

The Cultural Influence on Designing the Homepage: Romanian vs. Portuguese Businesses Comparison

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Abstract. *The growth of the Internet and the digital transformation of the entire marketplace motivate a better understanding of the one major element of the communication strategy: the website. Often, the website is the only way a company communicates to its customers, therefore it has an impact on marketing and sales. The main purpose of this study is to analyze how cultural factors are influencing the construction and the content of a website in two countries: Romania and Portugal. This study analyses how the homepage reflects specific social values based on models of culture. Therefore, a secondary objective is to suggest alternative website content for communication practitioners based on the results. The websites selected from each country belong to small and medium companies, younger than 3 years, from 3 industries: technology, agriculture, transportation. The main research question of this study aims to find if there is any significant difference in executional factors amongst the creation of a website across different countries. The most useful technique for analyzing the websites and the cross-cultural differences has been recognized as the content analysis. The cross-cultural comparison of the companies' websites showed that cultural values play a significant role and the cultural dimensions are reflected in the online communications. Both cultures have similar scores on Hofstede's dimensions, so the websites design for Portugal and Romania were expected to have similar characteristics of executional factors. The paper offers interesting conclusions and implications for both designers and researchers, highlighting the importance of future automatization in order to help companies to develop nation-specific content.*

Keywords: *Cultural factors; advertising strategy; website; young small and medium companies.*

Introduction

The rise of the globalization and the impact it has on the market is forcing the companies to pay more attention to the online activity and communication. After the Internet started to become a constant in our lives, scientists started predicting that the effect of the globalization will be a homogenized culture throughout all the countries (Johnston & Johal, 1999). But recent studies have explored the hypothesis that users from different cultures have different cultural and social perspectives (Clemmensen, 2006) and the results proved that differences in cultural mentalities or background lead to differences in computing systems. Localization is not just mere translation, but it should also include the design elements of the interface. (Collazos & Gil, 2011)

In modern days, the website has become an important element of the marketing mix for the e-commerce companies, playing an important part in selling products or services online. But more often the website is no longer used as the base just for e-commerce business, but also as a core component of any company's external communication. This study focuses on culture-specific preferences reflected on websites' design explained by Hofstede's cultural model. The main purpose of the study is to identify the similarities and the differences between Romanian and Portuguese cultural preferences for text, colors and visual representation.

Literature review

Cultural models

Even though it might be considered a fairly understood concept, the term *culture* has different definitions depending on the domain, field or context. Widely accepted is that the culture includes: values, beliefs,

attitudes and actions (Hofstede, 1996). An important aspect is how culture influences the way we perceive the reality and also the other cultures. Therefore, it influences more than just the way people interact, behave and think. As a complex concept, the culture is easier to comprehend by the sum of its elements: language, values, religion, rituals, heroes, symbols etc. All these elements are brought together and grouped by the cultural models. These always have tried to measure different variables or set of factors to find patterns among national cultures.

One of the most popular cultural models is developed by Hofstede, a Dutch social psychologist who became well-known after developing the cultural dimensions' theory. His studies demonstrated that cultural beliefs influence the society and organizations and he considers the culture to be for humans what software is for computers (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). Together with his colleagues, the author identified six dimensions influencing national cultures: Power Distance, Individualism, Uncertainty avoidance, Masculinity, Long Term Orientation, and Indulgence vs. Restraint. Although theorizing and research on various cultural dimensions has provided many insights, there are some limitations of this approach.

Hofstede's Model applied: Romania vs. Portugal

Using the comparison tool available on the Hofstede Insights website, the national scores of both countries could be analyzed and detailed. According to Mihaș and Lungescu (2006), the scores on the Hofstede Insights website are estimative and they are not the result of any field research. In 2005, The Gallup Organization Romania implemented the Hofstede methodology and instrument to find significant differences for three out of five dimensions' scores. The authors developed a new instrument formed by 42 new items to investigate the five dimensions, but with different methodology. The conclusions confirmed the estimations made by Hofstede.

