



Website design in an international context: The role of gender in masculine versus feminine oriented countries



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ABSTRACT

Previous research confirms there are differences between men and women concerning website design preferences. A few researchers have further suggested website preferences based on gender (i.e. whether one is a man or a woman) differ in countries that are typically considered higher in masculinity versus higher in femininity. As such, this supposes fewer differences exist between men and women in more feminine societies, while more significant differences occur in more masculine societies. To test this assumption, we survey a total of 955 participants located in six countries. More particularly, we examine design constructs of Information Content, Navigation Design, Visual Design modeled to Website Trust and Website Satisfaction. We are interested to determine if gender differences are strong in higher masculinity countries and weak in lower masculinity countries. We also investigate if gender moderates the various relationships in our model. As predicted, in higher masculinity countries there are more differences between men and women, and gender is more likely to moderate the relationships in the model. This research has implications for the complexity of website design preferences, and extends earlier work on website design in a multiple country sample where masculinity–femininity differs. Theoretical contributions and design issues are elaborated.

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1. Introduction

There are differences in perception of the Internet experience between men and women, and these differences transfer to the on-line shopping experience (Garbarino & Strahilevitz, 2004; Rodgers & Harris, 2003). More particularly, previous research outlines that men and women have different preferences concerning website design, and this applies in an e-business setting (Moss, Gunn, & Kubacki, 2008; Simon, 2001). Based on gender (i.e. whether one is a man or a woman), differences have been uncovered related to online social presence and enjoyment (Cyr, Hassanein, Head, & Ivanov, 2007), website design and satisfaction (Cyr & Bonanni, 2005; Moss, Gunn, & Heller, 2006), social norms (Szymanski & Hise, 2000), online risk (Garbarino & Strahilevitz, 2004), or website trust (Awad & Ragowsky, 2008; Riedl, Hubert, & Kenning, 2010; Sebastianelli et al., 2008). While some research has addressed gender differences and website design in an online shopping context, almost no research examines this topic across countries.

It is known that there are different design preferences in different cultures (Gefen, Geri, & Paravastu, 2007; Marcus & Gould, 2000), and these preferences have implications for website trust

and website satisfaction (Cyr, 2008). Most often, researchers have used Hofstede's (1984) cultural dimensions to make pre-determined cultural comparisons between countries (Vyncke & Brengman, 2010). One such dimension of interest in the current research is that of masculine–feminine cultures. Generally described, masculinity refers to societies which value competitiveness or independence, while femininity refers to societal values such as being gentle or compassionate (Hofstede, 1984; Srite & Karahanna, 2006). There is evidence to suggest that gender differences may moderate the technology acceptance model (TAM) in different cultures, and that this relationship may differ in more masculine versus more feminine cultures (Sanchez-Franco, 2006).

In a study based in Spain, Sanchez-Franco (2006) examined the impact of gender on Web acceptance and usage using an elaborated TAM in which flow and attitude were also considered. The findings revealed that as expected, women exceed men on a cluster of traits termed “socio-emotional, expressive and interpersonally oriented, whereas males exceed females on a cluster called task-oriented, instrumental and agentic” (Ibid, p. 22). However, not expected and counter to previous research, perceived ease of use influenced attitudes of males more so than for women. Sanchez-Franco suggests that the moderate masculinity ranking for Spain may have tempered the overall results of the study. More specifically, he proposed that “a high masculinity ranking indicates the country experiences a high degree of gender differentiation” (p.

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33) since men in the country are more “masculine” in orientation than men in more feminine countries. This is an interesting, and untested supposition and has implications for the role of gender across cultures. It is this proposition that is at the core of the current research.

In the realm of website design, and based on the preceding, one would expect that preferences between men and women would be more different in higher masculinity countries than in more feminine countries. To test this premise, three elements of website design [Information Content, Navigation Design, and Visual Design] as used in previous research (Cyr, 2008; Cyr, Bonanni, Bowes, & Ilsever, 2005) are modeled to website trust and website satisfaction. The focus is not to test the model, but rather to determine if gender moderates these relationships, and further, if this is more the case in higher masculine countries than lower masculine (or more feminine countries). We also expect that there will be more significant differences between men and women for each of the constructs in higher masculinity countries. This results in the following research questions:

- (1) Are there a larger number of significant differences between men and women in perception of website design elements (e.g. Information Content, Navigation Design, Visual Design) in countries that are higher in masculinity versus lower in masculinity?
- (2) Are design elements (e.g. Information Content, Navigation Design, Visual Design) which lead to Website Trust and Website Satisfaction more likely to be moderated by gender in countries that are higher in masculinity versus lower in masculinity?

