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Does the Localisation of Cultural Markers Affect User's Destination image?

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Abstract

This paper represents a pioneer work on the discussion of the effects of the localisation of cultural markers on tourism destination websites on user's destination image. First, a preliminary research was conducted on 130 sites in order to identify the cultural markers of New Zealand, Chinese and Indian tourism destination sites. Afterwards, an experiment was conducted to investigate the influence of the localisation of cultural markers on destination image. A fictitious tourism destination website was created for the purpose of this research and tailored for the New Zealand audience. In total, 400 students participated, performing tasks on the site and answering a survey. Results indicate that there are clear differences in the cultural markers of New Zealand, Chinese and Indian destination sites and that incongruent cultural markers lead to a more positive affective and overall image of the place.

Keywords: Destination websites; website localisation; cultural markers.

1 Introduction

Destinations websites represent official self-presentation platforms of places and therefore are of great importance to their online promotion. As a result, research to enhance their performance and improve their efficiency is vital for online success. In this paper, the authors investigated the effects of the localisation of cultural markers on the affective and overall destination image.

2 Theory

2.1 Localisation of cultural markers

Website localisation refers to the tailoring of website elements in order to meet the specificities and preferences of target audiences (Petrie, Power et al. 2009). Related to website design, it represents the adaptation of formats (numbers, dates, currency, etc.), language, accessibility, functionality, graphics, images, information architecture, layout, search engines, symbols, and website navigability (Russo and Boor 1993; Hanna and Millar 1997;Collins 2002; De Troyer and Casteleyn 2004). This practice has shown to generate positive outcomes, enhancing the user's time spent on the site (Barber and Badre 1998), purchase intention (Luna, Peracchio et al. 2002), intention to revisit the site (Luna, Peracchio et al. 2002), attitude towards the site, satisfaction (Cyr, Bonanni et al. 2005) and trust and e-loyalty (Cyr and Bonanni 2005; Cyr 2008).

Web design and layout elements form the bases of website structures. They are responsible for the look and feel of the site, and hence have a great impact on the individuals perceptions towards the site (Cyr and Trevor-Smith 2004). Cultural markers, on the other hand, represent the interface elements that are most common and may be preferred in certain cultures and are less common or even absent in others (Barber and Badre 1998; Mushtaha and Troyer 2009). The main difference of cultural markers among countries regards the use of colours, fonts, amount and types of content, graphics, language, layout, multimedia, navigation and symbols. Such distinctions were found when comparing the design of websites from various countries such as Malaysia, Germany, Austria, United States of America, Ecuador, Japan, Sweden, Greece, and Denmark (Cyr and Trevor-Smith 2004; Callahan 2005). However, cultural markers are not static and change over time (Mushtaha and Troyer 2009), and such features also vary amongst different industry segments (Barber and Badre 1998).

Considering the visual importance of website design elements on the image of a place that is communicated on the web and the relevance of destination image on tourists decision making process, *this paper aims to investigate the influence of the localisation of cultural markers on the destination image perceived by users when visiting destination websites*.

3 Methods

The research consisted of two phases: a preliminary study and an experiment. They are both now presented.

3.1 Preliminary study

First, New Zealand was defined as the target market of the study. Following this, preliminary research was conducted with the objective of identifying the cultural markers of New Zealand destination sites and its differences compared with other markets. A total of 130 websites were investigated through content analysis: 48 New Zealand, 36 Indian and 46 Chinese. The cultural markers were investigated under four main categories of evaluation: colour, content, graphics, layout and information architecture (Cyr and Trevor-Smith 2004; Callahan 2005; Cyr, Bonanni et al. 2005). The list of website elements that were investigated in each category is listed on Table 1.

Table 1. Description of cultural markers analysed on the preliminary research

Category of evaluation	Website Elements
Colour	Background (colour/picture), background colour, colour intensity, colour of font, colour of logo, overall colour and secondary colour.
Content	Amount of text, amount of photos.
Graphics	Animation of photo, animation of text, animation of main photo, animation of advertising banners and background type.
Layout	Positioning of: advertising banners, menu placement (homepage and web pages), language options, log in/ create account, logo, recommender systems, pop ups, search engine, social medias links, titles.
Information Architecture	Index, labels, organizational scheme of information and organizational scheme of the menu.

Results indicated differences between cultural markers among the three countries on all four categories of evaluation. New Zealand destination sites were mostly characterised by presenting a 'clean' look with small amount of content depicted on the homepages, white and blue as most used colours both as primary and secondary colours in the site in light tones, use of colour as background of the page instead of pictures, low use of graphics, information presented in vertical scheme, menu placed on mid centre of the page, search engines on the top right, logo on top left of the page and ads banners on the centre right side of the websites. Chinese sites showed an intense use of animations on photos, texts and ads, a 'clustered' visual of the site with a much greater amount of content being shown on the homepages (in comparison to New Zealand sites), a wider range of colours used, although white and red colours were the most prominent and a common use of photos on the background, content information scheme in vertical and banners positioned on both sides of the site. Indian destination sites depicted an overuse of the colours orange and yellow, in darker tones, and a moderate use of animation on both text and photos. Overall the sites had a 'clean' look, compared to the 'clustered' visuals of Chinese sites, and also had small amounts of content. Finally, having identified the cultural markers of New Zealand tourism destination websites, the following step was the development of the experimental website for the main study.