The Power Distance reflects the attitude of a culture towards the fact that the individuals in society is not equal. This dimension measures the level of acceptance that the less powerful members within a country towards the inequalities amongst them. As seen in the Figure 1, Romania scores very high on this dimension – 90 compared to Portugal – 63. Even though both cultures admit that the most powerful positions have privileges, in Romania the hierarchical order needs no further justification. This dimension might impact certain aspects of the Web design such as: highly structured access to information vs less-highly, strong vs weak focus on expertise, logos, certifications, prominence given to leaders vs customers or employees.

The Individualism is the dimension which measures the degree of interdependence of a society's members. In an individual society people look after themselves and their direct family whilst in collectivist society people are loyal to extended and diverse groups. Both Romania and Portugal are collectivistic societies, having similar scores: 30 and 27. People in these countries have strong, long-lasting, stable relationships and supporting other people is essential. This dimension might be reflected on a website over the use of images of success: materialism vs work-life balance, rhetorical style: official slogans vs a speech of tolerance, the importance given to individuals vs products, the emphasis on truth vs relationships, the prominence given to youth and action vs. aged and experienced leaders.

The Masculinity score indicates how much the society is driven by competition, achievement and success. Both cultures are rather Feminine and people value quality of life more than status and triumph. In a high-masculinity culture, the UX elements like graphic, sounds and animations are used for utilitarian purposes only, the attention is gained through games and competitions. A feminine culture is blurring the gender roles, it promotes the cooperation and support and gains attention through poetry and visual aesthetics.

The dimension measuring the *Uncertainty Avoidance (UA)* is related to the way the members of a culture handle with the anxiety and the unknown situations in the future. Romania and Portugal have a very high score on this dimension, meaning that both maintain rigid codes of belief and behavior. Both value punctuality, security and may resist innovation. Of course, UA might influence which user-interface elements are preferred, and translated high-UA would mean using clear metaphors, limited choices and redundant cues to avoid ambiguity. A low UA culture would act the opposite: the coding color and typography would maximize information; the content and choices would be non-restrictive and the mental models would focus on understanding concepts not narrowing the tasks.

The way people try to control their desires and impulses is measured by the dimension called *Indulgence*. Both countries have a relatively weak control and they are defined by a tendency to pessimism and cynicism.

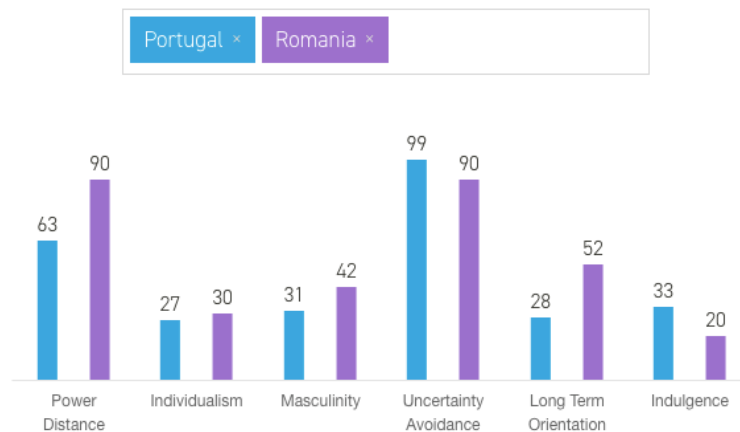


Figure 1. Comparison Portugal vs. Romania

Long Term Orientation deals with the prioritization of the two important goals: keeping the links with the past and dealing with present and future challenges. As seen in the Figure 1, Romania has an intermediate score of 52 while Portuguese culture is a very normative one. The latter, values traditions and focuses more on achieving quick results rather than saving for the future. In a high LT country, the content is focused on practice and practical value meanwhile in a low LT culture, there is a content focused on truth, desire for immediate results and achieving goals.

The digital culture and the cultural products

In the last 30 years, the digital technology became a constitutive part of our life and, despite pessimistic predictions about the banking computer systems, accidental launching of nuclear missiles, any apocalyptic event didn't take place (Tewksbury, Moy, & Weis, 2004). The exponential development of science, media and capital produces a more dramatic change in a shorter time. Therefore, the "digital culture" is the result of the complex interactions between elements like: ways of thinking and doing, technology, codification, virtualization, programming, subcultural formations etc. It is important to understand how these elements develop and interact to influence the culture.

