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The Influence of Cultural Differences on the Perception of a Web Site. A Comparison between Mexico and Spain

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Abstract

The cultural background in the development of the Website is important to avoid mistakes that may cause bad image to the customer. (Nantel and Glaser, 2008) have found that language, a major cultural factor, is less important when the quality of the offered products is attractive to the buyers. The native language of the site does not have a big impact on the perception of the usability of a site and purchasing decisions.

This paper examines if the cultural background of the website is perceived when using English language in the design. The Website was designed and developed specifically for this research, using usability principles, trying to access to a multicultural buyers market. So far the relationship between usability and Hofstede's cultural dimensions has been an important factor in cross-cultural work. Based on this, we analyzed the data collected by a survey in Spain and Mexico to verify our research question.

Background

The first studies about the implementation of a Web site used to focus on the development and the technical aspects of the site, which has led most research on web site design to analyze technical aspects of it. Thus, it has generated a large number of design elements that will apparently make a web site to be successful: usability, use of images, aesthetics, navigation and search, site interactivity, elements such as brand power and the degree of site customization (A°berg and Shahmenhri, 2000).

According to Falk et al. (2007), not only the technical design of a Web site is the key to success. Also it should be considered other important factors such as the culture of the users that the site is focused on. It is not about adapting the company sites to attract customers from different regions, something that many companies do just by switching the language (Lynch et al, 2001). For example, designing a Web site made for entertainment or educational purposes may not be compatible with the same approach as it is done in the design of a commercial site (Cook and Finlayson, 2005). Therefore, it should be always included the cultural analysis and, as well, to establish standards that bring together the preferences and expectations of a community that is intended.

Companies that offer their products in different markets are willing to improve the usability of their sites to attract more visitors. Examples of some pieces of work are those of Ferreira (2002), that examines topics related to language besides to the metaphors used, the attitudes and preferences that weigh in the cultures to which the site aims to reach (Nantel and Glaser, 2004), which also focus on the use of language to improve the usability of a site and thus attract more visitors, offering create sites oriented to each culture rather than a universal one. In sum, most of these works are based on understanding the cultural differences and from there designing a specific site.

The models proposed so far come from computer science. However, we believe that you cannot leave out the cultural and organizational factors affecting the development of the site (Ogbonna and Harris, 2007). Thus, cultural issues and dynamics faced by organizations are a very important factor that impacts the design, development and implementation of a site. What if the site is oriented at a different market to the cultural background of the designer? Nantel and Glaser (2008) have found that a cultural factor as relevant a priori, as is the language, it is less important when the quality of what is offered is attractive to the prospective buyer. Hence, sometimes the native language of the site seems to have no impact on the perception of usability and in the purchasing decision taken by the user. While there are various models for analyzing the cultures from different perspectives, some of the dimensions and their interpretations of how a culture behaves under those values is equivalent between the different

authors. Models, regardless of whether they are related to areas such as politics or business agree mostly in two dimensions: Individualism vs. Collectivism and risk aversion. Many of the studies that have been made about culture and the Internet are related to the reduction of uncertainty or risk at the time of a commercial transaction, or tried to model sites that may be perceived the same way by different cultural groups (Hofstede, 2002; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1998; Chaney and Martin, 2005; House et al., 2002).

Marcus and Gould (2000) made an analysis of several Internet portals where they assess and classify different groups defined according to the dimensions of Hofstede and found that different cultures affect the design of their sites. Their conclusion is that culture, expressed through the dimensions of Hofstede affects the design of Web pages. In the study by Matei and Ball-Rokeach (2001) it was found that among the ethnic communities living in Los Angeles the groups of the most collectivist societies (in this case Korea and China), make from three to two times more on-line friends than the groups of European origin (while Hispanics were the ones with the lowest percentage at the time to make friends on-line). Kim and Yun (2007) attribute this to that in collectivist societies is easier for users to express their emotions in an environment where it would be impossible to communicate face to face, as is the case of Korea. In the work of Miura and Yamashita (2007) we observe that the same applies to Japanese users of blogs. They are more sensitive to the negative responses on their sites, concluding that this is due to the collectivist mentality of Japan, where they perceive less risk to say something negative when it is not say face to face. The work of Nath and Murthy (2004) shows that issues such as community, income level, the country's innovation, risk aversion and masculinity of a culture have a significant impact on Internet penetration. As far as differences regarding gender, countries with a high level of masculinity value productivity and try to be the best (Alberts-Miller and Gelb, 1996), and advertising shows how effectiveness of a product emphasizing on all the capabilities of site performance.

