The Enigma of Web Interfaces: Cultural Aspects of Web Site Design

by

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Declaration:

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research.

....................................
Linda Lim Mei Luan
ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the role of cultural differences in the design and usability of web sites. Specific factors that affect localisation and internationalisation of web sites and user preferences are studied. The overarching research question is: Are there differences in usability of web sites for users from different cultures?

There are three areas of interest in this research: (i) Human Computer Interaction (HCI), (ii) Culture, and (iii) Localisation/Internationalisation. HCI focuses on the cultural factors affecting the usability of web sites. Culture is discussed in the context of HCI. Geographically disparate people use the Internet through web browsers. They may come from different cultural backgrounds and are likely to have different perceptions due to their cultural influences, which may influence their preferences for aspects of web interfaces. Challenges and opportunities regarding localisation and internationalisation of web sites are also examined. The methodology for this research facilitates the study of the impacts of culture on HCI in the context of the design of web sites and usability, specifically in terms of localisation and internationalisation.

An explorative pilot study of the materials, procedures and analysis techniques was undertaken. Due to the small number of participants in the pilot study, only limited statistical analyses are provided.

In the main study, 301 participants were divided into three almost equal groups, based on their preferred language (Australian English; Mandarin; International [primarily American] English). Each group responded to two of three virtual restaurant web site versions constructed for the experiment: (i) a localised version for Australian English speakers, (ii) a localised version for Mandarin speakers, and (iii) an internationalised version for speakers of other languages. Detailed statistical analyses of the quantitative data were compared with results from qualitative analyses of participants’ comments on experimental web site versions.
The results demonstrate that a web site that uses an International version of web design, text and web interface elements is more usable to International group participants. Participants who chose Australian English or Mandarin as their Preferred Language did not display significant preference for localised versions of the web site. The participants, being experienced and heavy users of the web, were perhaps expecting to use International English, since it has traditionally been the dominant web language.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>xii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>xiv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 BACKGROUND TO THESIS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 RESEARCH PROBLEM</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 RESEARCH DESIGN</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 AIMS OF STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6 OUTLINE OF THE THESIS</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7 CONCLUSION</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 HUMAN COMPUTER INTERACTION</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.1 Definitions of HCI</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.2 Web Sites</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.3 What is Usability?</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.4 Design for Usability</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.5 Web Site Usability Evaluation Techniques</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.5.1 Usability Evaluation Tools</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.5.2 Usability Evaluation Methodologies</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.5.3 Heuristics</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 CULTURE</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.1 Components of Culture in This Research</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.1.1 Dominant Culture</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.1.2 Language</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.1.3 Religion</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.2 Culture and HCI</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.3 Impacts of Culture on Web Site Usability</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 LOCALISATION AND INTERNATIONALALISATION OF WEB SITES</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.1 What is Localisation of Web Sites?</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.2 What is Internationalisation of Web Sites?</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.3 Processes of Localisation and Internationalisation of Web Sites</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.3.1 Localisation and Internationalisation of Specific Types of Content</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.3.2 Localisation and Internationalisation of Icons and Symbols</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.3.3 Localisation and Internationalisation of ‘Look and Feel’ of Web Sites</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 KEY ISSUES OF LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6 CONCLUSION</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 8 – CONCLUSIONS

8.1 INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................. 265
8.2 MAIN RESEARCH FINDINGS ....................................................................... 265
8.3 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS..................................................................... 267
  8.3.1 Culture................................................................................................. 267
  8.3.2 Localisation and Internationalisation of Web Sites ............................ 270
8.4 STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH .................................... 275
8.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH ................................................................ 276
8.6 DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH ..................................................... 279
8.7 CONCLUSION .................................................................................................. 279

