

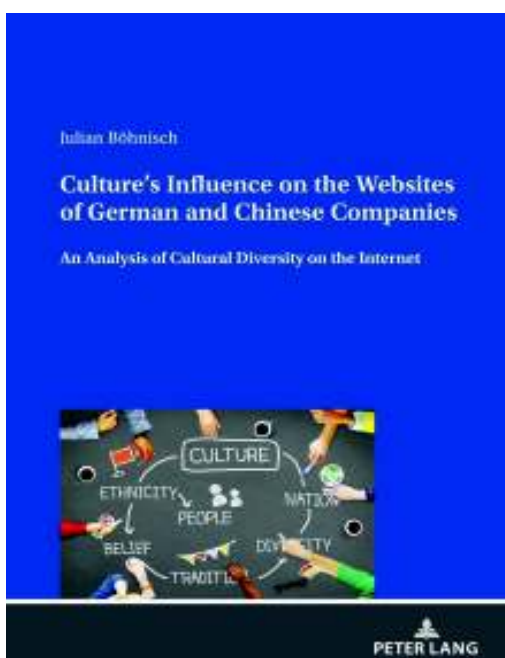
BOOK REVIEW

JULIAN BÖHNISCH: CULTURE'S INFLUENCE ON THE WEBSITES OF GERMAN AND CHINESE COMPANIES. AN ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY ON THE INTERNET

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Reviewed work:

Culture's Influence on the Websites of German and Chinese Companies. An Analysis of Cultural Diversity on the Internet

Julian Böhnisch

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For those interested in cultural issues, Julian Böhnisch's 2022 publication – Peter Lang, Berlin, 246 pages – might be a real delight. The PhD thesis published addresses cultural differences and their manifestation in the domain of online publicity looking for an answer to the questions “whether culture has traceable influences on the internet presences of international companies and – if so – what impact these influences have on the respective web design.” (abstract). In doing so, the author analyses the web pages of German and Chinese companies through the prism of Hofstede's and Hall's cultural dimensions and their XXI. century application to web design by Marcus, Gould (2000) and Würtz (2006).

The book is structured into seven chapters, preceded by both a list of figures and one of tables and by an introduction, and is rounded up by an appendix listing the

almost 400 web pages of companies (German and Chinese) activating in four business domains. The worldwide web offers to nowadays' businesses a vast potential, however they might also face a set of challenges and limitations partially imposed by local and regional authorities. Given these circumstances, companies have to find ways and solutions for reaching potential customers, subjects to various political systems and belonging to different cultural groups. For an effective communication with them, companies need to apply an interculturally optimised design for their web pages, the "one-fits-all" formula is not feasible any more.

One of the aims of present book – in concordance with being preponderantly dedicated to empirical research – is to offer possible solutions for these intercultural challenges and to "bridge the gap between theory and practice." (p. 45).

Following a reversed chronology, chapter one offers a literature review upon culture, cultural issues in the last two decades focusing upon their presence in and impact on the internet. Besides the traditional aspects highlighted by Hofstede, Zahedi et al. (2000) found six other individual factors influencing the effectiveness of a website at a certain target group, namely: demographics, professional knowledge, information technology knowledge, flexibility, the ability in processing information and respectively cultural knowledge. In case of highly differentiated products – having many technical details and differences in quality – another factor in this respect is, according to Warden et al. (2002), the availability of a website in the local language. Furthermore, according to Ishak et al. (2012), even religion can impact the way internet and computer are used in general. Concluding, it can be stated, together with Sia et al. (2009) and Faiola and Matei (2006) "that a culturally-adapted web design supports the performance of the target groups in a positive way." (p. 33). Completely conscious of that, Guseva (2013) raised the financial aspect of this cultural adaptation, wondering how many different cultural versions of a website can be supported in terms of cost-effectiveness.

Identifying the gaps and limitations in these studies, – a rather low sample size possibly falsifying the results, and concentration upon a single sector in the analysis – Böhnisch comes to the idea of applying his content analysis to a very large sample size (400 companies) and four branches of activity: technological and engineering, financial, food and fashion industry, the first two not significantly influenced by cultural factors, while the other two all the more.

After these preliminary considerations the author turns, in chapter two, to the analysis of the notion 'culture' – in normative, cognitive, anthropological and symbolic way – and to the overview of Hofstede's and Hall's findings related to it. Only the first four cultural dimensions of Hofstede and Hall's classification of communication into low or high context type are taken into consideration as relevant in terms of their influence upon the web design. Thus, the research of Böhnisch will focus, though not uncritically, upon the two cultures analysed, German and Chinese, with respect to their power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance and way of communication. Based on the realities of a globalised world, the criticism of Böhnisch targets Hofstede's conviction of cultures being quite stable, hard to change and homogeneous in one country, and Hall's research methods and data similar to "a black box because the way, in which he gained his information,

remains obscure to a certain degree.” (p. 68). Still, the cultural dimensions in question build a solid and appropriate base for present research.

