](http://www.chryslerdemexico.com.mx)



Figure 4.16. Toyota Guatemala: Company’s vision and mission statement.

[www.toyota.com.gt](http://www.toyota.com.gt)



Figure 4.17. Toyota USA: Depiction of awards acquired.

[www.toyota.com](http://www.toyota.com)

#### 4.4.5 Masculinity / Femininity

Based on observation of cultural features reflecting gender-related marketing on websites of several car manufacturers advertising in countries with high values of masculinity (Austria, Germany, Japan) and femininity (North Europe countries), the following conclusions were arrived at: Generally, it is possible to say that depictions of extremely masculine features like exaggerated emphasis on male strength, speed and action were avoided on websites in highly feminine countries. On the contrary, on some websites in countries high on masculinity, certain examples of highly masculine content were found. For all it is possible to mention the German website of Mercedes-Benz. The slogan used in the advertisement: “Wrong time. Wrong place. Right car.” demonstrates high demands on quality and performance of this SUV which also features in their new action movie *Die Slowly*. The movie seethes with heavily armed “macho” men and there is no shortage of shooting and car explosions. On the website there is also a free computer game available to play online—another item of characteristic masculine features (see Figure 4.18). As a contrast, the Swedish Toyota website was chosen as a typical example of a feminine theme, as seen in Figure 4.19.

Moreover, websites of several car manufacturers gave the impression that some specific car models were designated as typically masculine or feminine. This finding might explain different marketing approaches in promoting specific kinds of vehicles. On the most of web graphics, powerful and robust SUVs or fast sports cars were almost exclusively driven by men, whereas small city cars were predominantly used by women (see Figure 4.20).



Figure 4.18. Mercedes-Benz Germany: A masculine website.

[www.mercedes-benz.de](http://www.mercedes-benz.de)

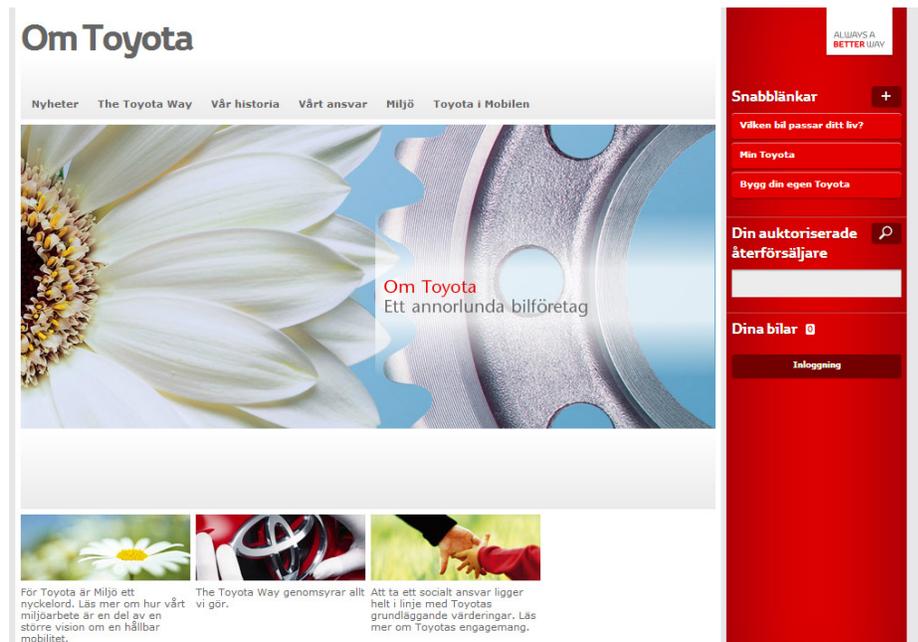


Figure 4.19. Toyota Sweden: A feminine website.

[www.toyota.se](http://www.toyota.se)



Figure 4.20. Hyundai Sweden: Small city cars “meant for women”.