This research is aimed to contribute to an understanding of how gender perceptions of website design vary by country based on cultural variations. Further, does culture interact with gender to influence user perceptions? If this is the case, then as suggested by Sanchez-Franco (2006) research should focus not only on comparisons in the IT realm based on biological differences and whether one is a man or a woman, but also on the cultural values represented by country groups and how gender moderates website or other perceptions in a cultural context. In addition, this work has implications for website designers and how they might best tailor Web content for international users.

This paper begins with an overview of the theoretical background to the research including information processing differences between men and women, and cultural differences for masculinity–femininity related to country affiliation. This is followed by an explanation of the research model, and elaboration of the literature leading to our hypotheses. The method and results are presented, and the paper concludes with a discussion in which both theoretical and practical implications are outlined.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Men, women and information processing

Men and women are known to process information differently and this spills into various areas of information technology communications (Gefen & Ridings, 2005; Gefen et al., 2007), including online shopping. Relevant to the current investigation in which comparisons between men and women are made with respect to website design, in other research concerning gender and website design both Simon (2001) and Sanchez-Franco (2006) refer to the Myers-Levy selectivity model as a theoretical framework for comparisons.

The selectivity model as first proposed by Myers-Levy (1989) asserts that women are comprehensive processors who are apt to assimilate all available information before arriving at a conclusion, while men are selective processors who rely on specific and readily available cues. Translated to an online shopping experience, women will spend considerably more time gathering information about products and comparing the merits of each prior to making the purchase decision. Men on the other hand, tend to pursue a minimizing approach whereby they make a selection as quickly as possible. This dichotomous approach is confirmed in a study of shopping in which men take a more goal-oriented approach and women seek a more interpersonal experience (Knowledge at Wharton, 2007). Simon (2001) more specifically suggests that given the comprehensive information processing strategy preferred by women, females using the Web may exhibit lower levels of favorable perception and satisfaction if websites fail to deliver gender relevant information.

Dittmar, Long, and Meek (2004, p. 440) wrote: “Men are more functional in their buying attitudes...whereas women stress social-experiential and identity-related concerns, and in particular, emotional involvement”. Inadequately perceived emotional benefits may be an underlying reason why women are sometimes less involved in e-commerce activity (Cyr et al., 2007; Rodgers & Harris, 2003; Sanchez-Franco, 2006). The cited research suggests differences between men and women in technology use such as the Internet – including the experience of online shopping. There is a tendency for women to be less satisfied with online shopping than men (Cyr & Bonanni, 2005; Dittmar et al., 2004). Finally, the moderating effect of gender has been studied in a variety of IT settings, but has rarely been examined in an e-shopping setting (based on a table provided by Shen, Lee, Cheung, & Chen, 2010).

2.2. Cultural values of masculinity–femininity

While the previous discussion focused on differences in perception of websites based on biological differences and whether one is a man or a woman, an alternative perspective is how values manifested in different national cultures may also influence one's experience of the Web. Further, culture is known to effect perceptions of online shopping (Cyr, 2008; Cyr et al., 2005; Garrett, 2003; Srite & Karahanna, 2006).

Over the years, researchers have often used Hofstede's (1984) classifications to study social phenomena including website design and experience (Cyr et al., 2005; Gefen & Heart, 2006; Jarvenpaa, Tractinsky, Saarinen, & Vitale, 1999; Simon, 2001). Although there have been questions regarding the validity of using Hofstede's findings, results of his work have been supported quantitatively and qualitatively by numerous studies in various disciplines (Cyr, Head, Larios, & Pan, 2009; Sanchez-Franco, 2006; Straub, 1994). Of particular relevance to the current investigation, researchers who have studied website design used Hofstede's classifications for masculinity–femininity as a basis for comparisons (Marcus & Gould, 2000; Zahedi, Van Pelt, & Srite, 2006). As Zahedi et al. (2006) noted, masculinity–femininity is under researched and relates to Web communication richness and usability.

To elaborate, in masculine cultures values emphasize work goals such as material success and having challenging work. As defined by Hofstede (1984,1998) work goals include a focus on recognition, challenge, advancement, earning, and achievement defined by earnings. Alternately, in feminine cultures values are focused on quality of life, nurturing, and modesty (1984, 1998). Quality of life work goals emphasize a supportive and friendly work environment, cooperation, job security and achievement determined with respect to work relationships and human contacts.

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