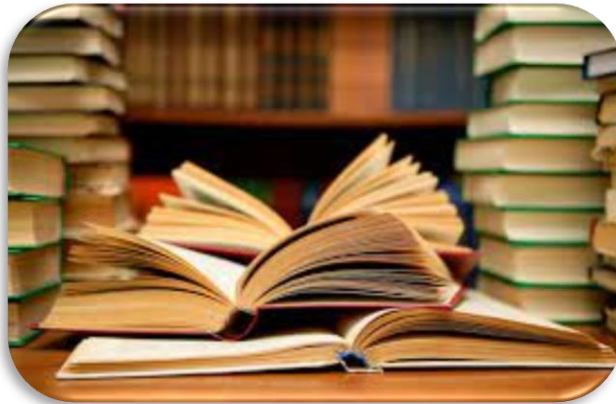


Review Paper



An Intercultural Analysis of Iranian and American Websites in Light of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory

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ABSTRACT

One of the most significant discussions in sociolinguistics has been intercultural competence which involves interactions between people from different cultural backgrounds. Undeniably, beyond the linguistic competence, one needs intercultural competence for an effective communication. An area which may be affected by intercultural competence is website design for target users. The purpose of the current review is to compare the cultural dimensions between Iran and the United States in terms of design from a variety of state and private sectors. As the theoretical framework, the study relies on Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory which consists of 6 indices of power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long/short-term orientation, and indulgence/restraint. The results of the comparison of websites indicated that the way information is presented via Iranian and American websites differs to a great extent, each country reflecting its own cultural norms and values. The study implies that target users' needs, interests, and cultural values should be taken into account in order to achieve an effective intercultural communication with target users.

Keywords: Intercultural competence, Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, Website design

مقایسه وبسایت بخشهای دولتی و خصوصی دو کشور ایران و آمریکا با توجه به تئوری ابعاد فرهنگی هافستد

یکی از مهمترین موارد در حوزه جامعه شناسی زبان، دانش بین فرهنگی است که دربرگیرنده ارتباطات بین افراد دارای سوابق فرهنگی متفاوت میباشد. این یک واقعیت انکار ناپذیر است که برای ارتباط موثر، علاوه بر دانش زبانی، اطلاعات بین فرهنگی نیز مورد نیاز است. یکی از حوزه های متأثر از دانش بین فرهنگی، طراحی وبسایت برای جامعه هدف میباشد. در مطالعه حاضر مقایسه وبسایت بخشهای دولتی و خصوصی دو کشور ایران و آمریکا با توجه به تئوری ابعاد فرهنگی هافستد، استاد و محقق برجسته هلندی در حوزه روان شناسی اجتماعی، انجام شد. این تئوری دارای شش مولفه اصلی شامل فاصله قدرت، فردگرایی در مقابل جمع گرایی، مردسالاری در برابر زن سالاری، ابهام گرایی، رویکرد دراز مدت در برابر رویکرد کوتاه مدت، وافراط در مقابل تفریط است. بررسی محتوای وبسایتهای مذکور موید انعکاس فرهنگ هر کشور با توجه به مولفه های تئوری هافستد در طراحی وبسایتهای آنها بود. بدین مفهوم که طراحان با هدف نیل به ارتباط موثر با مخاطبان، عنایت ویژه ای به نیازها، علایق، ارزشها و هنجارهای فرهنگی داشتند.

کلمات کلیدی: دانش بین فرهنگی، تئوری ابعاد فرهنگی هافستد، طراحی وبسایت

INTRODUCTION

With the advent of globalization and the widespread use of technology, web surfing has revolutionized the way information is exchanged locally as well as globally. Interestingly, websites are well-known for their key role in international education, commerce, and introduction as well as distribution of products and services through the internet (Marcus & Gould, 2000). It seems an undeniable fact that many institutions, factories, companies, and organizations consider their homepages as a means to access the world (Callahan, 2006).

One of the most significant discussions in sociolinguistics has been intercultural competence which involves interactions between people from different cultural backgrounds. Undeniably, there has been a need for intercultural competence as well as linguistic competence for an effective communication (Chen & Starosta, 2005). Intercultural competence may be defined as "the ability to function effectively across cultures, to think and act appropriately, and to communicate and work with people from different cultural backgrounds" (Leung et al., 2014, p. 2). Intercultural competence, as a valuable asset in an ever increasingly globalized world and a crucial issue in sociolinguistics, has gained paramount attention in virtual communication as well as face-to-face interaction. Armed with the effective intercultural competence, people from different cultural backgrounds rarely face embarrassing faux pas which could potentially break down the communication with their audience whether in personal or business relationships (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997). One of the main areas which may be impacted by intercultural competence is website design for target users.