Studies have found that much of the risk perception is influenced by the culture of a country, since this is one way of interpreting the world (Ueltschy et al, 2004). Traditionally it has been perceived as a higher risk purchasing services than goods, due to the intangible nature of the former. Regarding on-line sales is practically saying that all sold products are intangible, so that the perceived risk increases among consumers and users (Ueltschy et al, 2004). The same applies for the Internet adoption in economically undeveloped countries, where users represent less than 1% of the population like in countries such as Bangladesh, Nigeria, Vietnam and Zimbabwe (Nath and Murthy, 2004). Yeniryut and Townsend (2003) found that the lower acceptance of new products can be supported with power distance and risk aversion, finding that technological innovations are high in countries with small power distance, low risk aversion and higher individualism. While Linjun et al. (2003) show that power distance is a key element in the e-mail acceptance in China. The use of color can also reduce ambiguity for cultures with high levels of risk aversion, or it can be used to maximize information without redundancy, for cultures with low levels of risk aversion (Zahir et al, 2002). Starting from this point, for the specific case of this research, it has been worked on a site previously designed with usability principles developed by Nielsen (1994), relating these to indices of Hofstede's cultural values. Thus, the hypotheses have been developed for each cultural value related to Web design as it is indicated below (TABLE 1).

TABLE 1. SUMMARY OF THE FORMULATED HYPOTHESES

Hofstede´s values	Relationship of usability	Hypotheses	Element of usability
Risk aversion	H1a: (-)	The higher the risk aversion index from a country, the lower the perception of Web site security.	Security
	H1b: (-)	The higher the risk aversion index, the lower the perception of navigation easiness of the site.	Navigation Efficiency
	H1c: (-)	The higher the risk aversion index, the lower the perception of control on the site.	Control
	H1d: (+)	The higher the risk aversion index, the greater the importance of the site content	Content
Collectivism	H2a: (+)	The higher the index of collectivism, the lower the perception of control on the site.	Control
	H2b: (-)	The higher the index of collectivism, the lower the perception of freedom of navigation on the site.	Navigation Efficiency
	H2c: (-)	The higher the index of collectivism, the lower the interest in the site.	Emotion
	H2d: (-)	The higher the degree of collectivism, the lower the perception of a site as safe.	Security
	H2e: (-)	The lower the index of collectivism, the greater the importance of the site content.	Content
Masculinity	H3a: (+)	The higher the masculinity index, the greater the importance in the performance of the site and its products (easiness of use.)	Easiness of use
	H3b: (+)	The higher the masculinity index, the greater the importance of taking control of the Web site.	Control
	H3c: (+)	The higher the masculinity index, the greater the importance of the navigation easiness of the Web site.	Navigation Efficiency
Power distance	H4a: (+)	The higher the power distance, the greater the perceived need for security features on a site.	Security
	H4b: (+)	The higher the power distance index, the greater the importance in the site content.	Content
	H4c: (+)	The higher the power distance index, the greater the importance in the language used on the site.	Language

Taken into account the principles of usability of Nielsen (2002) for the design of Table 1, in the case of this variable there are reduce the number of actions that the user must do in order to avoid losing it, being necessary to convey a sense of security and credibility on the site. FIG.1 shows the proposed full model with all the hypothesis listed.

