

Consumer Perceptions of Global Branding and Iconization

Gail Ferreira

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CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS OF GLOBAL BRANDING AND ICONIZATION

by

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ABSTRACT

Global usage of the World Wide Web continues to increase exponentially, yet many corporate Web sites are misperceived by non-English-speaking audiences. Diverse communities of global consumers purchase products on the World Wide Web based on a positive image of the product as reflected in the Web site content, which includes text, images, and icons. However, corporate leaders may not have an awareness of the common elements present in successful global Web sites as comprehended by different cultures. This qualitative, phenomenological data analysis used a Web-based survey to explore the perceptions and feelings of a purposive sample of participants regarding the content of global World Wide Web sites. Each participant in the study spoke English or a combination of English and Spanish and explored their perceptions and feelings regarding global Web sites. The following five themes emerged from the research results regarding consumer perceptions of global Web sites: (a) product, (b) information, (c) people, (d) simplicity, (e) and brands. Information gleaned by this study regarding consumer behavior can be incorporated into a comprehensive global marketing campaign that can be used by leaders to expand business internationally.

DEDICATION

The doctoral program has been an exciting journey that has led me into uncharted waters. During the course of my travels, my family, friends, and doctoral committee members have acted as guides to help direct me when the path became steep or unclear. Thanks to my husband, Robert Sears, for providing me continuous support and inspiration. God bless Dr. David Hall, my mentor, who has guided me through the ups and downs of this precarious journey. His thoroughness and inquisitiveness regarding my research has helped me remain on target and focused. Thanks to Dr. Dennis Clodi, whose sharp eyes, wit, and keen insights in the information technology field are an asset to this research study. Thanks to Dr. Caroline Molina-Ray for her precise writing skills and insights into the research process. In addition, I thank Dr. Freda Turner for all of her help throughout the years while obtaining this doctoral degree. She has been an instrumental positive shining light that has helped me through difficult times during this journey. I would like to also extend thanks to my direct supervisor at Kronos, Alton Prewitt, for supporting and coaching me through this difficult process and for granting me time off when necessary.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Creating a global presence on the World Wide Web is a critical aspect of marketing strategy in multinational corporations (Robinson, 2004). Globalization has “flattened the world” (Friedman, 2006, Abstract), combining disparate sources of information into a single source on the World Wide Web. Leading global corporations continue to experience exponential growth by creating Web site content that can be understood by a global audience (Kim, 2004; Yunker, 2003). Corporations that expand their business globally not only attract more consumers, but also can enjoy an appreciated return on investment (ROI; “Global most admired companies,” 2006). Leaders of corporations want their organizations to become global entities to solidify opportunities for further revenue expansion, as demonstrated by the exponential growth of Google (Battelle, 2005; “Global most admired companies,” 2006; Vise, 2005). When Google globally expanded its business by introducing multilingual Web site content, business revenue increased from 38% in the fourth quarter of 2005 to 45% in the first quarter of 2006 (*Google, Inc. Investor Relations*, 2006; Yunker, 2006).

Consumer demographics on the World Wide Web have changed dramatically over the past few years. Although English is the most common language used on the World Wide Web, English-speaking populations only comprise slightly more than one third (35.8%) of the total world online population (Global Reach, 2006). Chinese-speaking populations represent the second largest World Wide Web user group, comprising 14.1% of the world’s online language population, while the Japanese-language (9.6%) and Spanish-language (9.0%) markets rank third and fourth in usage, representing just less than one fifth of the world’s online population (Global Reach).

Because of the linguistic differences and proportionality of English usage on the World Wide Web, corporations must find methods to expand their core message to a global audience.

Universal standards do not exist for multicultural content on the World Wide Web (*World Wide Web Consortium*, 2006; Yunker, 2003), and corporations selling products and services to multicultural populations on the World Wide Web lack the capability to deliver their intended message because of substantial language barriers (Holt, 2004; Yunker, 2003). Although the World Wide Web gives any person with a computer and Internet access the ability to view public World Wide Web sites, potential consumers of the information contained in the Web site often cannot comprehend the content on the Web pages because of their inability to understand English (Holt). Leading technology companies such as Skype, Yahoo!, Lionbridge, and Google now offer services to translate Web page content into a multicultural domain (Inc., 2006; Yunker, 2006). Interpretive services are cost prohibitive to most companies because of the amount of time it takes to translate the large amounts of Web site content from English to a foreign language (Yunker, 2006). Meanings can also be lost in translation when interpreting Web site content.

