

Localization Issues: A Glimpse at the Korean User (From the Western Perspective)

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Abstract. This paper shows how applying Chavan's Quick and Dirty User Profiling Technique proves to be an excellent first step for gaining first insights into users from a different cultural background, exemplified for the Korean market. On this hit products of the Korean market are reviewed, Korean design preferences are analysed, cultural context data is gathered and completed with findings of cultural dimensions.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural, Usability Engineering, User-Profile, South Korea.

1 Introduction

The user lies at the core of the user-centred design. Especially for the development of a localized product within a cross-cultural approach, in-depth understanding of the user and her culture is a prerequisite for success. "To grasp the native's point of view" [18] is the ultimate goal here. The scientific approach exploring an 'alien' culture is ethnography, which is rooted in the field of anthropology. One methodological approach thereby is to observe social conventions that guide attitudes and behaviours of a social system – the so called ethnomethodology [19; 5; 4]. The probably most famous method for gaining this understanding is applying etic dimensions and observing their occurrence in different cultures [6]. Triandis [29] points out that cultural characterization based on these etic constructs is far too simplistic and proposed these dimensions (collectivism and individualism in particular) to be conceptualized rather as polythetic constructs [28]. Hence further attributes are required to describe a researched culture.

As this research aims at the user-oriented, cross-cultural HMI-development the purpose of this paper is to broaden the developers understanding of the Korean culture to be enabled to implement culture-specific variables into the development-process. From this perspective innumerable attributes are thinkable for defining the target-culture. A method designed to arrive at a fast and frugal user-profile is the Quick and Dirty User Profiling Technique (QDUPT), as introduced by Chavan [1]. The QDUPT can be understood as a heuristic, based on three steps, to derive essential cultural variables from the vast amount of data and information available related to cross-cultural HMI-development.

2 Step 1: Aspects of the Korean Culture's Lifestyle

In the first step diverse aspects of the target culture's lifestyle are analysed. This includes the examination of the hit products of the past five years to identify possible unique selling propositions and the scope of globalization or localization of products. Hence it is to determine if some kind of distinct local look, in terms of colours, layout, etc., can be identified. A review of book illustrations, advertisements or web unique selling proposition gives useful insights to answer these questions. Another interesting source to broaden the understanding of the target culture's recent lifestyle is to have a closer look at the past years top five films and music videos, as well as at the most successful local websites. [1]

2.1 Hit Product 2002: Colour Screen Mobile Phones [22]

Even though according to the Samsung Economic Research Institute (SERI) report the 2002 World Cup was the number one hit in 2002, colour screen mobile phones seem better suitable to generate a picture of the Korean user, as the World Cup as an international, single event might have its short-term impact, but doesn't necessarily enhance the understanding of the Korean user for our purpose here. The sales of mobile phones with colour screens sharply increased to 2.40 million and 5.71 million units in the first and second half of 2002 respectively; since its introduction in June 2001 (1.80 million units were sold in 2001). Out of all mobile phones sold in the latter half of 2002, around 72% had a colour screen; representing the fast adoption of new products and features by the Korean user. This also helped the rapid deployment of other advanced phone features such as high-definition pictures, various melody ring tones and built-in cameras rather than plain vanilla features like voice messages and short text messaging. In line with the rapid growth of the market for mobile phones with colour screens, the size of the mobile on-line content market has expanded to 258 billion won (ca. 230 Mio. EUR) in 2002 from 38 billion won (ca. 33 Mio. EUR) in 2001. Unique features of the mobile on-line content market include creating personal avatars or icons and messaging photos, what seems especially appealing to the younger Korean generation who increasingly wants to differentiate themselves.

2.2 Hit Product 2003: Digital Photos [23]

Monthly sales of mobile phones with built-in digital cameras surged from 300,000 units at the beginning of 2003 to 1 million units in October. The share of camera phones in the mobile phone market has thus skyrocketed from 24% to 72.7% during this period. In addition to the mobile phone market, up to 80,000 units of digital cameras were sold only in October 2003, dramatically higher than the monthly sales average of 20, 000 units recorded the prior year. Such rapid growth of the digital photo market is attributed to technological advances. The technology had reached a point where camera phones with more than 1 million pixels and digital cameras with around 8 million pixels already emerged in the market. The spread of digital photo equipment was accompanied by various services, such as internet photo shops, which provide free online storage space. It also created a culture with the younger generations to promote their self-image by uploading such photos to the web. This has

even developed into a new type of ‘beauty contest’, where people would take self-portraits, upload them to the web, and the one who received the highest grade from netizens is called ‘eol-jjang’, meaning ‘the best face’.