Sample characteristics

For the sample college students from Mexico and Spain were selected discretionally and by convenience. The countries were chosen because: 1) they represent a wide difference between their range for risk avoidance, power distance, and individualism / collectivism, being the dimension of masculinity / femininity which has a narrower range of disparity between the participants from those countries. Besides the fact that Mexico is a natural neighbor of the U.S. and the cultural influence in this country is evident by the verbal communication of Mexicans. Spain plays an important role in the Spanish language, since it is the country of origin of this idiom and its Anglophones inhabitants are more familiar with British English than with the one from the U.S. Some authors recommend at least 200 visitors to obtain a reasonable sample size (Swearingen, 2009). Data collection was performed during the period from April to June 2010, so it has been possible to achieve an appropriate size for the test statistics. For technical reasons, the survey had to be answered in one session; therefore it could not be interrupted. In order to approximate the sizes of the different subsamples, 206 questionnaires from Spain and Mexico were taken. In order to obtain the test results and all statistical models SPSS version 18 and AMOS 18 were used.

The site and its user interface are based on a model of e-commerce distribution and sale of music in order it matches with the four elements that Postava-Davignon et al. (2004) mentioned: a feeling of confidence, sense of security, sense of interest in the site and desire to return to the site. It was decided that the criteria of usability of Nielsen (2002) was the main basis to design the site and also were taken into account the categories of usability from the Microsoft guide described by Keeker (2004), including those areas identified by Agarwal and Venkatesh (2002) and Postava-Davignon et al. (2004). The site is in English and sells independent music, as a consequence the language does not have a representative impact on the perception of usability as the quality of what is offered is attractive to the consumer (Nantel and Glaser, 2008). While CD sales have declined, it is still a major source of online sales. Independent music labels have survived through the sale of formats that are believed missing -such as vinyl- and a target market consisting of an informed public, which continues to consume music in traditional formats (Hidalgo, 2009). Using a portal designed in English will also help to find whether the application of usability elements in site design effectively reduces the cultural impact of it, fulfilling a major premise that a Web site allows: it serves as a knowledge distribution channel for both providers and users of a site (Fang and Holsapple, 2007).

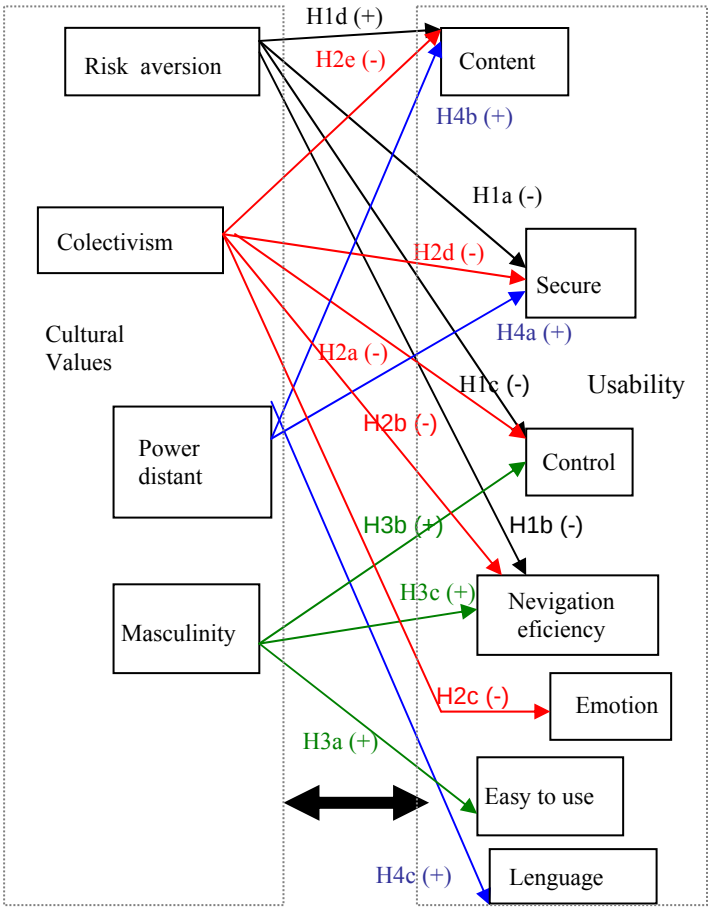

FIG 1. MODEL OF THE RELATIONS BETWEEN USABILITY AND CULTURAL VALUES AND THEIR HYPOTHESIS

The online design and implementation was carried out by a Mexican company that has experience in Web sites, even at a governmental level. The Web site design was the most "culturally neutral" as possible, considering