Chapter 1 presents the background of the primary elements found in global Web site content, including text, images, and icons. The historical account of text, images, and icons forms the foundation for understanding how the elements are used to build a global brand on the World Wide Web. Corporate global branding is a form of symbolism where text, images, and icons are combined into a graphical element that sends a message to the global Web site consumer (Hanlon, 2006). Understanding the dynamic nature of visual

communication elements and having the ability to wield a powerful corporate message are skills that Web designers must possess when designing and building a corporate Web site (Yunker, 2003).

Background of the Problem

To begin this qualitative study, it is necessary to understand the background of content found embedded within World Wide Web pages. This qualitative research study begins by exploring the background of different elements of Web site content, including icons, brands, and images. Each element is a method of visual communication that transmits an interpreted message from the sender to the receiver (Krippendorff, 1980). Each of the messaging elements builds a story that inspires people to use a World Wide Web site by stimulating their senses. Although each element has been used differently in the past, the usage of sophisticated visual elements on the World Wide Web brings animated, exciting, and vibrant meaning to products and services.

History of Icons

The word *icon* originates from the Greek word *eikon* and means an image, picture, or representation of an object (Keesling, 2006). Icons are a sign or likeness that represents an object (Barthes, 1964, 1972). The oldest icons are almost 2,000 years old; have their roots in ancient Greece, Rome, and the Holy Land; and depict religious figures such as Jesus Christ, Mary Magdalene, Lazarus, and the Virgin Mary (Forest, 2000). Because of the rich visual nature of the World Wide Web page, similar design tactics can be used to embed symbolism and meaning within Web site content using icons and graphics.

Icons originated to create an interface between man and machine that was intuitive and easy to learn. Dr. Ivan Sutherland created an interactive computer graphics program called Sketchpad for his doctoral dissertation at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and first introduced the concept of being able to interact with the computer through means other than the keyboard (Sutherland, 2003). Although originally designed to enable an artist or draftsman to use the computer as a tool, the introduction of a graphical user interface (GUI) language enabled the end user to accomplish tasks in a more perceptive fashion. Graphical icons were introduced into the functionality of computer operating systems to add a user-friendly interface that made interacting with the computer easy to learn. When the Apple MacIntosh was introduced in 1970, one of the major features of the computer was an intuitive graphical operating environment (Young & Simon, 2005). Because of the overwhelming popularity of the graphical user environment, Microsoft also built a GUI into the Windows operating system (Hansen, 2001).

In the field of computer technology, icons originated in the computer operating system environment as a visual method to suggest the purpose of an available function on a computer. Some examples of icons available on a Windows-equipped computer are those symbols (a) that refer to operating system functions, such as My Computer, My Network Places, and Internet Explorer; (b) that symbolize available user applications, such as Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, and Microsoft Access; (c) and that indicate common World Wide Web browsers, such as Internet Explorer (Microsoft, 2006b). Other well-known desktop icons include a trash can, a mailbox, a microphone, and a speaker.

Myths and Metaphors

Mythology is the body of myths of a particular culture and the study and interpretation of those myths. *Myth* may be broadly defined as a narrative story that has become an accepted tradition in a society through many retellings (Armstrong, 2005). On the World Wide Web, icons such as signs, logos, trademarks, celebrity images, and other graphics use symbolic elements to tell a compelling story that will attract consumers (Robinson, 2004; Shao, 2002). Myths and metaphors are a popular medium between users of different languages in the international Web community. Humans are drawn to primal elements that personify the brand by building myths, metaphors, and legends as the core message of the product (Hanlon, 2006). On the World Wide Web, prospective customers interact with technology at a personal level, identifying with myths built into the brand (Hanlon; Kim, 2004). For example, while looking for a pair of tennis shoes on the Nike global Web site, consumers not only purchase a well-designed set of shoes, but also participate in sports activities with sports superstars. By incorporating sports personalities such as Tiger Woods, Andre Agassi, and Lance Armstrong into the content of their global Web site, Nike not only sells tennis shoes, but also makes customers feel they belong to an exclusive club of sports superstars by wearing the brand (Cho, 2004; Hunt, 2003; Turrini, 2004).

