



# Should all firms adapt websites to international audiences?



Boris Bartikowski <sup>a,\*</sup>, Nitish Singh <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Euromed Management, Domaine de Luminy, BP 921, 13288 Marseille cedex 9, France*

<sup>b</sup> *Saint Louis University, 3674 Lindell Boulevard, St. Louis, MO 63108, USA*

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 1 November 2012

Received in revised form 1 May 2013

Accepted 1 May 2013

Available online 2 June 2013

### Keywords:

Website cultural congruity

Attitude toward the site

Trust in e-vendor

Brand equity

Purchasing risk

Consumer involvement

## ABSTRACT

The authors investigate the moderating roles of brand equity and purchasing risk in the relationships between website cultural congruity (WCC) and two dependent variables: attitude toward the website ( $A_{ST}$ ) and trust in the e-vendor. An exploratory study identifies typical French website design elements (graphic design and layout factors) to use in a subsequent experimental study to manipulate WCC. The results reveal that the effect of WCC on  $A_{ST}$  increases when brand equity is weak; for trust, both brand equity and purchasing risk act as moderators. The interaction between brand equity and purchasing risk reveals that WCC only influences trust when brand equity is weak. Overall, the results suggest that strong brand equity outweighs the effects of WCC in terms of improving site attitudes and reducing purchasing risk, with notable managerial and research implications.

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## 1. Introduction

Companies need to account for the importance of culture when developing international websites (Sia et al., 2009; Singh, Kumar, & Baack, 2005; Steenkamp & Geyskens, 2006). Websites frequently display cultural markers (e.g., colors, pictures, symbols, rituals, heroes, values) that reflect aspects of target users' cultures (Cyr, 2008; Cyr, Bonanni, Bowes, & Ilsever, 2005; Singh et al., 2005). Such culturally congruent websites can enhance website usability, which may generate more favorable attitudes toward the site and ultimately increase purchasing intentions; in contrast, foreign-looking websites may be more difficult for consumers to process, reduce usability, and prevent business transactions (Baack & Singh, 2007; Luna, Peracchio, & De Juan, 2002a; Luna, Peracchio, & De Juan, 2002b; Singh, Fassott, Chao, & Hoffmann, 2006; Singh & Matsuo, 2004). Consumers may recognize website cultural congruity (WCC) at different levels and degrees, such as language (simple translations, full target language congruity), functions (site ergonomics, functionality, technical specifications), or graphic designs (typical cultural markers such as colors, national references, symbols, heroes). This study focuses on graphic design and layout factors, which previous studies suggest influence site attitudes and trust (e.g., Bart, Shankar, Sultan, & Urban, 2005; Mazaheri, Richard, & Laroche, 2011).

Most previous studies document positive effects of WCC on usability and site attitudes, but no empirical support confirms that improved levels of WCC improve trust in the e-vendor. Online trust is an important antecedent of profitable relationships with online consumers

(e.g. Jarvenpaa, Tractinsky, Saarinen, & Vitale, 1999; Schlosser, White, & Lloyd, 2006; Wang, Beatty, & Foxx, 2004), and companies should identify drivers of online trust, beyond the basic website requirements of privacy and security (Bart et al., 2005). One important antecedent of online trust might relate to how the website looks and feels in terms of culturally relevant content (Cyr et al., 2005).

However, the present study argues for a more nuanced approach to the positive effects of WCC on site attitudes and trust, because extant claims neglect the likely interactions with brand equity and purchasing risk. Strong brand equity might outweigh the positive effects of WCC on attitude and trust. As a consequence, companies with strong equity brands may economize by limiting their investments in WCC. Different effects of WCC also likely pertain to attitude and trust, because of the different interactions of these constructs with purchasing risk. Brand equity and purchasing risk could interact to influence the effect of WCC on trust too. Therefore, companies may be well advised to make WCC investment decisions according to brand equity and consumer purchasing risk. To substantiate these claims, this experimental study uses manipulations of WCC for a typical French website design. The hypothesis tests employ a WCC  $\times$  brand equity  $\times$  purchasing risk between-group design and 200 French study participants.