that there are users whose cultural values are opposite. The model is based on the Visibility Graph Usability Center at Georgia Tech (Fang and Holsapple, 2007), that suggests raising a series of instructions for the participants in order to explore and then execute a series of tasks, which are: seeking for information or for a particular object. Part of the demographic information and prior experience, appears in most of the usability studies and perception of a site, as well in analysis on Internet usage and satisfaction (Roy et al., 2001, Palmer, 2002; Ferreira , 2002, Agarwal and Venkatesh, 2002; AMIPCI, 2004). The culture dimensions are shown in TABLE 2.

Several authors use the site navigation to assess perceptions of usability (Nielsen, 1994, Agarwal and Venkatesh, 2002; Palmer, 2002, Hall et al., 2004). The effects on the usability dimensions are restricted to site navigation tasks such as selecting an item, obtain personal data and product selection of a music sales company. The dimensions of culture are shown in TABLE 3

TABLE 2. DESCRIPTION OF THE DIMENSIONS OF CULTURE

DIMENSION	ITEM	DESCRIPTION
Risk aversion RISK	RISK1	Safety is an important concern in my life
	RISK2	Life is so uncertain that I must be in constantly alert to not be in disadvantaged
	RISK3	It is important to consider different points of view when I take personal and social decisions
Collectivism / Individualism COLECTIVISM	INDIVIDU1	I like to share little things with my neighbors
	INDIVIDU2	Being an unique person is important to me
	INDIVIDU3	The decisions achieved in group are better than those achieved individually
	INDIVIDU4	Usually I sacrifice my own interest for the benefit of my group
	INDIVIDU5	I prefer to rely on others
	INDIVIDU6	It is important for me to be useful for others
Power distance POWER	POWER1	El jefe de uno es una persona igual a cualquier otra My manager is a person like any other
	POWER2	Managers are always inaccessible and distant
	POWER3	The way to change society is to make everyone equally powerful
	POWER4	Other people are a threat to my power of one and I cannot trust them
Masculinity/ Femininity MASCULIN	MASCUL1	Having a career is more important for men than for women
	MASCUL2	Men usually solve problems with logical analysis, women generally are more visceral
	MASCUL3	Solving difficult problems usually require a strong and active approach, which is typical of men
	MASCUL4	There are some jobs that a man can always do better than a woman

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TABLE 3. USABILITY DIMENSIONS DESCRIPTION

Dimension	Item	Description
Security SECUR	SECUR1	The site is secure
	SECUR2	I trust in the site
	SECUR3	I relied more on the site as it has social networking (myspace, twitter, facebook)
Navigation Efficiency	EFICIENCY	The site is simple to navigate
Control CONTROL	CONTROL1	It is easy to do what I want to do
	CONTROL2	The performance of the site was excellent
Content CONTENT	CONTENT1	The site provides good information about products
	CONTENT2	The image quality is great
	CONTENT3	The site produces purchase wishes
	CONTENT4	I identify with the images of the site
Emotion EMOCION	EMOCION1	The site is interesting
	EMOCION2	The site is fun
Easiness of use	EASY	Obtaining information is easy
Language	LENGUAGE	I identify with the language used on the site

Covariance structure model (CSM)

In order to formulate the covariance structure model there were carried out two stages proposed by Anderson and Gerbing (1988): 1) To analyze the goodness of the psychometric properties of the measuring instrument used, performing a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). 2) After the goodness acceptance of the measuring instrument, this is modified including the theoretically proposed structural relationships that are analyzed by a Structural Equations or Covariance Structure Model (CSM). Before using these tools, prior analysis was required, such as inspecting the homogeneity of the standard deviations and doing multicollinearity and normality testing of variables. Subsequently it was conducted an exploratory factor analysis that allowed to observe the structure of relationships among variables.