2.3 Hit Product 2004: www.cyworld.com [24]

The internet company Cyworld has drawn subscribers in excess of 10 Mio. as of 2004. For 2006 20 Mio. out of 33 Mio. internet-users are estimated cyworld-users; 96% of the 20 to 29 year-olds regularly use this site [3]. This website allows subscribers to choose background music, colour and avatars to decorate their own web-logs. Sales from these decoration items amounted to a staggering 150 Mio. Won (ca. 132,000 EUR) a day for 2004 (2006, 250 Mio. Won (ca. 210,000 EUR)). Users have created new words like ‘Cyzil’ (to indicate uploading of articles and pictures on web-logs), Cyholic (referring to addiction to Cyworld activities) and ‘Dotoeree’ (=Acorn, to indicate electronic coins); these terms have gained a wide currency as a result of the website’s popularity. Cyworld’s explosive popularity indicates consumers’ overwhelming desire to communicate with each other. On the website, users search other people’s web-logs and form virtual families with close friends. They upload digital picture on their cy, download music and use their own homepage as some kind of juke-box. In addition, users can create and decorate their own web-logs with just a few clicks as the website provides simple and convenient tools. Stung by Cyworld’s takeoff, rival portal sites have appeared, emulating its blog service. Daum Communications, Freechal and MSN have all launched their own blog services named Planet, SUM and HomeP, respectively. Now it’s becoming a fad for business companies to create their own blog sites on Cyworld to boost corporate image and promote products.

2.4 Hit Product 2005: The Cheonggyecheon (청계천) Stream [25]

The Cheonggyecheon is a stream that flows right through the centre of Seoul meeting the Han River. For about 58 years the stream was covered by highways and concrete till in July 2003 the restoration-project was launched. Despite controversial discussion of the use of this project, it seems to have met Korea’s ravages of time as the renewed stream was immediately after its opening in September 2005 voted for Korea’s number one hit in goods and services. It seems like Koreans rediscover their love for nature, freedom and leisure-time what findings of the cultural context data also back.

2.5 2006: Apartments in Pangyo [26]

Appartments in Pangyo district in Seongnam-city, a satellite city south of Seoul, were the number one hit product in 2006, driven by competitive but steadily increasing housing prices as well as the fact that Pangyo is long-time considered as potential replacement for Gangnam-ku, which is popular for new (and expensive) apartments, IT and competitive schools. For the understanding of the Korean user particularly the effects of schools on housing decisions seem interesting. Education in Korea is highly competitive and considered as one of the most important factors throughout the society. Parents would spend their life-time savings to allow only the very best

education for their children. They even chose their homes to close proximity to the best schools, if they can afford this as housing prices around first-class schools are considerably higher than elsewhere. Despite just ranked number two of the 2006 hit products, slim mobiles shall explicitly mentioned here as their success implies a change of user-preferences compared to previous years. While products in the past competed mainly with functions and technology users increasingly value design and hedonistic product features developers need to account for.

