

Smart Strategies for Creating Culture Friendly Products and Interfaces

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Abstract. We increasingly live a 'local' global existence, whereby we are affected by the connectedness of the world but at the same time desire to retain our local identity. In this scenario, what strategy should one adopt when designing products and interfaces for use across the world? While we know the pitfalls of the 'one size fits all' strategy, is there an alternative way to include the cultural element in design without incurring huge cost and effort? This paper discusses one such strategy that allows cultural customisation without the 'kill bill' budget.

1 To Do or Not to Do...That Is Still the Question!

In this era of the supposed 'global village', there is still much debate about the imperative or otherwise, to create products and interfaces that are a close cultural 'fit' to its users. There are many voices that cite the 'global village' model as a reason to have a one size fits all approach.

However, there is overwhelming research support for the need for cultural customization, emerging from real life experiences of a wide variety of corporations who have tried the 'standardised' strategy approach and have run into major problems across the world.

Professionals from disciplines ranging from anthropology, visual design, usability, product design etc. are now increasingly raising their voice in favour of a rational strategy that would allow products and interfaces to be designed for the cultures where they are going to be used.

Why then is the debate continuing? One of the reasons is the challenge faced by multinational corporations who sell their products across the world and therefore are faced with the ruthlessly practical aspect of the cost and effort involved in cultural customization. Imagine the mega budget involved if Dell or HP or Intel had to totally localize their products and/or their websites for the 90 or more countries that they now reach out to. Creating and maintaining 90+ variations of their products and local sites that communicate information about these local products, would involve a huge budget and managing a major effort on an ongoing basis.

There is no doubt that the most effective kind of cultural customization is when one systematically understands the 'cultural needs' of users in each target culture and

designs a product/interface that best meets those needs in a culturally familiar way. However, given the high cost associated with this kind of ideal route, and the discouraging effect that has on any initiative to customize culturally, it is worthwhile to explore whether there are other smart strategies to achieve a large part of the cultural customization goal without a large part of the cost.

2 And so to Cultural Dimensions

Cultures can be described according to specific *characteristics* or categorized into *value categories* or *dimensions* of national culture. Dimensions are generally developed from large numbers of variables by statistical data reduction methods (e.g. factor analysis) and provide scales on which countries are scored. Dimensions that order cultures meaningfully must be empirically verifiable and more or less independent'. (De Mooij) There are several categorizations that help in evaluating similarities or differences between cultures. Some of the most commonly used ones are:

Hofstede

Power Distance,
Individualism/Collectivism
Masculinity/Femininity
Uncertainty Avoidance
Long term /Short term orientation

Trompenaars

Universalism versus particularism
Neutral versus affective
Diffuse versus specific
Achievement versus ascription

Hall

High context versus low context
Monochronic versus polychronic
Linear time versus cyclical time

It is a myth that there are universal values that can be used when designing products for the world. Several studies have reiterated the fact that cultures differ and the dimensions mentioned above are one good way of understanding how cultures differ and how users look at the same product in different ways, colored by their 'cultural glasses'.

3 Relating Cultural Dimensions to Users and What They Use – Two Examples

3.1 The Differential Effect of Brand on Asian (Collectivist) Versus American (Individualist) Consumers (Nancy Wong, Bernd Schmitt)

Individualists are likely to value brand image more because a brand's idiosyncratic meanings allow them to create individual and unique relationships with the same

brand and yet maintain a different self –identity from others (“x is my favourite brand because this is what I was using on the day of my promotion”).

They will be more disposed to judge each product as an individual.

On the other hand, collectivists are more likely to value things that enhance their relationships with others within the social in groups but elevate their social status to members from the out groups. As a result, they may value brand awareness more for a brand’s signifier role in establishing group identity and social hierarchy (“y is my favourite brand because it is used exclusively by the elite group”).

Collectivists will place more emphasis on the product’s affiliation to a group, such as a brand, manufacturer, or country of origin.

3.2 Culture Explains (de Mooij1997, 1998, 2000, 2001)

While for some products differences between countries worldwide can be explained by differences in national income, in more economically homogeneous Europe most differences can only be explained by culture.

Differences in media usage are persistent because the media are part of countries’ culture. Although, for some media, differences worldwide are related to national income, in the developed world and Europe in particular, differences in radio ownership can only be explained by culture (Fig. 1.).

The number of radios per 1,000 population is correlated with individualism. This correlation becomes more significant over time. In individualist cultures everyone has his/her own radio, while in collectivist cultures one radio per family is enough.