Preliminary analysis: homogeneity, multicollinearity and normality

It was found that there is consistency among the variables due to the observance of averages and standard deviations. Thus, we ensure good adjustment goodness in later models; it is advisable that there are no variables in the model with a lot of variability and others with few. The multicollinearity test of the tolerance statistical values are above 0.1 and the inflation variance factor (IVF) is below 10; therefore it is not perceived a possible problem of multicollinearity for any variable. Thus, the variables of the model met the requirements for their use.

Exploratory factor analysis

To assess the unidimensionality of the latent concept, we performed an exploratory factor analysis. The extraction procedure has been the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) for the dimensions of cultural values and usability. Regarding the results of the usability dimensions, the measure of sampling adequacy Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) has a value of 0.873, higher than the acceptable value of 0.7, while the Bartlett's sphericity test has a p-value inferior than the significance level (0.05) to reject the null hypothesis that the correlation matrix is an identity one; therefore it is concluded that the factor is adequate. Concerning the test for the variables of culture, the measure of sampling adequacy Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) has a value of 0.720, higher than the acceptable value of 0.7 and the Barlett´s sphericity test has a p-value lower than the limit of level of significance (0.05) to reject the null hypothesis that the correlation matrix is an identity matrix, so we conclude that the factorial is adequate.

Model applied to Spain

The model for Spain (FIG.. 2) consists of ten variables. Masculinity only has impact on the efficiency of navigation, but with a negative sign (λ = -2.347) in an approach contrary to the expectations. Collectivism also influence this variable (λ = 2.044), which is also reflected in emotion (λ = 2.052), control (λ = 2.052), content (λ =

2.947) and security (λ = 2.028).

Of these, the greatest influence of this construct is produced on emotion. For Spain, the variable of perceived risk emerges, which is reflected in the content (λ = 3.100). In addition, power distance, measured only by the indicator "Security is a major issue in my life" influences the language positively (λ = 3.818), however the content (λ = -1.654) is influenced negatively.

Verification of the hypothesis (TABLE 4) was carried through the analysis of each of the standardized coefficients and their significance level. Regarding risk aversion, no relationships were found between safety and efficiency or easiness of use. The five hypotheses for collectivism are accepted, while for the dimension of masculinity / femininity only one hypothesis was accepted. In terms of power distance, the only hypothesis not proved was the one related to its influence on safety.

TABLE 4. VERIFIED HYPOTHESIS FOR SPAIN

Variables	HIP.	Verification
Risk Aversion	H1c: (-)	YES. With opposite sign
Collectivism	H2a: (-)	YES. The measured variable is individualism, in opposition to collectivism, the sign changes
	H2b: (-)	YES. The measured variable is individualism, in opposition to collectivism, the sign changes
	H2c: (-)	YES. The measured variable is individualism
	H2d: (-)	YES. The measured variable is individualism
	H2e: (-)	YES. The measured variable is individualism
Masculinity	H3c: (+)	YES. With opposite sign
Power Distance	H4b: (+)	YES. With opposite sign
	H4c: (+)	YES