Building a myth into a brand extends an appealing message to consumers that entice them to purchase a product. When customers see the Starbucks brand, they envision drinking a unique cup of coffee that can be enjoyed in a comfortable environment conducive to intellectual activity (MacRae, 2002; Solomon, 2002). Apple advertises with symbolism that draws customers into a cyberculture network (Matrix,

2002). “Cyberculture can be a contested term, but is understood as a discursive formation which Foucault believes is a shared community of cultural practices and knowledge” (Foucault, as cited in Matrix, p. 22). Stories such as *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* entice consumers to belong to a cult of users that will purchase a product to become a member of the cyberculture (Holt, 2004; Matrix). Cyberfiction inspires users to think different, which was the advertising slogan used by Apple in the 1980s and 1990s to draw the consumer to its product (Matrix). Apple’s iPod product line draws consumers into the cyberculture network of music lovers by using well-known celebrities in the music industry to advertise the brand (Holt).

Female images are recognized globally as powerful symbols that draw users into an attractive network of products and services (Solomon, 2002). Advertising uses attractive women as decorations and uses the power of beautiful women to entice new consumers to use a company’s product (Lambiase, 2003). The World Wide Web builds the female celebrity image into a metaphor that attaches meaning to the offering of goods and services online (Lambiase). Britney Spears’ image provokes envy to an audience of young women, which motivates them to purchase her music and products (Lowe, 2003). In 2002, the popular search engine Lycos reported that the name Britney Spears was in its top five ranking searches online (Association for Computing Machinery, 2003). The extension of image into the World Wide Web shows that feelings and perceptions associated with a celebrity image can also link to consumer interest (Holt, 2004; Lambiase; Lowe).

Celebrities and sport superstars are used in corporate branding to suggest strength, victory, and physical beauty. Corporations pay millions of dollars in endorsements to top

athletes to translate sports superstars' image into the brand meaning (Holt, 2004; Hunt, 2003). Metaphors such as the Nike *Just Do It* slogan and the Nike Swoosh logo are recognized by millions worldwide (Hunt). Large photographs of internationally recognized sports superstars are often embedded in corporate Web pages to attract consumers (Hunt; Shao, 2002).

The image of a corporation is illustrated within its corporate brand (Holt, 2004). Modern society is surrounded with ubiquitous corporate imagery found on billboards, elevators, televisions, computers, portable desktop assistants, and cell phones (Robinson, 2004). Media advertising incorporates elements that extend the meaning of the corporate brand to consumers (Kim, 2004). The image of the corporation is conveyed to consumers by using print, newspapers, billboards, television commercials, and product packaging (Solomon, 2002). Global corporate branding differentiates organizations by creating a brand name as a status symbol for non-Western cultures by offering goods and services that are nonlocal (Batra, Venkatram, Alden, Steenkamp, & Ramachander, 2000). The ability to tell a compelling story about the product by using stimulating symbolism is imperative for attracting global consumers (Kim). Metaphors have the power to influence a group of people through the feelings that they invoke (Kim; Robinson).

Global Branding on the World Wide Web

A brand is generally accepted as a name or a symbol that acts as a recognizable image to the consumer on the World Wide Web (Ballantyne, Warren, & Nobbs, 2006; Kim, 2004). Branding of company products and services has long been a centerpiece of global marketing, acting as a recognizable image to the consumer (Hanlon, 2006; Kim, 2004). Brand recognition entices the customer to buy a product or service because of the

perceived value of the product (Holt, 2004; Kim). Global corporations spend millions of dollars building an image as a reflection of their product offerings, as well as their corporate vision (Holt). The challenge in delivering universal content to a variety of cultures is to create a message that can be understood globally (Yunker, 2003).