The transformations brought by new technologies have an impact on how we think about ourselves. In his book, the editor of *Wired* analyses the effects of the new technology on commerce, being concerned about "the infinite shelf space" that is now available on the online websites (Andreson, 2007). It is considered that one of the big changes brought by new information communication technologies is the possibility to rearrange a bottom up model of organization (Wilson & Irvine, 2013). The most popular examples are the Wikis, the websites with content created by users in a vast, constantly evolving data base of articles.

Nowadays, the Internet represents a new environment for the communication between people and organizations, in general, and companies and audience, business and consumers, in particular. Therefore, owning a website and understanding differences across cultures is imperative to the growth of the business. Because online traffic and online purchasing is steadily increasing, it is critical for all businesses to build and maintain a proper image and customer loyalty. Sometimes, for example in the case of an online vendor, the website is the only way it communicates with its clients. So, all the design elements and content characteristics had to be carefully considered to inspire trust and deliver outstanding results.

The websites can be considered cultural products of our era. Defined as "goods and services that include the arts (performing arts, visual arts, architecture), heritage conservation (museums, galleries, libraries), the cultural industries (written media, broadcasting, film, recording), and festivals", the cultural products were declared by UNESCO to be the products are not like other forms of merchandise (Aiello, 2014).

Before designing the website, both SMEs and web developers should be aware about their target and how it behaves. Medium-sized companies are more likely to be involved in diversified activities and different

markets in different countries. It is already known that cultural specifics like the use of certain colors, shapes, pictures should be considered (Ruzzier, Ruzzier, & Hisrich, 2013). At a national level, the culture also appears to influence the perceptions of Internet users for website design and content, according to an experiment by Fink and Laupase (2000). Communication in all its forms, mass mediated, interpersonal or nonverbal, cannot be separated from culture: each shape and is shaped by the other (Hall & Hall, 1959).

Because the cultural frameworks created to investigate the cultural values at a national level cannot be applied to interactive platforms like websites, new frameworks had to be developed. The initial studies adapted previous cultural models, such as Hofstede's (1980) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's (2011), to identify the values depicted in websites (Marcus & Gould, 2000). However, Vyncke and Brengman (2010) consider that the framework developed by Singh et al. (2005) is the most successful. It evaluates the website elements and contains six cultural dimensions, operationalized through twenty-three cultural categories (Singh et al., 2005). This framework includes the cultural dimensions of Hofstede and Hall: collectivism and individualism, power distance and uncertainty avoidance and high-low context dimension. Despite the criticism that was previously expressed in connection to Hofstede's model, Singh et al.'s framework has been applied in numerous investigations in different countries.

Web design and UX

The web is a dynamic place where people can be constantly connected. Therefore, we can investigate and identify a "digital" culture which developed on top of the social cultural identity. In most of the cases when a website should be developed, the complex mix of marketing, business communication, engineering requirements and accessibility is being tended by specialists called UX designers. They develop iterative processes which include planning, analyzing, designing and evaluating a project until it serves its purpose of showcasing company's best attributes. Superior design elements on the Internet attract and engage customers (Hoffman & Novak, 1996), and create positive cognitive and sensory user experiences (Nielsen, 2000).

The concept of "cultural marker" refers to the "interface design elements and features that are prevalent, and possibly preferred, within a particular cultural group" and it was coined by Barber and Badre (1998). More recent, the concept of "digital marker" started to be used when discussing the major variables in determining the way culture and usability in Web design are being defined.

Previous studies have investigated how these digital markers, consisting of elements such as color, language cues, images, metaphors etc. are preferred and understood by users in certain countries. Websites from Germany and Belgium were analyzed and markers like elements for all domains (e.g. page icon) and domain markers icons (e.g. shopping basket for e-commerce) were shared between both cultures (Mushtaha & De Troyer, 2012). On the other hand, country specific digital markers were identified and different sets for each country were recommended when building a website. The cultural markers are efficient when we want to address local audiences as a small or medium company or to localize the message as an international business (Alexander, Thompson, & Murray, 2017). The cultural markers relevant for this study are detailed in the Table 1 below.