2.6 Korean Design Preferences

As the Korean culture itself, Korean design is strongly influenced by the Chinese as well as the Japanese culture. However, one would make a big mistake to assume that what makes successful design in Japan or China does it in Korea too, what studies like INTOPS show. INTOPS [21] and research conducted by Fuji Xerox (FX) [7] both proof that when it comes to colours, Koreans strongly favour bright and intense colours over pale ones. So chose 88% of subjects interviewed by FX bright green, blue and red over their pale counterparts and all of Koreans participating at INTOPS requested a colour-intensity of 100%. These observations are clearly confirmed when comparing 18 of Korea's most successful websites of different areas of interest. While the background of all pages is left simply white, buttons, navigation-bars and titles are embedded in a rather strong colour. Green and blue seem to be the most preferred ones when it comes to web-design, followed by orange. Despite the vast amount of textual content on most pages, they do not evoke the feeling of simple word-documents that are merely converted to HTML but rather seem quite sophisticated and well organized. One factor supporting this impression is the strong clustering of information on Korean websites. Information referring to the same or similar context is clearly, visually differentiated from other information. Findings of the FX research invigorate this idea, also. 76% of subjects asked preferred a strongly clustered page layout for a VCR manual with instructions and supplementary information in the left column and explanatory screens in the right column, or vice versa, over less clustered layouts, like supplementary information in the left and screen plus instructions in the right column, or the vertical arrangement of those. The differentiation between clusters is also improved through the widespread use of pictographs as cluster-titles. Also this preference is supported by findings of the FX research. So, do 96% of the survey's participants prefer rather icon-like pictographs over more word-like labels. Despite the abundance of animations, pictures and other icons on Korean homepages, these pictographs are rather kept simple and neat than fancy and pictorial. Yet other research proves, that when it comes to recognisability of icons and symbols Koreans perform significantly better when those are rather pictorial and less abstract [21, 17]. Hence, the right balance between pictorial and abstract is to be found to meet recognisability and aesthetic preferences.

3 Step 2: Cultural Context Data

In the second step of the QDUPT a closer look at existing cultural context data, as gathered by marketers or research institutes, gives further insights about the

respective culture. Especially non-traditional data such as national character, self-expression, young/adult culture, individual- and/or group-perception, cultural bilingualism, etc., as opposed to traditional demographic data, can significantly improve the developers understanding of the culture in question. [1]

3.1 Demographic Data

As of July 2006 Korea has a total land area of 98,190 km² and a population of 48,846,823, of which 18,9% are under 15 years old, 71,9% are between 15 and 64, and 9,2% are 65 and older. Most Koreans (46%) are religiously not affiliated, 26% are Buddhists, the same ratio are Christians, 1% Confucians and 1% belong to another religion. The literacy rate is 97,9%. [2]. Over the past 40 years the new middle class – made up of specialists, technicians, and employed administrators/office workers – was the fastest growing class in Korean society [27]. With an average age of 38,2 years and about 14,1 years of education, this class is made up of comparatively young and highly educated people (50% of them graduated from four-year university or obtained higher degrees). This indicates how highly valued education is in the Korean society, as it is a mean for many to move up in their social status. The chance, however, to obtain good education strongly depends on the social background.

3.2 Cultural Context Data

Currently Korea is undergoing a massive social change fuelled by the impressive development of the Korean economy, globalization and the ever increasing internet abundance over the past decade. This has a significant impact on consumption patterns, life-style and the structure of society.

According to a survey on consumption features of Korean customers conducted by the Korean Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI), the most significant factors influencing the buy-decision are quality (31.7%), followed by price (25.1%) and brand (17.2%) [15]. Especially high-income brackets, with an income over 3.85 Million won (ca. 3000 EUR), are very quality oriented, while the focus of lower income brackets, with an income less than 1.46 Million won (ca. 1200 EUR), is naturally more on price. When deciding for a purchase place, 62.4% of the consumers are mainly driven by price – one reason of the success of on-line shopping in Korea – and 17% by the shopping atmosphere. These preferences let more and more consumers purchase online [16]. Especially internet-based customer-to-customer (C2C) shopping significantly increased by 4% from 2004 to 2005 compared to other online businesses. 71.7% point out that they prefer C2C-shopping due to the very competitive prices. However, even when shopping online the product quality plays an important role for Koreans. In consequence poor product quality is the main reason of dissatisfaction in C2C-shopping, leaving online malls with a much higher customer satisfaction (56.3% compared to 49%) [8]. Quality preferences also let online-consumers spend in average 1.6 days comparing offers from at least 3 different online- or offline outlets before deciding what and where to buy, indicating how picky and conscious Korean customers are.