Global brands are considered “brands with a high degree of similarity across countries with respect to brand identity, position, advertising strategy, personality, product, packaging, and look and feel” (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000, p. 306). Companies spend millions of dollars crafting and promoting the global brand to expand their product offerings into other countries (Yunker, 2003, 2006). Although Kim (2004) discovered primary motivators for consumer purchases by examining the brand image alone, the impact of online branding on the World Wide Web to a multicultural audience was not considered.

Researchers have purported consumers’ exposure to other forms of advertising media influences their perception of a corporate Web portal (Coyle & Gould, 2002). By experiencing the brand in other contextual settings, consumers have a preconceived image of what to expect from the goods and services based on the primal elements of the brand (Coyle & Gould; Hanlon, 2006; Holt, 2004). Incorporating the brand into a universal global message on the World Wide Web allows corporations to attract more business by incorporating primal elements into the new form of advertising (Hanlon; Holt; Yunker, 2003). A consistent story needs to be told to a diverse set of consumers that will be decoded as intended by the global corporation (Holt). To achieve this goal, the perceptions of a global consumer audience on the World Wide Web need to be explored.

A universal language is developed through careful attention to cultural details and the translation of Western products to non-Western countries (Yunker, 2003). Universal text, images, and icons can be used as a method to get a single message out to a diverse audience. Yunker analyzed some elements of iconization to seek universality, but only hinted at the search for patterns of global universal symbols. In a survey involving 3,300 consumers across 41 countries, Holt, Quelch, and Taylor (2004) discovered most people choose certain brands because of specific global product branding qualities expressed through the use of iconic elements, the choice of word patterns, and the presentation of myth and metaphor embedded within the Web page content. This qualitative study examined a set of global commercial World Wide Web sites, exploring words, images, and icons embedded into the World Wide Web content. The study extended current research by exploring the content embedded within global World Wide Web sites, including brand personality, icons, images, and text. Global corporations can benefit from developing content on the World Wide Web that is understood by a diverse audience (Tallman & Fladmoe-Lindquist, 2002).

Icons on the World Wide Web

Icons are used in advertising as a visual method of projecting a vibrant image of the brand. Leading corporations generate sales because their brand consists of certain ethereal characteristics that attract consumers (Holt, 2004; Kim, 2004; Lambiase, 2003). Hanlon (2006) posited that successful corporations use certain primal elements in branding their product that give them a superlative image. The usage of an icon is one of the main primal elements used to translate the brand name into the product (Hanlon). Icons on the World Wide Web are usually graphic content embedded into Web sites that

consist of photographs, drawings, or other visual elements that draw the consumer to the product (Yunker, 2003).

The explosion of the World Wide Web into a commercial market in the mid-1990s led companies to rethink the way they conduct business in the online environment (Castells, 2002). The World Wide Web was introduced to the research community in the 1960s as a method to exchange communication through the evolving structure of the network infrastructure (Abbate, 1999; Castells; Griffith, 2005). By 1990, commercial exploitation of the World Wide Web had begun, even though the World Wide Web was still largely used by research and academic communities as a method to exchange information (Abbate; Castells; Griffith). The phenomenon of the dot-com explosion in the mid- to late 1990s shifted the world into a new paradigm of using the World Wide Web as a virtual shopping bazaar. Icons and imagery of products began to be built into the content of the Web page using graphical programming tools such as the ActiveX language and Flash animation to give vivid virtual meaning to the iconic elements of the brand (Microsoft, 2006b). Icons and imagery are embedded within the content on a World Wide Web site. The difference between using the World Wide Web and other advertising media, such as magazines, newspapers, television commercials, and billboards, is the ability of the icon to not only portray the image of the brand, but to also take the consumer to other virtual destinations by using hyperlinks (Yunker, 2003). Additionally, the new medium of advertising instantly propels the corporation into a global realm because the World Wide Web is available worldwide to any person with a computer and a network connection that can access the World Wide Web.