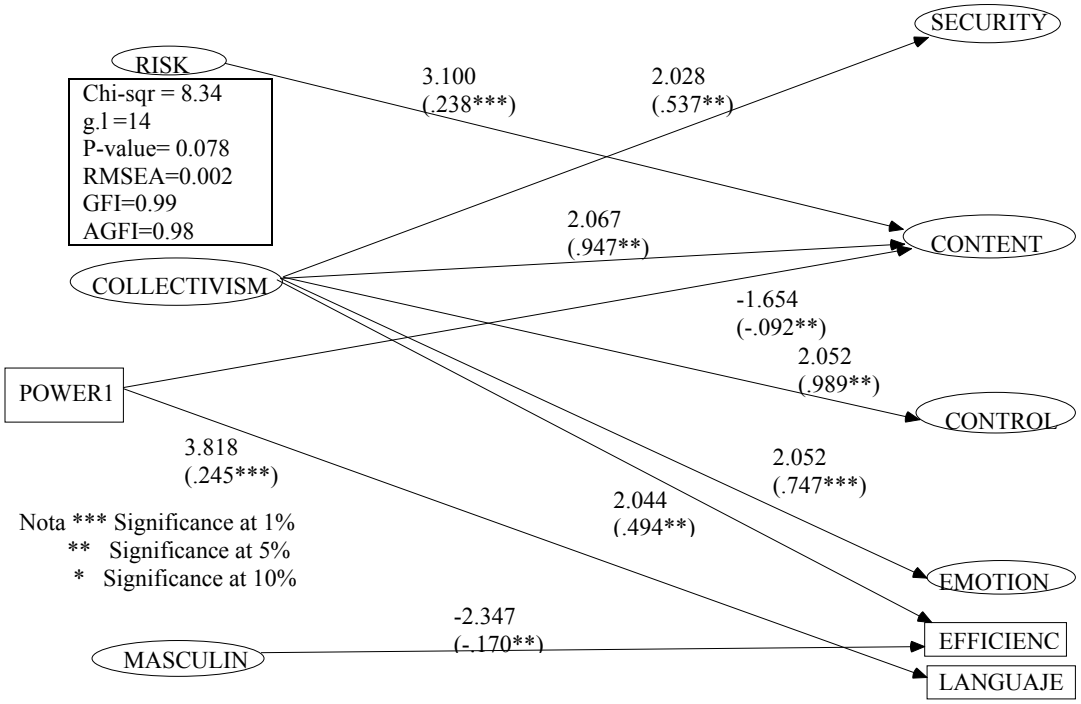

FIG. 2 STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODEL FOR SPAIN

Model applied to Mexico

The model for Mexico only comprises two cultural variables: Sex ratio vs. femininity and collectivism. The two appear as latent variables and all enclose their reflex variables (Fig. 3).

In terms of usability variables, four of them are exposed as latent variables and two as observable variables. The observable variables are efficiency and easiness of use, which are influenced by the masculinity variable $\lambda = \lambda =$ -2.929 and -3.224 respectively. It can be noticed that values have negative signs. There is a latent variable that influences also masculinity, control (λ = -2.016). The three variables have a different weight, being the ones with the greatest influence easiness of navigation followed by the navigation efficiency. The three variables are significant at 1%. The estimators for the collectivism variable are: efficiency of navigation, which is an observable variable with λ = -2.968. The other four appear as latent variables, being content the one with most significance (λ = 3.166), followed by excitement (λ = 3.110), control (λ = 3.045) and finally safety (λ = 2.693), all with positive signs. Again, it is collectivism the cultural dimension that best represents cultural differences. These values are consistent with what has already been shown in other studies (Yano and Seo,2003; Zandapour and Harich, 1996; Matsumoto et al., 1998) on these dimensions, which also explains the behavior and characteristics of many countries and are also key parts to deduce the origins of cultural differences that cause problems to achieve success with a website.