The steadily growing economy of Korea leaves more money in the country, and the peoples pockets (GDP per capita reached USD 24,200 in 2006 and South Korea joined the trillion dollar club of world economies already in 2004). Despite this 57.9% of Koreans reported a decrease in their disposal income in 2004 compared to 2003 [9] as prices, living-standards and other expenses are rising, too. As a result consumer confidence was in 2004 at an all time low ending in a sluggish consumer spending for this period [10]. 40.2% of questioned households reported that the fear for uncertainty of the economy is one of the main reasons for them to spend less, indication the high uncertainty avoidance of Koreans. These developments cause deep changes in the society. So reported 78.1% of the people asked that, as a result of decreased bargaining-power, they stay at home more often, 77.3% increased their saving of energy [11] and 57.6% said to split bills, usually uncommon in Korea, became the norm at lunch or dinner with friends [13]. These developments can be added up to the three buzzwords of the domestic consumption in 2005: *Single*, *Security* and *Self-Satisfaction* [12].

Single refers to the recently spreading 'I-will-do-my-bit-and-you-mind-your-own-business'-thinking even among family members. While in the past Korean men and women lived with their families until they got married, the number of single households is steadily increasing. People more and more are taking the right to live their own life, less constrained through their families. This will boost the sales of products which seem to be particularly relevant for singles, such as multi-functional monitors, large capacity MP3-devices, telematics and SNS (Social Network Services), such as Cyworld. The second buzzword, *Security*, relates to the increased number of crimes and suicides within the last decade. Thus the market of security related products, such as CCTVs or mobile devices with sophisticated internet-based accident surveillance systems, is expected to increase heavily. Recently, especially Koreans in their 20s, are increasingly consuming products for the sake of *Self-Satisfaction*. The success of mini homepages, as provided by cyworld, satisfying the consumers' desire for self-displaying, can be partially explained by this development, as people spend more time and money on doing things for their own satisfaction.

Amid these trends, an aging population leads to the emergence of new major *consumer groups* with different consumption patterns [14]. The first major group is characterised through *egocentric* and *sensible* consumption patterns. Those are the customers mainly aiming for subjective satisfaction, sensibility, beauty and first-hand experience. Among them those can be found who are only using first-rate brands, a rather small but old group, as well as lately emerging TONKS¹ and Metro-Sexuals. Increasing ecological problems, such as yellow dust or air pollution as well as the growing economical strength of Koreans lead to the second major consumption pattern that can be described as *nature-loving* and *simplistic*. Also the implementation of the 5-day workweek system in Korea in 2004 resulted in a growing amount of consumers higher valuing nature, family, health and leisure time. Finally there are those groups who fancy an *elite-style shopping*. Those are valuing planned consumption, are interested in efficiency, speed and self-development and spread steadily amid the trend for information and the emergence of internet generations. As the country becomes richer and information-technology more abundant people are getting more and more individualistic, family ties are becoming looser and people

¹ The acronym for 'two only no kids'.

start carrying more for their own quality of life. However, clearly the Korean mind is strongly influenced by its religious roots of Buddhism and Confucianism putting high weight on society and family in setting the boundaries between what is appropriate and what is inappropriate for individuals. In step 3 this impact can be observed.

4 Step 3: Cultural Dimensions

The third and last step of the QDUPT is to have a closer look at cultural dimensions, such as introduced by Hofstede, to compare the users' and developers' cultural background. The following table gives an overview of rankings and scores of Korea and Germany.

Table 1. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions – South Korea vs. Germany (r = rank, s = score)

Country	PDI		IDV		MAS		UAI		LTO	
	r	s	r	s	r	s	r	s	r	s
Germany FR	42/44	35	15	67	9/10	66	29	65	14	31
South Korea	27/28	60	43	18	41	39	16/17	85	5	75

4.1 Power Distance (PDI)

Power distance refers to the extent to which less powerful members expect and accept unequal power distribution within a culture. As a country with a higher PDI, in Korean society inequality among people is rather accepted and welcome, parents teach their children obedience, the attitude towards authority is less dependent from education than in Western Countries, structures are in general strong hierarchical structures, a tendency towards centralization can be observed, privileges and status-symbols are expected and popular, employees expect orders, power is valued over right and is based on family, friends, status as well as the possibility to apply pressure. However, it shall be pointed, that this enumeration represents a simplistic generalization than cannot be applied on the individual lever.