## 2. Conceptual background and hypotheses

### 2.1. Culture and the web

Culture influences how humans interact and socialize (Rokeach, 1973), with powerful effects on consumers' motivations, lifestyles, and purchase decisions (De Mooij, 2004). Marketing communication conducts information from a culturally constituted world, such that

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +33 491 827 982; fax: +33 491 827 983.

E-mail addresses: boris.bartikowski@euromed-management.com (B. Bartikowski), singhn2@slu.edu (N. Singh).

advertising not only reflects but also endorses and glamorizes the cultural values of a society (Albers-Miller & Gelb, 1996; Pollay & Gallagher, 1990). Accordingly, a growing body of literature investigates how online consumers respond to culturally differentiated website designs (Singh et al., 2006). These studies mostly suggest that online marketers can improve website effectiveness by customizing content and adapting the look and feel of websites to foreign target cultures (Singh et al., 2005). In a large-scale study, across nearly 9000 customers from 23 countries, Steenkamp and Geyskens (2006) report positive effects of WCC on perceived site value, especially in cultures with high national identity levels.

No studies investigate the effects of WCC on online trust though, and Cyr et al. (2005) and Gefen and Heart (2006) call for research on cross-cultural aspects of online trust creation. Except for Steenkamp and Geyskens's (2006) work, no research addresses contingency conditions of the effects of WCC on consumer behavior. To extend this literature, the present study investigates the effects of WCC on two dependent variables – attitude toward the website ( $A_{ST}$ ) and trust in the e-vendor – with brand equity and purchasing risk as moderators.

Specifically,  $A_{ST}$  is a consumer's predisposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to web content (Cases, Fournier, Dubois, & Tanner, 2010; Richard & Chandra, 2005). Important drivers of  $A_{ST}$  are emotion-based evaluations of website atmospherics, such as entertainment (e.g., fun to browse, exciting) or effectiveness (e.g., convenient, accurate) (Chen & Wells, 1999; Davis, Wang, & Lindridge, 2008; Eroglu, Machleit, & Davis, 2001; Mazaheri et al., 2011). Trust in the e-vendor is the consumer's subjective belief that an e-vendor will perform transactions according to expectations (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Verhagen, Meents, & Yao-Hua, 2006). According to McKnight, Cummings, and Chervany (1998), trust emerges from categorization processes and illusions of control, such that people place more trust in people and information that look familiar. The conceptual model appears in Fig. 1.

2.2. Direct effects of WCC on  $A_{ST}$  and trust

Categorizing, processing, and interpreting communication content can improve due to shared schemas that consumers hold as a result of living in a specific cultural environment (D'Andrade, 1992). These resources become embodied in language, patterns of social interaction, and cultural artifacts (Hutchins, 1995). Information that conforms to a person's cultural schemas is easier to process and assimilate, so the resources required to navigate culturally congruent sites likely do not exceed the resources available to site visitors (Luna et al., 2002a). This balance may generate positive thoughts about the site due to increased processing fluency (cf. Schwarz, 2004), the likelihood of experiencing flow (i.e., complete engrossment in the browsing task; Hoffman & Novak, 1996), or improved assessments of the e-tailer's assistive intent (i.e., buyer's perception of the extent to which the seller is helping the buyer complete a given task; Gupta, Yadav, & Varadarajan, 2009). Previous research also suggests that consumers experience feelings of attachment as a result of self-congruity with a stimulus image (Fournier, 1998; Sirgy, 1982, 1985; Sirgy, Johar, Samli, & Clairborne, 1991). Therefore, higher  $A_{ST}$  may result from emotions that consumers feel when using a website congruent with their cultural selves (high WCC). Such a website may facilitate stimulus classification, which gives people a sense of control, reduces uncertainty, evokes situational normality, and should also encourage online trust.

**H1.** A culturally congruent website leads to (a) improved  $A_{ST}$  and (b) greater trust in the e-vendor compared with a culturally incongruent website.