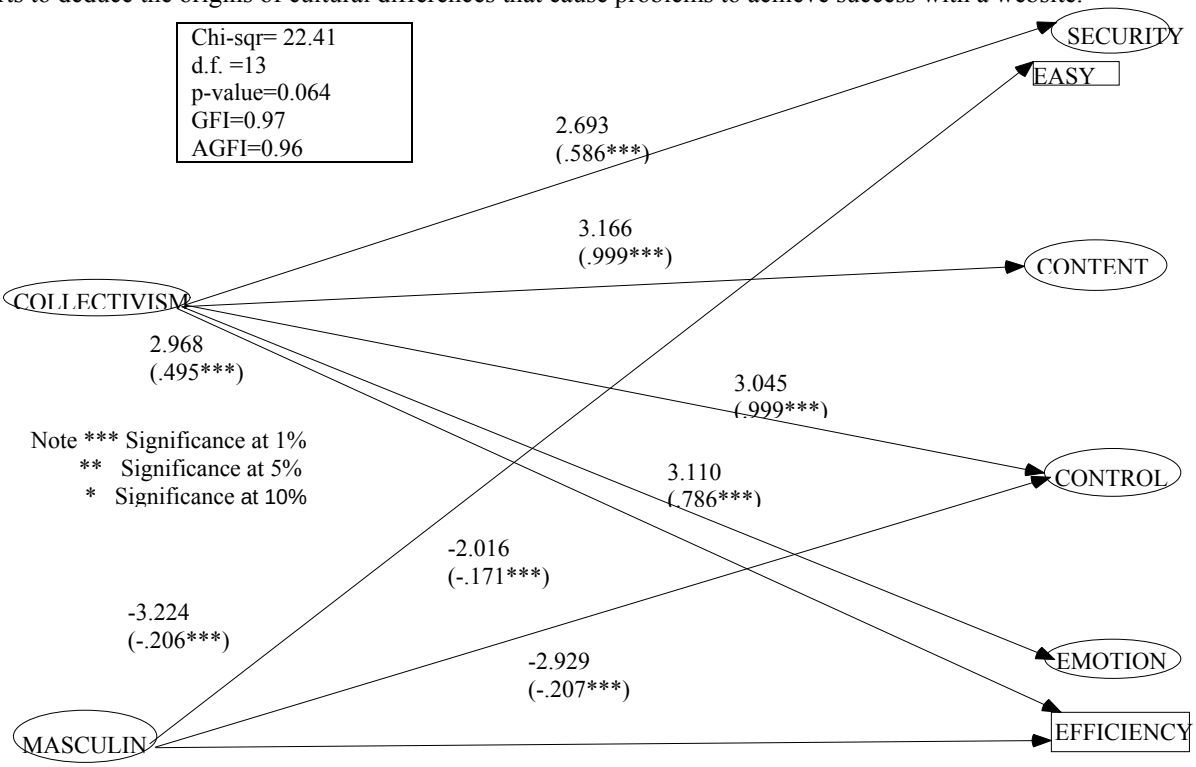

FIG. 3 STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODEL FOR MEXICO

TABLE 5 shows the assumptions that have been demonstrated for each cultural dimension regarding the variables of usability

TABLE 5 VERIFIED HYPOTHESES FOR MEXICO

Variables	HIP.	Verification
Collectivism	H2a: (-)	YES. The measured variable is individualism
	H2b: (-)	YES. The measured variable is individualism
	H2c: (-)	YES. The measured variable is individualism
	H2d: (-)	YES. The measured variable is individualism
	H2e: (-)	YES. The measured variable is individualism
Masculinity	H3a: (+)	YES
	H3b: (+)	YES
	H3c: (+)	YES

Results and conclusions

Structural equation models have helped us to propose and analyze a complete model of analysis about cultural perception and demonstrate that the site's users perceive the existing cultural differences since the web site was developed by a person of a particular national culture. The resulting models were different for each country; this is that users from Spain perceived differently the site designed by Mexicans. These results are consistent with authors such as Barber and Badre (1998) that had already pointed out: there are elements prevailing in the interface design within a given culture, known as cultural markers.

Only the model of Spain validates the four constructs of culture, although "power distance" is perceived as a reflecting variable. Stronger relationships between culture and perception of a given site are present on the "collectivism / individualism" level, construct present in two models with the five variables of usability that were proposed in the cultural model. Indeed there is a relationship between culture and usability for the dimension of collectivism / individualism. The positive and direct influence from collectivism to usability is given for the dimension of "content" for both Mexico ($\lambda = 3.166$) and Spain ($\lambda = 2.067$). As these two nations are more oriented toward collectivism, these results agree with the importance attached to the site's content, as Gibbs et al (2003) mentioned in their work. The dimension of collectivism has been consistent. This hypothesis is confirmed in its entirety to this cultural dimension, as a consequence the higher the degree of collectivism of a society, the lower the perceived safety of a site. As the site has been designed in English, but considering the collectivist culture (Mexico), issues related to security had to take into account to increase the control on the site, prioritizing the site content as well as limiting the freedom of navigation.

Relationship between Web design and cultural differences has been being discussed since the early years of the World Wide Web, where it begins to emphasize that culture plays an important role in the design of information systems (Gallupe and Tan, 1999). Despite the facts that a site can be written in a language such as English and can be directed to an international market, it must have a design that emphasizes the quality of the offering, to create interest in the prospective buyer. Nevertheless, many companies create multicultural designs or different versions for distinct markets but with an ethnocentric view, which is detrimental to the success that the site may have (Becker and Mottay, 2001). Again, is the consideration of cultural issues a key to the successful design of a site and avoid

that if it will be translated, it is transformed with mistranslations and grammatical inconsistencies that are not appropriate to the culture.