Table 1. Different categories of cultural markers

Colors	Specific Colors-Background	Orientation	Language	Font	Images
Red	Red	Centered	Native	Cursive	Products
Blue	Blue	Left-right	English	Italics	Human element - no faces
Green	Green	Right-left	Other	Bold	Individual/Leader
Purple	Purple		Multiple		Group pictures
Pink	Pink				Multiple individual pictures
Black	Black				Certifications
Yellow	Yellow				
Gold	Gold				
Teal	Teal				
White	White				
Multiple	Multiple				

Text

Scanning is more common than reading (Nielsen, 1997). Users scan the web page for the information they are looking for, focusing on emphasized text: bold, strong, italic, different font sizes, or different font colors. Abdulkhair (2004) showed that for some cultures, the use of different colors and bold are commonly used to highlight the important text, while for other cultures, bold and larger font sizes are preferred better. In this study, we evaluated the language used (native, foreign, multiple), text orientation (left to right or right to left) and font preferences (cursive, italics, bold) as derived from Abdulkhair's study.

Color

Each culture gives its own meaning to the colors. It is accepted that some colors might have contradicting symbolism (Mushtaha & De Troyer, 2012) and when a color might imply happiness, can suggest risk death for the others. Researchers identified some context-depending scenarios which deviate from the cultural norms (Cyr & Trevor-Smith, 2004) to try to understand and find the appropriate use of colors amongst cultures. In this study, every time one of the colors was found, it was recorded: red, blue, green, purple, pink, black, yellow, gold, white. The specific colors for flags, graphics, borders and background were also taken into consideration.

Visual representation

The Visual Representation is a factor that can have different particularities and attributes according to each culture. Marcus and Gould (2000) and Calabrese et al. (2012) developed cross-cultural web design guidelines, based on Hofstede's cultural factors. For example, Collectivistic cultures use images to promote their typical characteristics and the main focus is on leaders. Low-power distance cultures on the other hand, are in favor of public images like group achievements or people in daily life. Therefore, the use of images may vary between cultures and it can give us crucial information. This factor was used as a link to the cultural dimensions of the cultural model. Throughout the visuals, the layer of context and the contextual clues for user were evaluated.

Depending on how it is used, a photograph can affect emotionally the viewer: it can shock when related to war or simulate fantasies when related to pornography (Sontag, 2003). "Credibility" and "authority" are the two main characteristics of the photography and the reasons why it is sometimes used as "hard" evidence in justice or we use it in identification documents. Because of the preconceptions that we have about photography, it is sometimes hard to challenge its power. From a semiotic perspective, a photograph is the analogic representation of reality, and it is considered to be more precise. According to Barthes and Heath (1977) the reading of a photo and the creation of meaning is influenced by culture and social context. They also argued that the value of a photograph can be found in its connotation, but it can be difficult to separate the denotative and connotative part of its message. Even if the photography can be considered the most "honest" medium, it is surely not. There are a multiple of techniques of photomontage and they can be so complex that constructed digital photographs are not so easy to identify anymore (Paglamidis, 2013).

Methodology

The study analyses websites selected from each country belonging to small and medium companies, younger than 3 years, from 3 industries: technology, agriculture, transportation. The unit of analysis was determined to be the homepage of the companies and the components considered consisted of: text, visual representation and colors.

Research questions and hypothesis

Question 1: Is there any difference in the website's structural and executional factors across Romania and Portugal?

Question 2: Is Hofstede's model reflected in the website building?

Nowadays, websites reflect the values of the brand and create awareness on the market. However, there have been few studies on the executional factors that might be different between countries.

Therefore, the first question tries to find out if there is any significant difference in the website's structural and executional factors across two countries from different European regions: Romania and Portugal. A second question is focused on identifying if Hofstede's cultural dimensions are reliable predictors in case of any observed differences in creating a website.

