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Do multinationals standardise or localise? The cross-cultural dimensionality of product-based Web sites
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Abstract

Despite the growing use of the Internet as an effective marketing channel, there is a lack of comprehensive research regarding multinational corporations' (MNCs') Web sites for multiple cultures. In this paper, Japanese MNCs' product-based Web sites were content-analysed, comparing the Web sites created by the same firms in domestic and external markets. In total, 150 product-based Web sites were chosen from the Japanese, Spanish and US market samples. Three explanatory variables (information content, cultural values and creative strategies) were examined on the basis of cultural dimensions and contexts. The results revealed that Japanese MNCs are likely to localise their Web sites to meet the target market culture through tailoring content and creative strategies, but also that online product presentations do not reflect target-market values. In closing, implications and future research directions are discussed.

Introduction

The Internet has become a standard medium for international marketers. Worldwide, there are 426 million Internet users (Pastore, 200Ia) and it is estimated that there will be 1 billion by 2005 (Iconocast, 2001). An Angus Reid Group study in 34 countries reports that nearly 120 million users have already made a purchase or transaction online. Recent research suggests a consumer-purchasing channel shift, away from catalogues and toward online shopping. According to the catalogue industry's Trend Report, in the USA "catalogue dollar sales for the 12-month period ending June 2001 dropped 5.7 per cent from the previous 12-month period" (Pastore, 200Ib).

As consumers move online, so do multinationals. The astronomical growth in e-commerce has changed the way multinational corporations (MNCs) present themselves, sell and communicate with consumers. Product-based Web sites are an increasingly important advertising form. They are used by more and more consumers to find information for learning about, selecting and purchasing a particular product or service (Roberts and Ko, 2001). This phenomenon is accelerated by banner ads, which are placed on high-traffic

Web sites, and transfer the consumer directly to the company's or brand's target sites (Doe et al., 2001).

Theoretically, Web sites are accessible to anybody anywhere; thus, one would expect a high level of standardisation across countries (Laroche et al., 2001). It is argued, however, that the appropriateness of marketing standardisation depends on cultural, economic and competitive factors as well as on headquarters' control over subsidiaries (Hamilton and Kashlak, 1999; Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987, 2002; Yin, 1999). It is thus important and necessary to explore the issue of Web site standardisation across cultures. Further, the majority of the literature on electronic commerce has mainly focused on Western (i.e. American and European) enterprises, and little attention has been given to the Web communication strategies of Japanese MNCs.

The purpose of this paper is to fill these research gaps, and to determine whether Japanese MNCs' Web communication strategies are standardised or localised for their cross-cultural target markets. A content analysis of product-based Web sites was carried out, adopting an online research framework suggested by Okazaki and Alonso (2002). For comparing the Web sites created by the same firms in domestic and external markets, the sample was chosen from Japan, Spain and the USA. As Table I shows, the three countries differ not only in economic and geographic characteristics, but also in key Internet indicators (e.g. PC ownership, Web access and usage patterns). Furthermore, according to the Internet domain share, 17, 15 and 34 per cent of all Web sites in the world are created in the Japanese, Spanish and English languages respectively (Internet Software Consortium, 2001). Thus, they represent an important segment of the world online population. Because of the complexity of the theme, this study examined only such properties as information content, expressed cultural values and creative strategies in MNCs' product-based Web sites.

After a review of the relevant literature on the standardisation versus localisation debate and the major cultural dimensions, hypotheses are developed. Theoretical supports are drawn from Hofstede's dimensions (Hofstede, 1984) and Hall's context of culture (Hall, 1976). Next, the research methodology of the study is explained in detail, and the results are then described. Finally, the implications for international marketers' decision making on Web site standardisation are discussed.