REFERENCES....................................................................................................... 280

APPENDICES ........................................................................................................ 296

  Appendix 1: Supplementary Literature........................................................ 296
    1A Human Computer Interaction............................................................... 296
    1B Culture ................................................................................................. 319
    1C Localisation and Internationalisation of Web Sites............................ 333
  Appendix 2: Review of Experimental Issues............................................... 366
  Appendix 3: Operationalisation of Variables............................................... 371
  Appendix 4: Text Elements (Pilot and Main Studies) .................................... 373
  Appendix 5: Data Analyses.......................................................................... 376
    5A Data Analysis Matrix (Pilot and Main Studies) ............................... 376
    5B Data Analysis Variables (Pilot Study) ............................................... 378
    5C Data Analysis Variables (Main Study) ............................................... 390
  Appendix 6: Post-Experiment Interview Questions (Pilot Study) ............... 401
  Appendix 7: Advertisement (Pilot Study).................................................... 402
  Appendix 8: Web Site Variables
    8A Pilot Study........................................................................................... 403
    8B Main Study ........................................................................................... 407
  Appendix 9: Instructions
    9A Australian Participants ......................................................................... 410
    9B Chinese Participants ............................................................................ 411
    9C Participants of Other Nationalities ...................................................... 412
  Appendix 10: Pilot Study Data Analyses
    10A Qualitative and Quantitative Analyses (Pilot Study) ...................... 413
    10B Additional Statistical Analyses (Pilot Study) ...................................... 432
  Appendix 11: Advertising Material (Main Study)
    11A Student Guild .................................................................................... 457
    11B Get Ready for the Upcoming Event ................................................... 458
    11C Australian Computer Society ............................................................ 459
    11D Murdoch Alumni .............................................................................. 460
    11E International Contacts ...................................................................... 461
  Appendix 12: Chi-Square Tables of Demographics (Main Study) ............... 462
  Appendix 13: Categorical Regression Tables of Demographics
    (Main Study) .............................................................................................. 471
LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1 Similarities between Web Usability Dimensions ........................................ 31
Table 2.2 WAMMI and WUCET dimension comparison ....................................... 32
Table 2.3 Heuristic-Based Web Site Usability Evaluation Methods ......................... 33

Table 3.1 Groups and Web Sites ............................................................................. 74
Table 3.2 Constructs for localisation and internationalisation of a restaurant web site ........................................... 83
Table 3.3 Operationalisation of Web Site Variables .............................................. 85
Table 3.4 Dominant Culture ............................................................................... 86
Table 3.5a Method of Data Analysis – Stage 1 ...................................................... 98
Table 3.5b Method of Data Analysis – Stage 2 ...................................................... 99

Table 4.1a Average Number of Years Using Computers and the Web ................. 106
Table 4.1b Average Number of Hours Per Week Spent Using Computers and the Web ......................................................... 106
Table 4.2a Mean percentage of positive responses on web design items ............ 111
Table 4.2b Ratings of comments on web design items from post-experiment interview responses ........................................................................... 111

Table 5.1a Mother Tongue of participants grouped by Preferred Language .......... 123
Table 5.1b Chi-square analysis of Preferred Language and Mother Tongue (all groups and web sites) .................................................. 124
Table 5.2a Standard of English of participants grouped by Preferred Language .. 125
Table 5.2b Chi-square analysis of Preferred Language and Standard of English (all groups and web sites) .................................................. 126
Table 5.3a Religion of participants grouped by Preferred Language .................. 127
Table 5.3b Chi-square analysis of Preferred Language and Religion (all groups and web sites) .................................................. 127
Table 5.4a Identified Culture grouped by Preferred Language ............................ 129
Table 5.4b Chi-square analysis of Preferred Language and Identified Culture (all groups and web sites) .................................................. 129
Table 5.5a Nationality grouped by Preferred Language ....................................... 130
Table 5.5b Chi-square analysis of Preferred Language and Nationality (all groups and web sites) .................................................. 131
Table 5.6a Country where participants spent most of their lives grouped by Preferred Language .................................................. 132
Table 5.6b Chi-square analysis of Preferred Language and Country (all groups and web sites) .................................................. 132
Table 5.7a Dominant Culture of participants grouped by Preferred Language .... 135
Table 5.7b Chi-square analysis of Preferred Language and Dominant Culture (all groups and web sites) .................................................. 135
Table 5.8 Average Age of participants ............................................................... 136
Table 5.9a Gender of participants grouped by Preferred Language ................... 138
Table 5.9b Chi-square analysis of Preferred Language and Gender (all groups and web sites) .................................................. 139
Table 5.10a Average number of years using Computers and the Web ............... 139
Table 5.10b Average number of hours per week spent using Computers and the Web .............................................................. 139
Table 5.11a Average years using the Web ............................................................... 140
Table 5.11b Average hours per week spent using the Web ....................................................... 141
Table 5.12a Religion of participants grouped by Country ................................................................. 142
Table 5.12b Chi-square analysis of Country and Religion (all groups and web sites) ................................................................................................. 143
Table 5.12c Chi-square analysis of Country and Religion (Australian and Chinese groups) ................................................................................................. 143
Table 5.12d Country (Other) of participants .................................................................................. 144
Table 5.12e Chi-square analysis of Other Countries and Religion (International Group) ................................................................................................. 144
Table 5.13a Identified Culture of participants grouped by Mother Tongue ................................................................. 145
Table 5.13b Chi-square analysis of Mother Tongue and Identified Culture (all groups and web sites) ................................................................................................. 146
Table 5.14a Nationality of participants grouped by Mother Tongue ................................................................. 147
Table 5.14b Chi-square analysis of Mother Tongue and Nationality (all groups and web sites) ................................................................................................. 147
Table 5.15a Country of participants grouped by Mother Tongue ................................................................. 148
Table 5.15b Chi-square analysis of Mother Tongue and Country (all groups and web sites) ................................................................................................. 148
Table 5.16a Dominant Culture of participants grouped by Mother Tongue ................................................................. 149
Table 5.16b Chi-square analysis of Mother Tongue and Dominant Culture (all groups and web sites) ................................................................................................. 149