Considering these questions as the starting point for the hypothesis of the study two main objectives and two hypotheses to investigate were identified. Because it might be used both in qualitative and quantitative research, the content analysis is highly flexible and is based mostly on interpretations and is admittedly value-bond. The following objectives will serve as a guide for the research's next steps.

Objective 1: To describe the basic characteristics of the executional factors in building a website in Romania and Portugal

Objective 2: To describe the particularities and the meaning of visual representations on a website homepage in Romania and Portugal

Hypothesis 1: The executional factors (text, images and visual representation) have similar characteristics in Romania and Portugal.

Hypothesis 2: A higher score on the Power Distance dimension is correlated with visuals of products and services, rather than the team and management.

Data collection - Selection of websites

Content analysis is selected as proper and useful technique when analyzing websites from different perspectives: text, colors and visual representations. In this study, the websites' URLs were collected using paid databases created in each country. For the Romanian collection of URLs, the database provided by *ListaFirme* was used, with a paid version of the services including year of establishment of the company, CAEN activity code, region and other details. For the Portuguese collection of URLs, the data base provided by *InfoEmpresas* was used and it included companies sorted by economic activity, business domain, region etc.

Instead of using random sampling, the present research employs *purposive or theoretical sampling*, therefore the sample is intentionally selected to be information-rich (Oberle, 2002). In the chronological date of establishment in the past 3 years, the first 100 companies from each country were chosen using the paid databases. The other selection criteria consist in: having an active website and to develop activities in one of the following fields: agriculture, transportation or technology. These domains are relevant for the type of information presented on the homepage. The categories selected for this study are considered to be more relevant compared to others such as e-commerce focused, news and media etc.

After applying these criteria, a total of 70 websites per country were analyzed and a detailed inspection of each site was done to evaluate the selected markers.

Data analysis - Website audit

The coding instrument included two parts. The first part contained information about the company owning the website: date of establishment, field of activity, address. The second part consisted of a set of 3 executional factors: text, color and visual representation. Factors and sub-factors were evaluated by receiving 0 (not present) or 1 (present) for categorical questions. For example, if the homepage was written in the native language, the researcher gave a 1 for that category.

Results

There a multitude of relationships and correlations that can be found on a website, therefore the methodology used in this research is not comprehensive but rather it tries to gain insights about factors like text and visuals on the homepage and discuss it in the context of Hofstede's cultural model.

The results for each factor are displayed below. The tables illustrate the actual count for each variable.

Table 2. Results for the executional factors: colors and language

	COLORS									
	RED	BLUE	GREEN	GREY	PINK	BLACK	YELLOW	GOLD	TEAL	WHITE
PORTUGAL	15	20	4	16	0	5	3	1	0	6
ROMANIA	13	23	7	13	1	6	2	0	0	5
	SPECIFIC BACKGROUND COLORS									
	RED	BLUE	GREEN	GREY	PINK	BLACK	YELLOW	GOLD	TEAL	WHITE
PORTUGAL	0	1	2	19	1	21	1	0	0	26
ROMANIA	0	2	1	18	0	23	2	0	0	24
	ORIENTATION									
	CENTERED	LEFT-RIGHT	RIGHT-LEFT							
PORTUGAL	27	43	NA							
ROMANIA	23	47	NA							
	LANGUAGE									
	NATIVE	FOREIGN	MIX							
PORTUGAL	32	15	23							
ROMANIA	24	14	32							

According to the numbers shown in the table, the result regarding the usage of language, the use of colors and the main message of the images are similar. The analyzed sample consists of websites which use a narrow range of colors and according to the industry we notice the predilection for a certain standard. In both countries, the agricultural companies choose green, brown and sometimes orange. The transportation companies rather prefer red and blue whilst tech companies opt for grey, blue. Most of the times (67%) the background is white or black and only the pictures bring color to the whole page. The next most used background is grey (27%).