Text Content on the World Wide Web

The World Wide Web used both as a medium to establish a global corporate presence and as a conduit to sell goods and services online (Robinson, 2004). The challenge of creating meaningful text content in a global market is to build a Web site that can be understood universally (Yunker, 2003). On a global Web site, the brand name is embedded into the content to incorporate a text element that is recognized by the customer, thereby providing a mental translation to the product (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Kim, 2004). Corporate brand names such as eBay, Yahoo!, Google, IBM, Starbucks, and McDonald's are known all over the world and are used by many cultures to instantly provide a mental picture of the brand that includes the product name (Kim, 2004; Robinson; Yunker).

Other Elements on the World Wide Web

Other elements can be used to translate the brand image into the product. The background music that accompanies the startup of Microsoft Windows is a well-known musical phrase that advertises the technology of the Windows operating system to millions of people worldwide (Microsoft, 2006a). The start-up smile icon incorporated into the Macintosh computer suggests a friendly environment for computer users (Apple, 2006). Even the shape of a product can have meaning for the consumer, acting as an iconic element that attracts the user to the brand (Hanlon, 2006). The shapes of the Apple Macintosh and Apple iPod are recognized by millions of users worldwide (Apple). Even the founders of Apple are considered icons. Steve Jobs' reunion with Apple in early 2000 helped propel the corporation into new levels of profitability because of his clever marketing schemes as well as celebrity status (Young & Simon, 2005). All elements of

World Wide Web content, including audio-visual content, can be explored to gain insights into the core brand message.

The logo an important icon used to distinguish goods and services for the consumer, and the presentation and arrangement of the content within the Web page extend the global brand into a distinctive virtual experience, which builds an image for the corporation (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Kim, 2004; Robinson, 2004). In the interactive community of the World Wide Web, icons become hyperlinks that allow individuals to interactively access information and navigate through the Web site (Coyle & Gould, 2002). Users of the World Wide Web choose virtual locations via hyperlinks based on interests and background (Kim; Robinson). Web sites are defined to attract customers by using images and text phrases that attract the target market.

The globalization of the corporate image on the World Wide Web is important to technology leaders such as chief information officers (CIOs), chief technology officers (CTOs), and World Wide Web entrepreneurs because of the opportunity to increase ROI through expansion into new markets (Kim, 2004; Yunker, 2003). This study can benefit (a) Web developers, who want tips and techniques for building global Web sites; (b) marketers, who want high-level strategies, such as guidelines for taking brands global; (c) designers, who want to know what cultural and technical issues are involved when designing for new countries and languages; and (e) writers, who want to create text that translates easily (Yunker).

Statement of the Problem

Global use of the World Wide Web continues to increase exponentially, yet many corporate sites are misperceived by non-English-speaking audiences. English messages

are not understood by 35% of non-English-speaking Web users (Global Reach, 2006). Corporations need to create a message on their corporate World Wide Web sites that can be understood by diverse cultures (Kim, 2004). The problem is that corporate leaders may not have an awareness of the common elements that are present in successful global Web sites as comprehended by different cultures (Yunker, 2003). Even within the United States, the inability to understand English continues to be a rising trend. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2004), from 1999 to 2004, 47.4% of the population in the United States spoke a language other than English in the home (as cited in Shin & Bruno, 2003).

One of the primary international growth markets is Mexico. In 2005, the U.S. population increased its Internet usage by 110.4%, whereas the Mexican population increased its Internet usage by 530.4% (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2006). There is a significant Hispanic sector that exists not only in the international market but also within the United States. The number of Spanish-speaking people residing in the United States continues to expand with the constant influx of immigrants. Bilingual information in different types of print media within the United States is prevalent, especially in the Northeastern and Southwestern regions of the country, to provide community information and marketing messages to the Spanish-speaking populations. The cultural groups targeted for marketing that were explored in this qualitative study are World Wide Web consumers in the United States and Mexico. Leading corporations continue to expand operations into Mexico because of the explosive market opportunities that exist in the heavily populated country (Yunker, 2003, 2006).