Literature review

Standardisation versus localisation

Researchers traditionally have considered the issues of marketing standardisation and global marketing in terms of the consistent marketing-mix elements used when a company enters different foreign markets (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987). In fact, since the 1960s the standardisation of international marketing has been a central theme in many studies, especially because of the economic issues linked with this strategy (Hamilton and Kashlak, 1999).

More specifically, advertising standardisation has been extensively debated (Agrawal, 1995). The standardisation strategy uses promotional messages internationally, translating but not otherwise modifying headings, illustrations or copy. This school argues that consumers anywhere in the world are likely to share the same wants and needs. On the other hand, the localisation (or adaptation) strategy posits that consumer differences may, in fact, have been widening, and that messages should be tailored according to culture, media availability, product life-cycle stages and industry structures. The third school of thought offers a compromise approach that asserts that the appropriateness of standardisation depends on the product, consumer characteristics and environmental factors.

Levitt's (1983) argument for standardisation - "the earth is flat" - appears to have been exemplified by the recent proliferation of the Internet. Phenomenal acceptance and usage of this medium has led to astonishing growth beyond national boundaries in online communications and electronic commerce. As a result, researchers are aware that "the dissemination of global influences through the worldwide adoption of electronic telecommunications (e.g. Internet, and satellite) has favoured a resurgence of interest in the standardisation issue" (Laroche et al., 2001).

On the other hand, in their review of empirical studies, Onkvisit and Shaw (2002) argue that "consumers' demographics and behavioural responses vary greatly across countries". Further, a recent exploration found heterogeneity in response "to be highly significant both within and among countries" (Hofstede etal., 1999). A fundamental question remains unanswered: whether such cultural differences reflect on cross-country Internet communications.

Cross-cultural factors influencing Web site standardisation

Traditionally, many scholarly works on marketing standardisation have focused on the influence of cultural factors on behaviour and communications (Onkvisit and Shaw, 2002). Hofstede (1984) defined widely acknowledged cultural dimensions of power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity-femininity, and individualism-collectivism. Subsequent

research by Hofstede and Bond (1988) added a fifth dimension called Confucian dynamism. These five dimensions are briefly defined below:

(1) Power distance. The extent to which less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power should be distributed unequally.

(2) Uncertainty avoidance. The extent to which a culture feels threatened by ambiguous, uncertain situations and tries to avoid them by establishing more structure or maintaining institutions that protect conformity.

(3) Masculinity-femininity. A preference for assertiveness, competition, severity and material success as opposed to a preference for relationships, modesty, caring for the weak and quality of life.

(4) Individualism-collectivism. The degree to which a culture relies on and has allegiance to the self or the group.

(5) Confucian dynamism. The extent to which a society exhibits a pragmatic future-oriented perspective rather than a conventional historic or short-term point of view.

These dimensions can be considered a clear divide, especially between Eastern and Western cultures (La Ferle et al, 2002). Table II presents scores from Hofstede's work on the cultural dimensions for Japan, Spain and the USA. Clearly, the USA and Japan score very differently on many of Hofstede's measures, with Spain midway between.

Hall (1976) developed a conceptual framework for intercultural communications, based on the high-versus-low context of culture. "Context" refers to the fact that when communicating people take for granted how much the listener knows about the subject under discussion. In a high-context communication "most of the information is either in the physical context or internalised in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message"; whereas in a low-context communication "the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code".

High-context communication is characterised by the use of indirect or less wordy messages with more visuals or symbols, whereas low-context communication tends to employ textual and analytical argumentation, facts and data. Many researchers in cross-cultural communications point out that Japan and the USA form the two ends of a bipolar continuum for high- and low-context cultures, respectively, whereas Spain can be classified as a relatively high-context culture. Many researchers have employed Hall's cultural framework in their search for underlying factors impacting cross-cultural marketing communications (Onkvisit and Shaw, 2002).