Table 6.1 Groups and Web Sites ................................................................................................. 164
Table 6.2 Mean results for responses to close-ended survey questions for each group and each web site version ................................................................................................. 166
Table 6.3 Comparison of proportions and means of responses to close-ended survey questions between Australian and International Web Site Versions (Group 1 – Australian participants) ................................................................................................. 167
Table 6.4 Comparison of proportions and means of responses to close-ended survey questions between Chinese and International Web Site Versions (Group 2 – Chinese participants) ................................................................................................. 168
Table 6.5 Comparison of proportions and means of responses to close-ended survey questions between International and Australian Web Site Versions (Group 3 – International participants) ................................................................................................. 169
Table 6.6 Mean percentage of positive responses on web design items ................................................................................................. 170
Table 6.7 Comparison of paired t-test values of responses to close-ended survey questions for Australian, Chinese and International Web Site Versions ................................................................................................. 172
Table 6.8 Chi-square analysis of the Mother Tongue and web design elements for Group 3 (International) participants ................................................................................................. 174
Table 6.9a Chi-square analysis of Standard of English and web design items for Group 1 (Australian) ................................................................................................. 175
Table 6.9b Chi-square analysis of Standard of English and web design items for Group 2 (Chinese) ................................................................................................. 175
Table 6.9c Chi-square analysis of Standard of English and web design items for Group 3 (International) ................................................................................................. 175
Table 6.10 Chi-square analysis of Religion and web design elements for Group 3 (International) participants ................................................................................................. 177
Table 6.11 Chi-square analysis of Dominant Culture and web design elements for Group 2 (Chinese) participants ................................................................................................. 178
Table 6.12 Chi-square analysis of Overall Culture and web design elements for Group 2 (Chinese) participants ............................................................... 179
Table 6.13 Chi-square analysis of Gender and web design items for Group 3 (International) participants .......................................................... 180
Table 6.14a Categorical regression analysis of demographic factors (Gender, Standard of English) and web design items for Group 3 (International) participants .................................................................................................. 183
Table 6.14b Categorical regression analysis of demographic factors and web design elements for Group 3 (International) participants .............................. 184
Table 6.15a Comments from open-ended survey question by Group 1 (Australian) participants (Australian Web Site Version) .......... 191
Table 6.15b Comments from open-ended survey question by Group 1 (Australian) participants (International Web Site Version) ...... 191
Table 6.15c Responses to web task items by Group 1 (Australian) participants ..... 194
Table 6.16a Comments from open-ended survey question by Group 2 (Chinese) participants (Chinese Web Site Version) ...................... 195
Table 6.16b Comments from open-ended survey question by Group 2 (Chinese) participants (International Web Site Version) ............. 195
Table 6.16c Responses to web task items by Group 2 (Chinese) participants ...... 197
Table 6.17a Comments from open-ended survey question by Group 3 (International) participants (International Web Site Version) ...... 199
Table 6.17b Comments from open-ended survey question by Group 3 (International) participants (Australian Web Site Version) ........... 199
Table 6.17c Responses to web task items by Group 3 (International) participants ............................................................ 202
Table 6.18 Derivation of summary score of responses to tasks and questions related to each construct on each web site version by each participant group ............................................................. 208
Table 6.19 Impact of Mother Tongue on web site versions for each group (paired t-tests) ................................................................. 209
Table 6.20 Impact of Religion on web site versions for each group (paired t-tests) ................................................................. 209
Table 6.21 Impact of Dominant Culture on web site versions for each group (paired t-tests) ................................................................. 210
Table 6.22 Impact of Overall Culture on web site versions for each group (paired t-tests) ................................................................. 210