It is believed that adapting websites to cultural preferences and acknowledging and understanding demographic diversity can greatly contribute to the improvement of communication effectiveness (Alexander et al., 2017; Mousavi & Khajeheian, 2012). The fact that people prefer web interfaces which are congruent with their cultural contexts cannot be overlooked. Website designers need to follow different mental models for visual representation, navigation, interaction, and layout (Alexander et al., 2021) and definitely make adaptations to fit the needs of people from different cultures (Huggins, et al., 2020). Cultural diversity has directed the web designers not to merely rely on their instinctive knowledge or personal experience to explore cultural issues of every nation and apply them in web interface design (Eristi, 2005; Hsieh et al., 2009). Regarding different mental models for web designers, Marcus and Gould (2000) emphasized the necessity of doing much planning, research, analysis, design, evaluation, documentation, and training to differentiate mental models for visual representation, navigation, interaction, and layout.

A good number of scholars have supported that website are culturally-sensitive (Cyr & Trevor-Smith, 2004; Fletcher, 2006; Singh & Pereira, 2005; & Singh et al., 2009) and emphasized that the designers need to localize their websites not only linguistically but also culturally. More specifically, Singh et al. (2009) defined web localization as "the process of customizing a website for a specific cultural group so that it seems natural or local to members of that particular culture" (p.282). According to Ganguly et al. (2010), culture functions as the moderator in the relationship between website design and trust. In their study, Broeder and Scherp (2018) also found out that the relationship between purchase intention and color layout of websites can be moderated through culture. Additionally, Rao (2013) stated that several U.S. companies achieved higher profits when they had a deeper understanding of the India's local culture and appropriately addressed cultural practices of Indian people.



As a matter of fact, web interface design has provided a highly customizable and dynamic interaction medium (Alexander et al., 2021; Reinecke & Bernstein, 2013), yet the potential to satisfy the users' needs, preferences, and expectations have been untapped. It may sound unreasonable to expect that a one-size-fits-all model for website design suits every culture (Rau et al., 2008). Since website users from different cultures think and behave differently, these differences will leave a great impact on their information processing, interaction style, task performance, and satisfaction with websites (Reinecke & Bernstein, 2013). Today most companies and organizations seem to be really aware of the necessity of website localization for their users; however, there have been few studies comparing Iranian and American websites in terms of cultural dimensions of both countries. The current review makes an attempt at highlighting the cultural differences of two countries with respect to Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory and applying cultural issues to web design development more deeply to explore how local cultural values lead to discrepancies between two countries.

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory

In 1980, Cultural Dimension Theory, also known as Dimensional Paradigm or 6-D Model, was first developed by Geert Hofstede, the Dutch social psychologist, and has been used so far to identify cultural differences across countries. The theory first originated from a large survey that he conducted in 1960s to examine value differences among various divisions of IBM, a multinational computer manufacturing company. 100,000 employees from 50 countries across three regions participated in this study (Hofstede, 1997). Through factor analysis, Hofstede initially identified four dimensions: power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, and uncertainty avoidance. Very soon, Hofstede realized that his work was limited because it did not include non-western countries.

Later on, Canadian Michael Bond and Bulgarian Michael Minkov contributed to the development of Hofstede's four-dimensional model and developed it into a six dimensional one by adding long-term /short-term orientation and indulgence/restraint dimensions (Bond, 1991). The six cultural dimensions which currently make Hofstede's framework include power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long/short-term time orientation, and indulgence/restraint (Hofsted, 2011).

In addition to sociology, Hofstede's framework can be applied to different fields such as cross-cultural psychology, international management, cross-cultural communication, marketing and sales (Albers-Miller & Gells, 1996; Ming-Yi, 2013; Tianjiao, 2014), work-place interactions and human resources (Sartorius et al., 2011). Hofstede (1997) further states that people in a certain culture carry their own specific ways of thinking, feeling, and behavior learnt from our childhood. No doubt, these patterns, known as mental programs, vary across cultures and these differences should be taken into account in web communication.