Hypotheses

Information content

Japanese culture is believed to have a high level of uncertainty avoidance, which can be characterised as low tolerance of ambiguity (Hofstede, 1984). People with low tolerance of ambiguity are likely to act as rigorous information-seekers in purchasing decisions (De Mooij, 1998). Research on conventional advertising suggests that: information content is generally higher in Japan than in the USA (Lin and Salwen, 1995). It is also argued that Japan is one of the most price-conscious markets in the world, whereas Japanese consumers attach great importance to quality (Keown et al., 1992; Lazer et al, 1985). Here, "price" refers to the product cost and its value-retention and need-satisfaction capability, whereas "quality" refers to such characteristics as the quality of workmanship, engineering, durability, excellence of materials, structural superiority, attention to detail and special services (Okazaki and Alonso, 2002). Thus, the first hypotheses are as follows:

HIa. The frequency of portrayal of price and/or value in Japanese MNCs' Web sites will differ significantly across countries.

HIb. The frequency of portrayal of quality in Japanese MNCs' Web sites will differ significantly across countries.

Cultural values

The meanings and perceptions of hierarchical society vary from country to country, and MNCs must therefore decide whether to project a prestigious value in a particular market. Both Japan and Spain are thought to have a high power distance, with members of the society willing to accept a hierarchical structure. In such a market, the degree of social distance between individuals is reflected in every human contact, because people expect either to be subordinates or to have subordinates (Hofstede, 1984).

Messages emphasising social status can thus be used effectively by product-based Web sites. "Social status" can be operationalised as the use of prestige, trend setting and pride in the acquisition of a product that claims to be able to elevate the position or rank of the user in the eyes of others (De Mooij, 1998). The American market, however, is likely to resist such values because of a strong egalitarian tendency (Mueller, 1992). Thus, the next hypothesis is as follows:

H2. The frequency of portrayal of social status in Japanese MNCs' Web sites will differ significantly across countries.

In individualist cultures, such as the USA, priority is given to independence or "!"-consciousness, where competition is regarded as a necessary condition for pursuing personal goals (Triandis, 1995). "Independence" refers to the self-sufficiency and self-reliance that enable an individual to be distinct and unlike others. Such a "competitive" society emphasises distinguishing a product from its counterparts by aggressive comparisons. In contrast, in collectivist cultures such as Japan, group goals take precedence over personal goals when there is a conflict between them, and mutual assistance and harmonious cooperation among groups are highly valued (Markus and Kitayama, 2001). This argument leads to the following hypotheses:

H3a. The frequency of portrayal of independence in Japanese MNCs' Web sites will differ significantly across countries.

H3b. The frequency of portrayal of competition in Japanese MNCs' Web sites will differ significantly across countries.

Hofstede's final cultural dimension, Confucian dynamism, can be represented by the values of long-term orientation and veneration for the elderly (Hofstede and Bond, 1988). In the case of the former value, the products' long-run benefits are emphasised and the historical, time-honoured or legendary qualities of the product or company are venerated. In the latter value, the information describes or displays respect for older generations by using an elderly model, or by asking for the opinions, recommendations and advice of elders (De Mooij, 1998). The combination of Confucian dynamism and collectivism may result in Asia's family and group orientation. The prediction made here is that the more collectivist a culture, the more likely it is to project a more Confucian value. Therefore, the next hypotheses are as follows:

H4a. The frequency of portrayal of long-term orientation in Japanese MNCs' Web sites will differ significantly across countries.

H4b. The frequency of portrayal of veneration for the elderly in Japanese MNCs' Web sites will differ significantly across countries.

Creative strategies

It is argued that low-context cultures such as the USA tend to directly transmit hard-hitting rational selling intent, whereas high-context cultures such as Japan prefer an indirect and emotional display of those intentions, carefully avoiding a social confrontation (Pollay, 1983). As a result, soft-sell approaches, such as celebrity endorsement and emotional and/or psychological appeals, are commonly used in Japan (Ramaprasad and Hasegawa,

1992). Celebrity endorsement uses famous actors, singers, models, sports stars or comedians to create a positive image for a company or its products through association with their image, whereas "emotional appeals" can be defined as the use of positive or negative emotions (such as love, hatred, desire, joy, sadness, admiration or sorrow) to stimulate consumers' buying decisions (De Mooij, 1998). Therefore, it is hypothesised as follows:

H5a. The frequency of usage of celebrity endorsement in Japanese MNCs' Web sites will differ significantly across countries.