[www.hyundai.se](http://www.hyundai.se)

#### 4.4.6 High Context

Culturally customized websites designed for high context cultures, such as China, Taiwan, Japan and Thailand, presented a completely different marketing strategy than those intended for low-context western markets. Barring a couple of exceptions, there was a strong tendency to embrace soft-sell approach. For example, video promotions usually did not contain any speech. Instead, it was replaced by a soothing low-key music. Family theme was also used very frequently. For example, Volkswagen, a German company, evidently put a lot of effort into cultural customization of their Chinese website. In many videos on the website we can observe the portrayal of a typical Chinese family as well as the position of women in local society. Relatively often there is a depiction of father with his male offspring, not rare are pictures of women waiting at home for their beloved husbands (see Figure 4.21), etc. Emphasis is put on harmony—for example, in the commercial below, words are replaced by moving pictures of doves and ballet dancers accompanied by classical music.



Figure 4.21. Volkswagen Shanghai: Soft sell approach in China (a car commercial).

[www.svw-volkswagen.com](http://www.svw-volkswagen.com)

#### 4.4.7 Low Context

Similarly to individualism, signs of low context on culturally customized websites were found especially on large western markets, such as the U.S. or the U.K. In these individualistic countries the majority of the websites examined were diagnosed to adhere to the hard sell approach strategy. In comparison to soft sell approach, this style of advertising was found to be much more direct.

As for textual information, very often, it was possible to observe self-confident statements about company qualities, increased use of superlatives and explicit comparisons with competition. Similar results were observed during the analysis of the graphic content. For example, in Figure 4.22, which was taken from the US Hyundai website, the manufacturer states that they offer the “America’s Best Warranty”. Big headlines written in capital letters can be also considered typical for this type of advertising. Toyota USA, on the other hand, provide on their website a special form which serves for attribute comparisons of their cars with attributes of competitive models (see Figure 4.23).

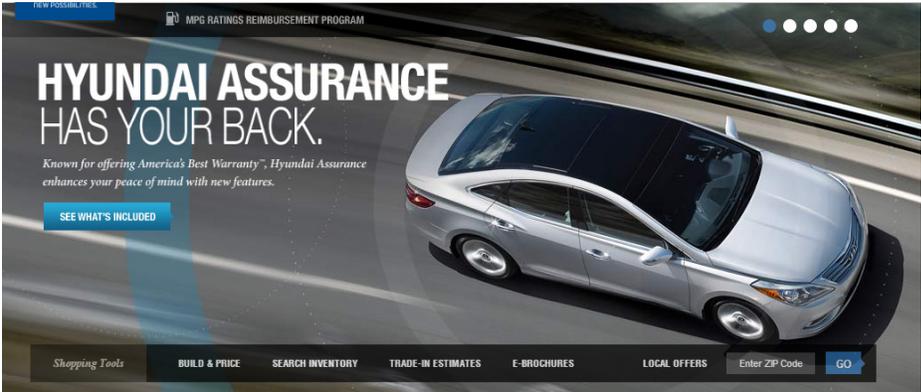


Figure 4.22. Hyundai USA: Hard sell approach, use of superlatives.

www.hyundaiusa.com

**Best**  
Toyota has an advantage over all vehicles in this comparison.

**Advantage**  
Toyota has an advantage over one or more vehicles in the comparison.

independent analysis by  
 Chrome Data

	2013 Prius c <b>Prius</b> 1.5L 4-Cyl Hybrid	2013 Ford <b>Focus SE</b> 2.0L I4 5M	
	 Change	 Change Remove	
<b>MSRP Including Destination Charge</b>	● \$19,875	\$19,995	
<b>Comparably Equipped Price</b>	● \$19,875	\$19,995	
<b>Fuel Economy (city)</b>	● 53	26	

Figure 4.23. Toyota USA: Hard sell approach, explicit comparison with competition.

www.toyota.com

#### 4.5 Other Observations

Except for website features derived from Hofstede and Hall's dimensions, some other cultural specifics were observed. As mentioned earlier, as a part of company's web marketing strategy proper colour choice of the graphics, ingeniously used symbolism, as well as respecting local national holidays should also be considered. The following picture, which was taken from the Taiwanese Toyota website, was chosen deliberately to demonstrate the connection of all of those three aspects (see Figure 4.24). Since in this country red colour is thought to evoke very positive emotions, it was used as the predominant colour of this web graphics. The snake was chosen as a symbol of the upcoming and probably most important holiday celebrated in China and Taiwan—the Chinese New Year. Also, out of the countries examined, no other country was observed to show stronger colour preference to a single colour than just these two countries.



Figure 4.24. Toyota Taiwan: Chinese New Year decorations and prevalence of red colour.