4.2 Individualism vs. Collectivism (IDV)

Individualism in cultures implies loose ties; everyone is expected to look after one's self or immediate family but no one else. Collectivism implies that people are integrated from birth into strong, cohesive groups that protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. As a rather collectivist country in Korean society identity is based on the social net a person belongs to, the credo is to avoid conflicts and keep harmony, the own opinion is determined by the group, collective interests have priority over individual interests, communication is highly context-dependant, degrees enable access to groups with higher status, the chief-employee-relation is based on moral measures (similar to family-relations), for hiring-/promotion-decisions the group is taken into account and relations are more important than the task to fulfil.

4.3 Masculinity vs. Femininity (MAS)

Masculinity and femininity refer to gender roles, not physical characteristics. Masculine roles refer to concepts of assertiveness, competition, and toughness, while feminine ones to orientation towards home and children, people, and tenderness.

In the rather masculine Korean society a decisive and authoritative performance-ideal is followed that supports the strong ones. On this the sympathy is with the strong; big and fast are beautiful, financial/material values are important, people live to work, while the working-life is focused on fairness, competition and performance and the resolution to conflicts is to carry them out (which, at the first sight, seems in contrast to the previously mentioned harmony ideal, but is non the less persuasive).

4.4 Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI)

People vary in the extent that they feel anxiety about uncertain or unknown matters, as opposed to the more universal feeling of fear caused by known or understood threats. Cultures vary in their avoidance of uncertainty, creating different rituals and having different values regarding formality, punctuality, legal-religious-social requirements, and tolerance for ambiguity. Due to the rather high UAI of Korea there is an emotional need for rules and laws, the country is rather conservative and intolerant to innovations (at least socially while technologically very open), values specialists and experts, people rather suppress aggressions and emotions as well as thought and behaviours which do not represent the norm. Despite uncertainty avoidance known risks and also unknown factors in the favour of speed are accepted resulting in the occasional referred to Korean 'pali-pali-syndrome' (pali = quick, fast).

4.5 Long-Term Orientation (LTO)

Long-Term Orientation seems to play an important role in Asian countries that had been influenced by Confucian philosophy over many thousands of years. Hofstede and Bond [7] found such countries shared the beliefs, that a stable society requires unequal relations, the family is the prototype of all social organizations; consequently, older people (parents) have more authority than younger people (and men more than women). Alike does virtuous behaviour to others means not treating them as one would not like to be treated, while virtuous behaviour in work means trying to acquire skills and education, working hard, and being frugal, patient, and persevering.

For the Korean society this implies a certain respect of social and status responsibilities within certain borders, a high social pressure of status-representation, a high saving-ratio and the importance of the protection of ones 'face' (status).

5 Conclusion

The QDUPT proves to be an excellent method to gain first, generic insights into a target-culture, particularly for the purpose of cross-cultural product development. So could be shown that even though the Korean culture is currently undergoing massive changes in its social-system, such as the desire for a single life and self-satisfaction particularly among the younger generation, the bonds within this social-system

remain significantly strong, what the success of SNS and the desire to communicate backs. This could not have been shown by simply applying Hofstede's cultural dimension as these merely provide the rather rough frame, which can be considered as more past-oriented and simplistic, of the Korean culture.

This structural change is not at least fuelled by the huge success of technological innovations and the new media in Korea. The fast adoption of colour screen mobile phones, digital pictures and internet clearly show the openness and even the desire of Koreans for innovation. Amid this dynamic a stronger orientation towards life-quality, health and free-time which were certainly neglected in the Korean society can be observed.

More than just broadening the developers understanding of the target-culture, the QDUPT also provides useful insights in user-preferences. On this first insights are, that Koreans strongly favour intense colours, get along quite well with much information simultaneously presented (as long as it is clustered) and their cognitive models are best supported by applying rather pictorial icons (but be careful of too 'childish' designs). Also suggests the fact, that shopping-websites, which can be associated with free-time and 'playing', are making more extensive use of animations and picture, than rather sincere website (such as for banks and news), the context-orientation of Koreans. This finding is also backed by other research [20] as well as through own usability-tests with Korean systems. Based on this first, generic understanding of the target-culture further steps towards the cross-cultural product-development, such as the definition of cross-cultural variables to further scrutinize localization issues, can be build on.

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