H5b. The frequency of usage of emotional and/or psychological appeals in Japanese MNCs' Web sites will differ significantly across countries.

Japanese marketing communication has often been characterised as emphasising subtlety and symbolism, which are characteristic features of high-context cultures. Batra et al. (1996) point out that Japanese ads are likely to be more indirect, more laden with symbolism and less pushy, whereas ads in the USA are more copy-intensive, rational and comparative. De Mooij (1998) points out that in Spain "visual metaphors are much used, both concrete and abstract", whereas "appeals are design and art oriented". In such a culture, products are linked to symbols and visual images of a place, event or person that provide positive insight into the expressions of Web sites. On this basis, it is hypothesised as follows:

H6. The frequency of usage of visual and symbolic metaphors in Japanese MNCs' Web sites will differ significantly across countries.

Finally, research on Internet advertising suggests that a pivotal function of electronic marketing communication is interactivity. According to an exhaustive literature review on the Internet, there are two major categories of interactive functions: reciprocal communication, and personalised choice and/or attention (Ghose and Dou, 1998). In "reciprocal communication" customers' active responses are encouraged through e-mailing, questionnaires or data registration devices. "Personalised choice/attention" refers to the function that allows consumers to pinpoint the particular information that interests them, or to identify their problems and access "trouble-shooting" suggestions. It is argued that Web penetration and usage patterns are likely to influence the level of interactivity (Oh et al, 1999). As Table I shows, there are notable differences in Web usage indicators between the three countries. The final hypotheses are thus as follows:

H7a. The frequency of usage of reciprocal communication in Japanese MNCs' Web sites will differ significantly across countries.

H7b. The frequency of usage of personalised choice/attention in Japanese MNCs' Web sites will differ significantly across countries.

Methodology

Content analysis was chosen as the method of analysis because it is commonly regarded as a useful measurement technique in social science studies, including Web communication research (Okazaki and Alonso, 2002).

Data collection

During the second week of August 2001, 50 companies were selected from the first section of the Tokyo Stock Exchange. All of the companies:

* had annual sales exceeding 10 billion yen (approximately 80 million dollars);

* had realised direct foreign investment in more than five countries; and

* possessed home pages in Japan, Spain and the USA.

Next, one specific product was chosen for each of these firms. It was decided that this product should be either the MNC's most popular product, in terms of sales turnover in the three markets, or the product that received the most spatial attention on the Web sites. The aim was to create three information sets comprised of equivalent Web sites for identical product categories in Japan, Spain and the USA (e.g. Nikon's digital camera on Japanese, American and Spanish Web sites). This procedure resulted in 150 Web sites for analysis (i.e. 50 products in each of the three countries). Table III shows the selected MNCs and their product category breakdown.

Measurement

The categories examined in Web communication strategies are shown in Table IV. They included information cues, cultural values and creative strategies. These are the study dependent variables. Except for Resnik and Stern's (1977) information-classification system, the categories were developed from an exhaustive literature review of advertising (Cheng and Schweitzer, 1996; Lin, 2001; Martenson, 1987), cross-cultural psychology (Hofstede, 1984; Markus and Kitayama, 2001; Triandis, 1995), intercultural communication (Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1988; Gudykunst et al, 1996; Hall, 1976) and Internet research (Ghose and Dou, 1998; Haas and Grams, 2000; Leogn et al, 1998).