3.2 Main study

The main study consisted of an experiment to verify the effects of localising cultural markers on the affective attributes of the destination image and on the overall image. Four versions of a website of a fictitious tourism destination were created and tailored for New Zealanders based on the cultural markers identified in the preliminary research: two versions with congruent cultural markers (the versions differed on the cultural values exposed the site) and two versions with incongruent cultural markers (the versions differed on the cultural values exposed the site). (Due to a word limitation of the conference paper, the influence of the different cultural values on the destination image is not reported in this paper).In total, the experimental website had an average of 26 web pages. It contained information about the destination, a detailed map of the place, a list and description of eleven different types of attractions, a description and list of accommodation, events, a detailed list of restaurants and bars, local cuisine, testimonial page, contacts, shopping and a photo gallery.

A pre-test of the experiment was conducted with 30 New Zealand undergraduate students and changes were made to the site and survey. After this, the experiment was performed. In total, 400 New Zealand undergraduate students from the University of Otago participated in the study; 100 per condition. First, participants were asked their top two choices of places to eat, sleep and activities to do. Afterwards, they answered an online survey which evaluated amongst other variables, 4 affective attributes of the destination image and one overall image attribute, evaluated on a 7-point scale (Baloglu and McCleary 1999).

4 Results

A MANCOVA was employed to verify the effect of the cultural markers across the different conditions. Therefore, first of all Barlett's test of sphericity (336.368 with *df* 14, p=.000) was adopted and indicated that there was a correlation between the dependent variables, which revealed the suitability of using the multivariate test. Levene's test of error variance was non-significant for all variables, except 'Boring-Exciting', p<.05, which violates the assumption of homogeneity of variance. Therefore, the results for this variable should be interpreted with caution. The results for the Levene's test along with the means of the affective and overall image attributes are presented on Table 2.

Table 2. Means and Levene's test of affective and overall image attributes.

Destination image attribute	Condition 1(n=100)	Condition 2 (n=100)	Condition 3 (n=100)	Condition 4 (n=100)	Levene's test
Unpleasant-Pleasant	5.88	6.03	6.21	6.16	.139
Sleepy-Arousing	4.93	5.05	5.31	5.01	.228
Stressful-Relaxing	6.09	6.08	6.08	5.69	.495
Boring-Exciting	5.30	5.87	6.08	5.69	.002
Overall image	5.60	5.87	6.27	6.05	.264

Condition one: Congruent cultural markers and congruent cultural values
Condition two: Congruent cultural markers and incongruent cultural values
Condition three: *Incongruent* cultural markers and incongruent cultural values
Condition four: *Incongruent* cultural markers and congruent cultural values

After controlling for the effect of 'trust", at .0001 level, Pillai's Trace test indicated that there was a significant effect of the 'cultural markers', V=.071, F(5, 385) = 5.85, p=.000, *partial* η^2=.071. Separate univariate ANCOVAS on the outcome variables indicated significant results for 'Boring-Exciting' F(1, 389) = 12.18, p=.001, *partial* η^2=.030; 'Unpleasant-Pleasant' F(1, 389) = 8.25, p=.004, *partial* η^2=.021; and 'Overall image' F(1, 389) = 26.32, p=.000, *partial* η^2=.063.

Table 3. Means of congruent and incongruent versions.

Destination image attribute	Congruent	Incongruent
Boring-Exciting	5.57	5.90
Unpleasant-Pleasant	5.95	6.19
Overall image	5.74	6.16

Finally, the means of the significant affective and overall image attributes are shown on Table 3 and indicate a more positive evaluation of sites depicting incongruent cultural markers.

5 Conclusion and Managerial Implications

As part of a larger project developed to understand the effect of website localisation on the perception of tourists, this paper has shown that the cultural markers have an impact on the affective and overall image of tourism destinations. Moreover, it was revealed that the *reverse-localisation* of cultural markers (the exposure of website elements that are opposite or different to the country's cultural markers) generated a more positive affective and overall image than the localisation. This contradicts previous research which supports the effectiveness of website localisation, and introduces a new concept of *reverse-localisation*.

This finding suggests that when developing country specific versions of destination websites, managers should develop designs that do not follow the cultural markers of the target market. Instead, website elements that are opposite or different from the cultural markers of the target audience should be used, therefore creating a unique design for each country version.

6 Limitations

The results are limited to a New Zealand context. Further research with other countries will provide a greater understanding of the effects of the localisation towards the New Zealand audience and also its effects on other cultures. Finally, the use of student sampling may also represent a limitation.

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