Chapter three is dedicated to the analysis of internet-related terminology and that of the elements of a website/web page (header, footer, columns, content and navigation, and of web design, such as: navigation system, layout, colour, icons, images and words influenced by the cultural background of the hosting company. On the other hand, cultural background also determines the way users look at, read a website/page, – direction of reading, emphasis laid etc. – while another key element represents the ease of using it. As colours might have cultural loading and icons might be interpreted differently by representatives of different cultures, web designers should use them in a conscious, well-informed way. The usage of multimedia channels supports culturally-adapted web page design, as they are able, through sounds, or feelings conveyed, to turn the low context medium internet into a higher context medium, more appealing for Asian cultures for instance.

Research methodology, consisting of content analysis including web analytics and key metrics like the number of total visits on a site, average visit duration, bounce rates of viewers – leaving the page without taking any action –, data sampling and qualifying samples, is presented in chapter four. By listing the features and steps of content analysis (data sampling meeting certain predefined criteria for comparability, coding schedule and manual, website analysis, measuring performance with SimilarWeb, result evaluation), Böhnisch highlights its advantages and aspects to be minded when resorting to it. This quantitative research method will be completed by a qualitative evaluation of results and their meanings.

The following two chapters (five and six), presenting the empirical findings, occupy a preponderant part in the book. The coding manual established by the author for the content analysis includes the components and subcomponents: navigation (navigation bar, dropdown menu, sidebar, searchbox), images (quantity of images, icons and people in the images), multimedia usage (quantity of videos, sound effects, social media icons), colours and words with a special focus on their quantity. Readers are supplied with a detailed analysis of the website of a company for each of the four domains in question – both on German (Deutsche Bank, Audi AG, Iglo and Adidas AG) and on Chinese side (Industrial and Commercial Bank of China Ltd, Zhejiang Geely Holding Group Co. & Ltd, Kee Wah Bakery and the Chinese version for Adidas AG) – followed by a synthesis of the results for all the 400 enterprises, indicating an overall average for the whole industry and for each activity branch in both cultures individually and then contrastively.

In chapter six, data previously presented as an average is used as a reference point for singling out high performing websites with data above the average according to the amount of total visits, average visit duration and bounce rates. These websites both on German and Chinese side and their performance rates are analysed through the prism of Hofstede’s and Hall’s cultural dimensions considered for this research. Although it is not in case of all the five dimensions (power distance, masculinity versus femininity, individualism versus collectivism, risk avoidance and high versus low context in communication) that congruent results

are obtained, "(...) it becomes clear that the design of the navigation and the use of elements such as images, colors, and icons are determined by the culture." (p. 193). Culture having thus a great impact upon the way info found on the internet comes to people, adaptation to a respective culture is imperatively necessary. That means for instance that the low context medium internet has to offer to users from high context cultures surrogates for the missing context in the form of more images and words for explanations to avoid misunderstandings. Based on the characteristics of high performing websites in both cultures, Böhnisch puts up a profile of successful internet presences for all the four activity branches, stating that the recipe of success is highly sector and country dependent.

Chapter seven is dedicated to summarising findings and opening new perspectives like finding cost-effective and easy to use tools for creating multiple versions of a website customised to the cultural background of the visitor. These could take the form of templates for internet presences in different cultures.

Although in many respects wider ranging, more up-to-date and valid than other previous studies, presenting definite advantages compared to them, Böhnisch still finds some limitations of his work, such as including also locally operating companies for a larger variety of the samples, potential biases resulting from the cultural background of the web designer, restricting the research to only four activity areas and two cultures, related to the cultural theories taken into consideration etc. Thus, future research could apply content analysis and these findings to other sectors, as well, analyse other types of web presences (internet forums, landing pages etc.), ask Chinese customers to comment upon their experiences with German websites and vice versa, check to what extent culturally-adapted websites result in an increased sales rates and turnover and so on.

Concluding, the book's strength – of handling a very interesting and timely topic in the era of cross-cultural encounters in a very complex way, with an unusual structuring but, nevertheless, adequate for the research intention –, is slightly overshadowed by lacking accuracy in expression (p. 45, 87, 203) – some even affecting understanding –, typing (p. 31, 34 (footnote), 38, 75, 208, reference list etc.) and the very frequent non-concordance between descriptive text and content of tables and figures in chapter five.