Coding procedure

All coding instruments were originally prepared in English, and then translated into Japanese and Spanish using the backtranslation technique (Brislin, 1980). Each typology was supplemented with additional examples to provide illustrations. Following the recommendations by Kolbe and Burnett (1991), two native coders, both unaware of the study purpose, were hired for each country and trained in the operational definitions of all the categories. With regard to information cues and creative strategies, the coders were asked to identify the presence of one or more categories in each Web site. With cultural values, however, the number of categories coded was to be limited to three dominant values per Web site in the following order (Pollay, 1983):

(1) overall value (i.e. the Web site's "gestalt");

(2) verbal value; and

(3) non-verbal value.

Whenever relevant information was missing on the first page the coders were allowed to click hyperlinks to enter the second level of the Web site hierarchy. All disagreements between coders were resolved through discussion (Kolbe and Burnett, 1991). All coding was completed by the second week of October 2001. Inter-coder reliability was calculated using the reliability index (/,.) suggested by Perrault and Leigh (1989) and considered the best by many researchers (Kolbe and Burnett, 1991).

At the end of the coding procedure, one of the primary researchers independently coded the same sample. These results were then compared item-by-item with those obtained by the coders. As Table V shows, the majority of the reliability indexes exceeded 0.76, slightly lower than the minimum value of 0.80 recommended by Perrault and Leigh (1989). However, the results were determined to be satisfactory, particularly in the light of the difficulty involved in coding non-verbal dimensions.

Results

To test the statistical significance, a χ^2 analysis was used. To minimise type-2 errors (falsely accepting the null hypothesis), only those results at the most stringent confidence levels are presented.

Table VI displays the number and percentage of information cues found in product-based Web sites in Japan, Spain and the USA. Hypotheses HIa and HIb suggest that the usage of "price/value" and "quality", respectively, would be localised for the target market's Web sites. In the home country, Japanese MNCs emphasise price/value significantly more often than in the other market samples. HIa is therefore supported.

However, with respect to HIb, the frequency of quality was similar in the three market samples, and the differences are statistically insignificant. That is, Japanese MNCs tend to emphasise quality-related information in all three markets. Hence, HIb is rejected.

As Table VII shows, the mean number of information cues used per Web site in Japan, Spain and the USA were, respectively, 6.26, 4.76 and 6.14. An ANOVA applied across the three countries resulted in F (2, 49) = 10.49, which was significant at p< 0.001. A pair-wise t-test revealed that the differences were statistically significant between Japan and Spain (t = -4.12, ρ < 0.05) and between Spain and the USA (t=5.66, p<0.05).

Table VIII shows the frequency of cultural values identified in product-based Web sites created for the three markets. H2 predicts that "social status" would be used differently across countries. This value is used only in Japan and the USA, and not at all in Spain. Nevertheless, due to the small cell size, the differences are not statistically significant. Thus, H2 is rejected. H3a and H3b deal with the level of individualism in terms of "independence" and "competition", respectively. Independence appears significantly more in Japan, whereas competition is employed significantly more in the USA. Therefore, both H3a and H3b are supported, but the direction of the evidence for H3b is contrary to Hofstede's assumption.

H4a and H3b claim that Japanese MNCs differentiate the usage of Confucian dynamism, in relation to "long-term orientation" and "veneration for the elderly"; however, neither value is used frequently. Surprisingly, the US market sample employs "long-term orientation" more often than the Japanese and Spanish ones, whereas "veneration for the elderly" is not identified at all in any sample. Therefore, neither H4a nor H4b is supported.

Table IX shows the use of creative strategies in the three countries analysed. HSa and HSb address whether high cultural context would be projected in the frequency of occurrence in softsell appeals; that is, "celebrity endorsement" and "emotional/psychological appeals". Celebrity endorsement is used only in Japan, but the difference was statistically insignificant. Hence, HSa is rejected. On the other hand, the occurrence of emotional/psychological appeals is more prominent in the USA and Spain than in Japan. This finding lends support to H5b; however, the direction of the evidence is contrary to the hypotheses.