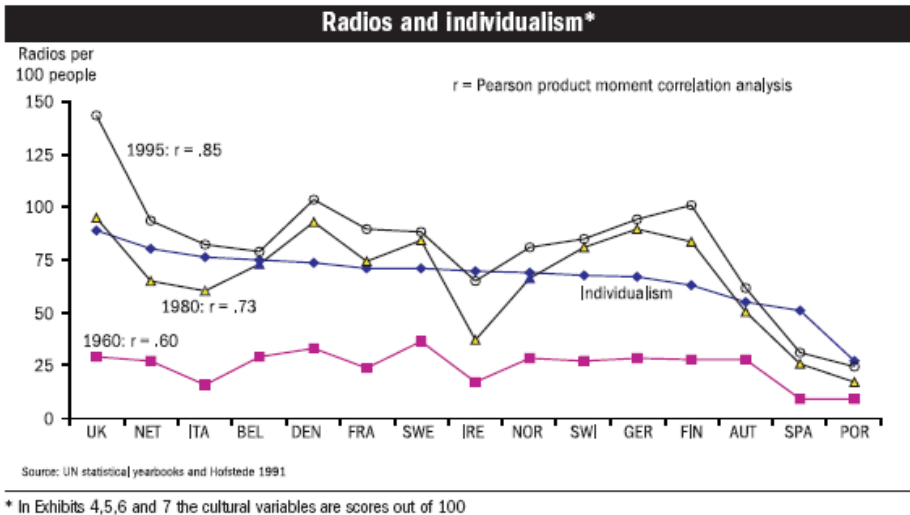


Fig. 1. Relationship between the dimension of ‘individualism’ and ownership of radio sets in Europe

Many other consumption differences can be predicted and explained by analyzing the relationship between consumption and scores on Hofstede's dimensions of national culture. For example, culture has been shown to influence the volume of mineral water and soft drinks consumed, preferences for new or used cars, ownership of insurance products, possession of private gardens, readership of newspapers and books, television viewing, ownership of consumer electronics, use of the Internet, use of cosmetics, deodorants, toothpaste and hair care products, and consumption of fresh fruit, ice cream and frozen food as well as numerous other products and services.

4 And so, Can This Lead to a Smart Strategy?

If cultural dimensions can predict consumption and usage behavior, then would it not be useful to FIRST group the countries one aims to reach out to, in clusters of countries with similar scores for each dimension? Scores for Hofstede's five dimensions of national culture are available for 59 countries (Fig 2.). The dimensions are measured on index scales from 0 to 100. The dimensions are Power Distance (PDI), Individualism/Collectivism(IDV), Masculinity/Femininity (MAS), Uncertainty Avoidance(UAI), and Long-Term versus Short-Term Orientation(LTO).

For example, if we take a look at the index of Hofstede's dimensions and select countries whose rank on the individualism dimension is low (rank of 30 or lower), we get an interesting mix of countries (Fig. 2.). The score on the individualism dimension being low implies that the countries are collectivistic (the opposite of individualistic). How does hofstede define collectivism?

Collectivism (Demooij)

In *individualistic* cultures, people look after themselves and their immediate family only and want to differentiate themselves from others. There is a need for privacy. In *collectivistic* cultures people belong to in-groups who look after them in exchange for loyalty. People prefer to conform to the norms adopted by others instead of differentiating themselves from others.

In individualistic cultures the person is viewed as an independent, autonomous entity with a distinctive set of attributes, (traits, abilities, motives and values). In collectivistic cultures individuals are fundamentally dependent on each other. The self cannot be separated from others and the surrounding social context. Self-reflection is more common among individualists than collectivists because for the latter their relationships to others are more important than self-knowledge.

As it appears from the index, Asians, Latin Americans and Africans are collectivists as opposed to North Americans who are individualists.

In other words, all these countries that scored high as collectivist cultures have that dimension as a significant common aspect of their culture, in spite of the geographical distance from each other.

Taking advantage of this similarity, a company like HP could decide to design one set of products and one website for this group of 22 countries, instead of 22 different products and websites for each of these 22 countries.

PDI Power distance Index
 UDV Individualism Index
 MAS Masculinity Index
 UAI Uncertainty Avoidance Index
 LTO Long-Term Orientation Index