Table 7.1 Hypotheses, Constructs and Variables .................................................... 214
Table 7.2 Summary of Findings ............................................................................... 216
Table 7.3 Impact of constructs on web site versions (Australian and International) for Australian group participants ................................................................. 258
Table 7.4 Impact of constructs on web site versions (Chinese and International) for Chinese group participants ................................................................. 260
Table 7.5 Impact of constructs on web site versions (International and Australian) for International group participants ................................................................. 262
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1 Overview of the Research ................................................................. 8

Figure 3.1a – Pilot Study version of the Australian Web Site ......................... 75
Figure 3.1b – Main Study version of the Australian Web Site ......................... 76
Figure 3.2a – Pilot Study version of the Chinese Web Site .............................. 76
Figure 3.2b – Main Study version of the Chinese Web Site .............................. 77
Figure 3.3a – Pilot Study version of the International Web Site ...................... 77
Figure 3.3b – Main Study version of the International Web Site ...................... 78
Figure 3.4 - Welcome and Introduction ............................................................ 79
Figure 3.5 - Consent Declaration .................................................................... 79
Figure 3.6 – Pilot Study version of Demographics page ................................. 80
Figure 3.7 – Pilot Study version of Language Preference page ....................... 80
Figure 3.8 – Main Study version of Demographics page ................................. 81
Figure 3.9 – Main Study version of Language Preference page ....................... 81
Figure 3.10 – Relationship between Independent and Dependent Variables ...... 84

Figure 4.1 Proportion of Preferred Language selected by participants ............... 102
Figure 4.2 Dominant Culture of the participants ............................................ 104
Figure 4.3 Mother Tongue of the participants ................................................ 105
Figure 4.4 Disparity between Mother Tongue and Preferred Language of the participants ................................................................. 105
Figure 4.5 Religion of the participants ............................................................ 106
Figure 4.6 Country in which participants spent most of their lives .................... 106
Figure 4.7a Relationship between participant Age and Computer Experience ....... 107
Figure 4.7b Relationship between participant Age and Web Experience .......... 107
Figure 4.7c Relationship between participant Age and Computer Usage .......... 108
Figure 4.7d Relationship between participant Age and Web Usage ................. 108

Figure 5.1 Proportion of Preferred Language selected by participants ............... 121
Figure 5.2 Mother Tongue of the participants ................................................ 122
Figure 5.3 Disparity between Mother Tongue and Preferred Language of the participants ................................................................. 122
Figure 5.4 Standard of English of the participants .......................................... 124
Figure 5.5 Religion of the participants ............................................................ 126
Figure 5.6 Identified Culture of the participants ............................................. 128
Figure 5.7 Nationality of participants .............................................................. 130
Figure 5.8 Country in which participants spent most of their lives .................... 131
Figure 5.9 Number of Years Living In Australia
  – Group 1 (Australian) participants ............................................................... 134
Figure 5.10 Dominant Culture of the participants ........................................... 134
Figure 5.11 Age of participants ..................................................................... 137
Figure 5.12 Gender of the participants ............................................................. 138
Figure 5.13a Relationship between participant Age and Computer Experience 151
Figure 5.13b Relationship between participant Age and Web Experience 152
Figure 5.13c Relationship between participant Age and Computer Usage 153
Figure 5.13d Relationship between participant Age and Web Usage 154
Figure 5.14a Cultural variables of Australian participants 155
Figure 5.14b Cultural variables of Chinese participants 156
Figure 5.14c Cultural variables of International participants 156

Figure 7.1 Variables used in Study 213

Figure 8.1 Internationalised Webability Model 278
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