H6 argues that the high-context nature of the Japanese and Spanish communication systems would provoke a higher usage of "symbolic/visual metaphor". The findings clearly indicate that the Japanese market sample does utilise this strategy significantly more than the other two market samples. In particular, this strategy is not used at all in Web sites created for the American market sample; hence, H6 is supported.

Finally, H7a and H7b suggest that interactive functions would be used differently in the three market samples, in terms of "reciprocal communication" and "personalised choice/attention". In this regard, reciprocal communication is used - from highest to lowest - more often in the USA than in Spain and Japan, whereas personalised choice/attention is employed more often in the USA than in Spain and Japan. These differences were statistically significant. H7a and H7b are, therefore, supported; however, the predicted direction does not completely correspond to the order of Internet usage indicators.

Discussion

This study focused on three key aspects of Internet communication: information content, cultural values and the creative strategies used in product-based Web sites. These elements are considered basic components of cross-cultural differences. In this section, managerial implications rather than generalisations are provided, because only one product was examined for each firm in the three markets. Still, the findings of the present study are expected to be particularly robust because many of the products chosen are, in fact, the Japanese MNCs' most representative brands.

Although the results are mixed, the data support the idea that there are important cross-cultural differences in the approaches that Japanese MNCs use to standardise product-based information on the Internet.

First, this study statistically confirms that product-based Web sites created by Japanese MNCs are likely to include higher information content in home-country market samples than in Spanish market samples, while being almost equally informative in Japanese and American market samples. This finding suggests that uncertainty-avoidance may not be a determining factor as far as online information strategy is concerned. Rather, the Japanese and American market samples tend to differ in kind rather than in degree. This suggests that Japanese MNCs are likely to perceive consumers in the two countries as homogeneous information seekers, while localising Web sites by tailoring specific information needs for each country.

Contrastingly, product information exhibited in the Spanish market samples is more limited. This is perhaps due to economic rather than cultural factors, such as smaller online penetration and e-market size. In addition, in the light of the standardisation versus localisation debate, the provision of fewer information cues in the Spanish market sample seems to be related to a "regional" approach adopted by the Japanese MNCs. During the data collection, it was found that some of the firms (i.e. Bandai, Bridgestone, Casio, Hitachi, Mitsui and Pentax) have created "European" sites in regional-headquarter markets (in many cases in the UK). These sites offer the same product information with various

language options. This strategy can be seen as a limited standardisation or "the trickle-down approach which uses the same strategy across a region" (Ha, 1995).

The information content in the Spanish market is thus low because an effective uniform campaign for a multiple market could be most easily achieved through a message with relatively little information content (Mueller, 1991). This approach seems to make sense, especially for those EU countries that have strengthened their economic unification through the use of a common currency, the Euro, since the beginning of 2001.

second, with regard to cultural values, differences across countries are not as accentuated as expected, because only one of the five hypotheses is supported. In fact, only nine out of twenty cultural values appear in a statistically significant manner in the three market samples. This failure to support our hypotheses based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions is surprising, as culture should act as the link connecting consumers' value systems and their preferences for products. Perhaps no differences were found because "cultural convergence" may have occurred in the three markets examined, in the sense that non-traditional or contrary values were deliberately incorporated in Web sites to attract more consumer attention. As De Mooij (1998) suggests, people are often attracted not by what they have, but what they lack. For example, "long-term orientation", which is traditionally considered as an "oriental" value, is used more frequently in the US market sample, whereas "individuality", a "Western" value, appears more in the Japanese market sample.

Alternatively, perhaps, the Internet has created a new "cultural region" where extant cultural classification schemes, such as Hofstede's dimensions, cannot be applied (Johnston and Johal, 1999). If this is the case, more effort should be made to find new ways to articulate specific lifestyles, habits and needs on Web sites in order to incorporate "desired" values for the target market.