	PDI		IDV		MAS		UAI		LTO	
	rank	score	rank	score	rank	score	rank	score	rank	score
Arab Countries	7	80	26/27	38	23	53	27	68		
Argentina	35/36	49	22/23	46	20/21	56	10/15	86		
Australia	41	36	2	90	16	61	37	51	15	31
Austria	53	11	18	55	2	79	24/25	70		
Bangladesh									11	40
Belgium	20	65	8	75	22	54	5/6	94		
Brazil	14	69	26/27	38	27	49	21/22	76	6	65
Canada	39	39	4/5	80	24	52	41/42	48	20	23
Chile	24/25	63	38	23	46	28	10/15	86		
China									1	118
Colombia	17	67	49	13	11/12	64	20	80		
Costa Rica	42/44	35	46	15	48/49	21	10/15	86		
Denmark	51	18	9	74	50	16	51	23		
East Africa	21/23	64	33/35	27	39	41	36	52		
Ecuador	8/9	78	32	8	13/14	63	28	67		
Finland	46	33	17	63	47	26	31/32	59		
France	15/16	68	10/11	71	35/36	43	10/15	86		
Germany FR	42/44	35	15	67	9/10	66	29	65	14	31
Great Britain	42/44	35	3	89	9/10	66	47/48	35	18	25
Greece	27/28	60	30	35	18/19	57	1	112		
Guatemala	2/3	95	53	6	43	37	3	101		
Hong Kong	15/16	68	37	25	18/19	57	49/50	29	2	96
India	10/11	77	41	48	20/21	56	45	40	7	61
Indonesia	8/9	78	47/48	14	30/31	46	41/42	48		
Iran	29/30	58	24	41	35/36	43	31/32	59		
Ireland (Republic of)	49	28	12	70	7/8	68	47/48	35		
Israel	52	13	19	54	29	47	19	81		
Italy	34	50	7	76	4/5	70	23	75		

Jamaica	37	45	25	39	7/8	68	52	13		
Japan	33	54	22/23	46	1	95	7	92	4	80
Malaysia	1	104	36	26	25/26	50	46	36		
Mexico	5/6	81	32	30	6	69	18	82		
Netherlands	40	38	4/5	80	51	14	35	53	10	44
New Zealand	50	22	6	79	17	58	39/40	49	16	30
Nigeria									22	16
Norway	47/48	31	13	69	52	8	38	50		
Pakistan	32	55	47/48	14	25/26	50	24/25	70	23	0
Panama	2/3	95	51	11	34	44	10/15	86		
Peru	21/23	64	45	16	37/38	42	9	87		
Philippines	4	94	31	32	11/12	64	44	44	21	19
Poland									13	32
Portugal	24/25	63	33/35	27	45	31	2	104		
Salvador	18/19	66	42	19	40	40	5/6	94		
Singapore	13	74	38/41	20	28	48	53	8	9	48
South Africa	35/36	49	36	65	13/14	63	39/40	49		
South Korea	27/28	60	43	18	41	39	16/17	85	5	75
Spain	31	57	20	51	37/38	42	10/15	86		
Sweden	47/48	31	10/11	71	53	5	49/50	29	12	33
Switzerland	45	34	14	68	4/5	70	33	58		
Taiwan	29/30	58	44	17	32/33	45	26	69	3	87
Thailand	21/23	64	39/41	20	44	34	30	64	8	56
Turkey	18/19	66	28	37	32/3	45	16/17	85		
Uruguay	26	61	29	38	42	38	4	100		
USA	38	40	1	91	15	62	43	46	17	29
Venezuela	5/6	81	50	12	3	73	21/22	76		
West Africa	10/11	77	39/41	20	30/31	46	34	54		
Yugoslavia	12	76	33/35	27	48/49	21	8	88		
Zimbabwe									19	25

Fig. 2. Index showing the rank and score of countries, for the five Hofstetdian dimensions

This would allow HP to explore all aspects of collectivism and how products designed for collectivists need to be different and how the website needs to communicate differently, from one designed for individualists.

It would, for example, be obvious that the product/s would need to allow shared usage and make it possible for the user to feel a sense of belonging/affiliation to the 'collective' or 'in group'. Further, the product would NOT make the user stand out or flaunt their individuality. It would, in fact, allow the opposite to happen.

The website for these countries would emphasise the shared usage capability and communicate 'in group' acceptance by ownership of the product.

The bottom line for HP would be a major win- win, in having created a few products and one website (thereby saving cost and effort) BUT all of these would be much more culturally customized (and hence more attractive to the users) than if they had used a one size fits all strategy and achieved cost saving.

5 Conclusion

As we realize that the 'world is flat', it becomes evident that in this flat world , cultures are increasingly visible to each other. However, that does not imply that cultures are converging into a truly homogenous global village. On the contrary the sharp juxtaposition of different cultures against each other is making people live life as an interesting double act. When in a 'global' environment (such as traveling outside ones country), there is evidence of 'global homogenous' behavior, but on return of the native there is evidence of a desire to recharge oneself with local 'flavors'. In this midst of this alternating reality, organizations wanting to reach out to the world, with their products and services, have no choice but to explore smart strategies that allow them to step closer to their users but also remain competitive as a business.

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