[www.toyota.com.tw](http://www.toyota.com.tw)

A use of proper human models in the graphic content was another feature that was tested on websites of international car producers. In this respect, it is quite difficult to arrive at an unambiguous conclusion, though. Observations of the website graphic content showed that displaying of people is often deliberately avoided, thus enabling the graphic elements to be used on more country variants of the website. On the other hand, some car producers were found to be highly aware of this issue and showed much effort to implement appropriate culture-dominant ethnic types in their graphic advertising material. In multicultural countries such as the United States or the United Kingdom, however, the prevalence of the dominant Caucasian race was evident. As for video promotions, in most cases cultural customization was ignored by European car manufacturers promoting their products in East-Asian markets. With few exceptions, the videos usually contained non-

localized texts written in English/Roman letters and sometimes also an English audio track. On the other hand, relatively high customization effort in this respect was found on websites of Japanese and South Korean car producers such as Toyota, Honda, Suzuki and Hyundai which were designed for western markets.

All in all, it is possible to conclude that culture sensitive advertising in general is related to the financial facet of the matter. As mentioned earlier, customized and dynamic marketing strategy is a very costly process. The tested car producers seem to be highly aware of this, and therefore their customization effort is primarily focused on markets with high buying potential. This reflects the fact that websites designed for larger markets such as China, the United States or the United Kingdom were observed to show much higher amount of country-specific web content than those meant for smaller countries like Austria, Greece, Guatemala, Portugal or Venezuela.

## CONCLUSION

The increasing interconnectedness of the world of the last few decades has initiated crucial changes to the world's market. Present-day international business companies are being forced to become more "global" in order to keep pace with their competitors. The rising number of Internet users throughout the world, but namely in East-Asian countries and India, undoubtedly represents a huge business potential.

Nonetheless, the major topic of this paper was culture and aspects of cross-cultural advertising. At the very beginning of this paper I posed the basic question of whether international companies pay enough attention to culturally-sensitive marketing. Based on my research of car producers' websites, it is obvious, that the score of culturally-sensitive websites still appears to be quite low. On the other hand, the days when standardized and semi-localized websites dominated the Internet seem to be gone. Compared to the result of a similar study carried out by the research team of Dr. Singh in 2004, a noticeable increase in the number of highly localized and culturally customized websites was observed. Therefore, it can be concluded that current companies with global presence slowly but surely start to be aware of the importance of culturally sensitive advertising.

The final section of this paper was concentrated on recommended features for culturally sensitive websites described in Singh's framework. These were tested on real websites of the world's largest car manufacturers. Not surprisingly, the highest customization effort was observed on websites of three countries with the highest number of Internet users—China, the United States and the United Kingdom.

Regarding the five Hofstede-Hall cultural dimensions analyzed, it is to some extent possible to arrive at some universal recommendations for culturally sensitive web design. These can be put as follows: Customized advertising strategies should be used for countries with extreme values of individualism and collectivism. Masculine features should be definitely avoided in highly feminine North European countries and also some East Asian countries. Soft sell approach should be used with high-context East-Asia countries and conversely hard sell approach can be recommended for typically low-context countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom or Australia. The last two Hofstede's cultural dimensions—uncertainty avoidance and power distance—were found to be less significant to my research on websites of automotive manufacturers. Since in this field of industry ambiguous information is generally avoided, practically all tested websites of car brands across cultures showed high level of uncertainty avoidance. Also, the

occurrence of power distance website features was not found to be in concordance with Hofstede's countries' values for this cultural dimension. Surprisingly, many websites of countries with low chart values of power distance contained content high on elements increasing company's status and authority.

Besides Hofstede and Hall's dimensions, my study has also revealed noticeable differences in advertising between eastern and western cultures in terms of perception of gender roles. Moreover, in cross-cultural advertising, attention should be also paid to other issues such as local perception of specific colours, depiction of country-specific symbols or use of proper human models.

In conclusion, it should be noted that studying culture can be very challenging, since observers are always partially influenced by the environment in which they were brought up. For example, a cultural characteristic that seems very surprising to a person from one culture can be perfectly normal for another person from a different culture. This is the reason why exaggerated statements about particular cultures should be avoided. Nowadays also many people talk about the impact of globalization on fading of cultural values. Nevertheless, of course, certain undisputable differences among cultures still can be found. And these differences, as we have seen, should also be reflected in web design or any other way of advertising.

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