Third, product-based Web sites are eloquently differentiated through creative strategies based on the target market, because four out of the five hypotheses are supported. This may not be surprising given that creative strategies, by definition, determine the nature of the message and, thus, should be directly connected with the functions of cross-cultural communications. Nevertheless, the usage of entertainment and reciprocal communication is almost equal in all three markets. This seems to be consistent with a view that these factors are principal gratifiers for Internet users and are, thus, the most important functions of the Web communications (Lin, 2001).

Interestingly, "emotional/psychological appeals" are not used in Japan as often as in Spain or the USA. This strongly suggests that Western market communications have become more emotional (Advertising Age 1987). It should be noted, however, that neither "logical

reasoning" nor "comparison", a principal component of low-context communications, was detected in Japan. This is also consistent with our conceptual framework.

The use of visual and symbolic metaphors occurred only in the Japanese market sample. This may be attributed to the differences in writing systems used in the countries: some researchers argue that communicating commercial messages in different languages could carry different appeals. Both the English and Spanish writing systems employ alphabetic characters, whereas the Japanese language employs a logographic writing system called "Kanji" that utilises ideographs. Kanji expresses concepts, but an alphabetic letter is only a symbol for a sound. The alphabetic systems appear to be represented in the consumers' mind primarily in a phonological code, whereas logographic systems are embodied primarily in a visual code (Pan and Schmitt, 1997).

Conclusions

The findings of this study suggest that Japanese MNCs standardise product-based Web sites to a very limited extent and, in most instances, localise the content according to the target market. Clearly, information and creative elements are determining factors in planning and producing product-based Web sites, because this study detects important cross-cultural differences. With regard to cultural values, however, the extent of the standardisation practised was maximised, and there was more uniformity than diversity in the cultural values reflected on the Web sites.

Managerially, marketers and advertisers should be fully aware of the importance of cross-cultural differences on product-based Web sites because the Internet is "a place better suited to create a rich product experience" (Evans and Wurster, 1999). Successful planning and execution of Web sites enables firms to "get consumers to come to a company's site and stop, satisfied that their search is over" (Coyle and Thorson, 2001).

Therefore, in choosing to promote products with Web sites, managers must consider several factors. First, from the Japanese MNCs' perspective, product-based Web sites should be linked to an integral part of the corporate Web site because most successful Japanese brands are company brands. That is, it would be strategically important to build up a solid characterisation of product attributes within a framework of general corporate image development on the Web. An understanding of cross-cultural differences should assist Japanese marketers to implement this process, adjusting product or brand image to suit individual local markets.

second, from Western marketers' point of view, the findings of this study suggest that imposing "idealised" Western values and lifestyles could be an acceptable - and appealing

- strategy, whereas tailoring creative elements is a crucial factor in the Japanese markets. This means that their Web sites would be a cost-effective venue for Western MNCs to employ "pattern standardisation", using the same basic creative theme but adapting other executional elements when necessary (Harris, 1994).

Limitations and future research suggestions

Several limitations must be recognised in this study. First, a general problem of content analysis is that it does not allow us to expand our interpretations beyond the manifest content. That is, the findings of this study do not enable us to reveal the underlying decision process that produced the particular strategies adopted. second, the analysis only focused on product-based Web sites in aggregate, rather than on general corporate Web sites; therefore, the findings of this study may not be generalised to other corporate Web functions such as corporate identity or investor relations. Third, because of an extremely limited sample size this study did not control for product classification; however, quality perceptions have been reported to be product specific (Eroglu and Machleit, 1989)

Future researchers should consider replicating the current study but should take into account a broader range of products to test the cross-cultural differences in Web sites created for different product categories. Also, it is clear that an international survey concerning Web communication strategies should be carried out among MNCs' marketing directors and executives, in order to investigate the degree of standardisation actually practised across countries.

Sidebar

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