Not only should the limitations of a national culture also be considered, but also the technological infrastructure and economic development that may affect the development of electronic commerce (Jungles and Watson, 2004). The lower the country's economic development is, the implementation of successful models in other countries with economic development does not mean it will succeed in a country with less economic development, consequently users' concerns about safety should have to be taken into account. This is the reason of why a good design of a site that comprises good information about the site or products, etc.., can help to reduce that risk perception (Zahir et al, 2002; Graeff and Harmon, 2002; Cunningham et al. , 2005; Pollach, 2006).

The issue of designing influences the reduction of uncertainty in a site, when it allows confidence and enables the navigation to be more accessible. It is precisely in the study of culture that has been confirmed that designing forms vary according to cultural values of a country (Marcus and Gould, 2000), in this case, using Hofstede's cultural dimensions to test the hypothesis it was proved that there are indeed different appreciations on a site, according to the culture that visits. The usability-engineering design of a site helps to make it more efficient and reduce any potential fears, but this is not enough. Once more it is emphasized that cultural differences should be considered (Nielsen, 1994; Quesenbery, 2001; Agarwal and Venkatesh, 2002; Gray and Salzman, 1998). While there have already done work on cultural differences and usability, these have been focused on making a site optimal and it has not found any of them in the test for various nationalities.

The models emerged from this study indicate that indeed, not only is necessary to make use of usability, but also allow for cultural considerations. Moreover, it is demonstrated that a universal site cannot exist because the cultural significance is such that, although the origin of the designer is not detected, the appreciation differs slightly by users from distinct nationalities. It is especially important to note that one of the cultural dimensions that represent a weighty role in cultural issues is individualism / collectivism (Ferreira, 2002).

Limitations of work and future research

The most important limitation of this work comes from its exploratory nature and foremost from the source of data collection. The survey was based on a sample of convenience that cannot be regarded as homogenous. Firstly, because although it has been distributed mainly among university students in Mexico and Spain, other users have had access the Web and therefore have produced biases related to age or educational level, mainly. Therefore, in subsequent studies it will be considered conclusive this limitation by designing a sample that, although it could be convenience, has the same amount for socio-demographic variables that may produce a higher bias in relation to the cultural dimensions or the principles of usability. Second, the participants are not necessarily music buyers and collectors of records, consequently the user characteristics of collectors are not reflected in the site preferences. For further studies, we believe mandatory to use samples that truly represent the people who visit such sites. Another limitation regarding the chosen sample is that although the web is the model actually used by several companies, it does not represent one of the major industrial markets. Although sales of vinyl records in formats have increased, it is a fact that the music industry is in crisis and buyers of such products are a very definite segment with their own characteristics in the industry.

The Mexican sample is basically formed by students from Guadalajara, making it fairly homogeneous, while the Spanish sample has been more dispersed and for that reason more heterogeneity, but it was mostly held in the Community of Madrid. Besides the future lines already pointed out in regard to the limitations, another possibility is to make a real investigation into only one of these countries, with samples representing the whole population and not just the university sector. Given that the U.S. is a country where many people live from different national origins, also it could even be perform a segmentation in which the Hispanic market is compared with other segments. Even if research is conducted again in the analyzed countries, results from the U.S. Hispanic segment could be compared with the market in Latin America and Spain.

Despite all these limitations, our study represents a starting point that corresponds to a clear contribution in the field of electronic commerce. Therefore, we intend to develop further research where more cultures become

involved. These future studies will incorporate cultures that do not have a Western origin, including emerging markets like China and India. Other countries where Internet is already well established and developed but they belong to cultures other than the Western world can be also incorporated, such as Korea and Japan. In addition, Brazil also will be contemplated since it is an emerging country and Latin America, but also has a historical background and current development different from its Latin American neighbors.

References

For a full list of references, please contact the author(s).