2.3. Interactions of WCC with brand equity and purchasing risk

Particularly on the Internet, which lacks physical surroundings or human touch, brands play an important role in the development of site attitudes and trust (Bart et al., 2005; Eastlick, Lotz, & Warrington,

2006; Hong, 2004; Van den Poel & Leunis, 1999). This study focuses on the concept of customer-based brand equity, which Keller (1993, p. 2) defines as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand." Strong equity brands prompt various consumer responses, including feelings of affiliation, improved store attitudes, or reduced perceptions of risk (e.g. Dubé, Chebat, & Morin, 1995; Kwon & Lennon, 2009). Strong equity brands may provide cues that outweigh the positive effects of WCC. A strong equity brand even may suffer in the presence of higher WCC, because the display of foreign cultural markers could dilute the brand's identity, which may spill over to reduce processing fluency and lower perceptions of situational normality. Moreover, consumers may think that building culturally congruent websites involves relatively more effort for weak equity brands (with limited resources) than for strong equity brands (with more resources). Therefore, consumers may perceive more assistive intent (Gupta et al., 2009) in the case of weak equity brands that show WCC than in case of strong ones that do so. The positive effects of WCC on  $A_{ST}$  and trust therefore should be more prominent for weak equity brands.

**H2.** The effect of WCC on (a)  $A_{ST}$  and (b) trust in the e-vendor is moderated by brand equity, such that the effect is stronger when brand equity is weak rather than strong.

The positive effect of WCC on  $A_{ST}$  may be independent of purchasing risk, because the emotional antecedents of  $A_{ST}$  do not relate to the purchasing situation. Emotions such as joy or pleasure reflect enduring, rather than situational, involvement (Bloch, 1982; Laurent & Kapferer, 1985). Enduring involvement is an inner state that reflects the person's continuing interest or emotional attachment, beyond the purchasing situation (Bloch, 1982; Hoffman & Novak, 1996). Such involvement is independent of risk-based considerations, can occur without any purchase goal, and derives from a perception that the object is related to centrally held values or self-concepts (e.g., Broderick, 2007; Huang, 2006). Thus,  $A_{ST}$  should form independently of purchasing risk, as should the effect of WCC on  $A_{ST}$ .

**H3a.** The effect of WCC on  $A_{ST}$  is not moderated by purchasing risk.

However, the reasoning differs for trust, the second dependent variable in this study. Risk is a prerequisite of trust, because trust can lead to the manifestation of behaviors only in risky situations (e.g., Bhattacharya, Devinney, & Pillutla, 1998; Ha & Stoel, 2009; McCole, Ramsey, & Williams, 2008). As Mayer et al. (1995, p. 724) put it, "one does not need to risk anything in order to trust; however, one must take a risk in order to engage in trusting action." Therefore, WCC, a website characteristic that might reduce risk by creating a more familiar surrounding and situational normality, should be more effective for promoting trust in high-risk situations.

**H3b.** The effect of WCC on trust in the e-vendor is moderated by purchasing risk, such that the effect is stronger when purchasing risk is high rather than low.

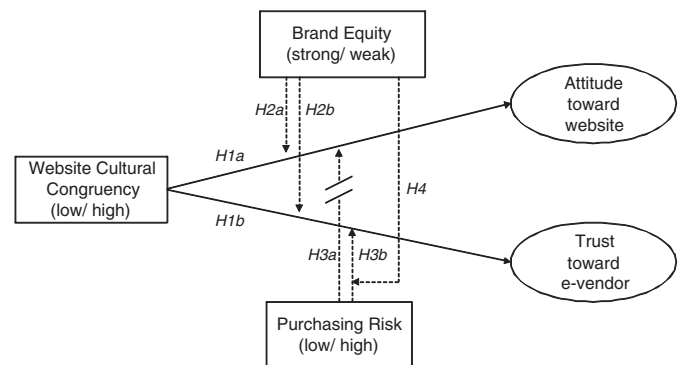


Fig. 1. Research model.

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