Closely related to the Uncertainty Avoidance dimension's characteristics, an interesting fact revealed by this analysis is the prevalence of using English rather than native language in the case of the tech companies. The percentage of native language in this field is relatively small compared to the other two, 4%. Developing their activity in a field where innovation and open-minded approach to future is mandatory, most of the tech companies act like they belong to a small sub-culture where the level of UA is lower than around them. Defined in general by maintaining rigid codes and resisting innovation, both Romania and Portugal show in tech industry a high percentage of websites using more than just one language, symbol of the openness and the wish of globalization.

To evaluate the impact of culture on the homepage elements the research focused more on the analysis of the images existing on each case. Using the dimensions Hofstede defined and measured for Romania and Portugal, we look into finding slight differences in general focus of the message and the people promoted.

Hence, the second hypothesis is confirmed. The Romanian culture scored higher on the Power Distance dimension and this is reflected on the homepage content. An overwhelming percentage of the images used for Romanian websites in agriculture, transportation and technology is formed of descriptive visual representations of the products or the process promoted (92%). The other 8% of pictures are representing only individuals, most of the time the leader, and only in few cases the members of the team in individual pictures. In the taken sample, the group pictures for the team are totally missing on the homepage. Customers or other people are represented only in 2% of the cases and more than a half in the case of the transportation companies. The explanation for this fact might be their involvement in people transportation and partnerships with traveling agencies. As a consequence of a minor difference in Long Term Orientation's scores, the pictures on the Portuguese websites focus more on the immediate results, the paramount benefit users could have by paying for the product or the service without highlighting the long-term advantage.

There is a direct and implicit relationship between a photograph and its referent, what Roland Barthes called photography's "analogic" character, photography can act as a compelling substitute for real experience. However, photographs are constructed representations of reality so they only express what is culturally desirable or advantageous for the business to communicate.

In 84% of the cases, the visitor of the homepage is greeted by a banner at the top depicting the service or the product sold. Only 37% of the banner analyzed contain in-house made photos and the rest of the companies use free or paid stock images available online. A total of 70% of the homepages without a banner are technology companies using a one-page website in order to explain the main features of the product or service and the contact details.

Conclusions

The main findings of this content analysis indicate that similar scores for Hofstede's dimensions are closely related to the usage of the Internet users in Romania and Portugal. Keeping in mind that Internet is becoming a part of the daily life in most of the European countries, the resembling digital values that were identified are not a surprise. In the interest of enriching their knowledge, alongside with their identity, people nowadays use many online resources such as e-books, movies, online press. Even though in the past, studies like Hofstede's comparison between Belgian society and Arab world found differences in certain dimensions, the rise of the digital culture decreases the gap. Of course, fundamental cultural differences will be kept and when the icons or a concept will not be entirely clear, each group will go back to the cultural background and look there for a meaning.

The cultural relativism is still necessary when checking small details and different patterns. The differences can occur inside the same culture when we discuss about different industries or fields because each business activity has particular needs on the market and demands in order to survive. In a future where a cross-cultural approach will be implemented, we will change and improve the translation practices and we will create new tools to develop more efficient, highly adapted and localized websites. With a better understanding of user-interface and web design, future automatization and online template could be created in order to help companies to develop nation-specific content.

Limits

To summarize, this research provides evidence to statistically significant evidence to support the influence of cultural factors when creating a website. It should be noted though there are some limitations. The sample is limited to only two countries and by selecting only the companies established in the past three years offered a limited access to a relevant number of websites. Ideally, the study should be followed by another one including older companies or websites because their presence is also part of the culture. Another interesting further research would include governmental or administrative websites, as they are considered to be less globalized or have lower risks of foreign influences. Apart from the homepage assessment, the complexity of a cultural set of factors should be investigated using all pages that a company uses in order to promote itself.

One of the most important limit of the study is the assumption that the culture of a nation is one total nation, without considering the small culture practices that exist within the same nation (McSweeney, 2002, p.93). Other authors identify the research structure used by Hofstede as inflexible to accommodate different views and using inconsistent and unevenly distributed sample (Safi, 2010). The fact that Hofstede's research was basically conducted by using only one company, made the measurements irrelevant for absolute results. The Hofstede's doctrine seems outdated when thinking about modern society (Jones, 2007).

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