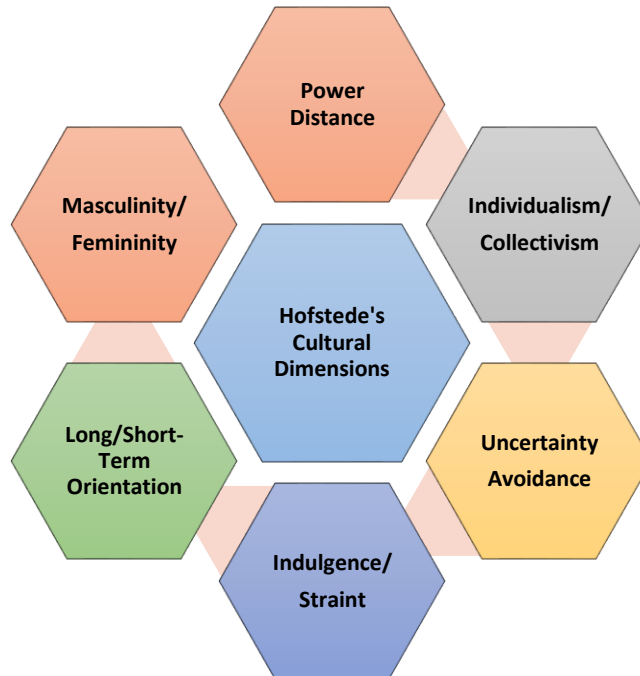
Understanding these cultural dimensions can play a facilitating role in communication across cultures in different areas. It is essential to bear in mind that learning about cultural dimensions of different countries eliminates the chances of cultural misunderstanding and bafflement which lead to communication breakdown (Hofstede et al., 2010). To this end, Hofstede Center developed a country comparison tool through which comparison of countries have been provided in terms of these cultural



dimensions. As the current review focuses on Hofstede's cultural dimensions, a detailed explanation of these dimensions seems in order.

Figure 1

Hofstede's cultural dimensions



Power Distance

The power distance index indicates to what extent members of an organization or institution accept and expect unequal distribution of power. In other words, it refers to the way people of a society relate to each other on a hierarchical scale (Hofstede, 1997). Although one may naturally expect a certain degree of inequality in almost all societies, Hofstede (2011) claims that inequality may be more common in some communities than others. Countries with a high degree of power distance easily accept hierarchies without questioning the reason for them. On the other hand, countries with low power distance presume an equal power distribution. Undoubtedly, in such communities consultative and democratic relations are taken for granted.

In high power distance cultures, inequality may be viewed as essential for the societal order; however, low power distance cultures regard equality as necessary (Hofstede, et al., 2010). To illustrate, in low power distance communities, more equality can be observed in parental relationship, while in high power distance countries, children are required to obey, subordinate, and show respect to parents (Hofstede, 1980). As another example, in countries with high power distance, superiors and subordinates rarely assume each other as equal in the workplace and both sides take it for granted that higher-ups make important decisions without asking them for their input. Such differences lead to the importance of status in higher distance power societies than low power distance ones. Noteworthy to mention is that U.S., Australia, and New Zealand advocate low power difference while Arab countries, Malaysia, and Mexico are in favor of high-power distance (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Individualism vs. Collectivism

Individualistic societies emphasize personal achievement, individual rights and a person's self-image of "I". This dimension addresses the degree of interdependence among members of a society. More specifically, the needs of oneself and one's immediate family are preferred over the group benefits. On the contrary, collectivist societies put more emphasis on the goals and well-being of the group, with a person's self-image of "We" rather than "I" (Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). Some societies like the U.S. highly appreciate individualism; in other words, people make their own choices so that their needs are met. There are, however, other cultures that value the benefits of the group over those of the individuals. In such societies, important decisions are made within groups and attributes such as harmony, saving face, and shaming can be easily expected. In Hofstede's scale (2010), many Asian as well as African countries favor collectivism whereas U.S. and Australia advocate a high degree of individualism.

Masculinity vs. Femininity

Masculinity vs. femininity, also called gender role differentiation, is another dimension of Hofstede's theory and it simply states how traditional a society is in valuing masculine and feminine roles. A masculine society advocates assertiveness, courage, strength, competition, and toughness while a feminine community values cooperation, nurturing, tenderness, quality of life, and orientation to home and children. Interesting to know, in masculine communities, conventional gender role distinctions are insisted on; in feminine societies, however, gender roles seem to be rather ambiguous or blurred (Hofstede, 1997). A feminine society advocates better maternity leave policies, more subsidizing child care expenses, child tax benefits, more women in leadership positions and higher rates of female entrepreneurship (Hofstede, 1980). Surprisingly, Norway and Scandinavian countries are regarded feminine based on their scores on Hofstede's scale, while U.S. and Japan have a high masculine score (Hofstede & Minkov, 2010).

Uncertainty Avoidance

The uncertainty avoidance dimension of Hofstede's framework indicates how much tolerance a society shows towards ambiguity and uncertainty. Hofstede (1980) furthers uncertainty avoidance refers to the extent a culture can be threatened by change. A high score in this index is the indicator of a low tolerance for uncertainty, ambiguity, and risk-taking. Individuals as well as institutions in such societies tend to minimize the unknown by strict rules since ambiguity is hardly accepted. However, countries with low uncertainty avoidance score can easily deal with change and unstable situations where the unknown is easily accepted and few strict rules are imposed on people. For instance, in a low uncertainty avoidance culture, a student may be tolerant of a teacher who doesn't know the answer to every question than in a high uncertainty avoidance one (Hofstede, 1980). Uncertainty avoidance score is high in China and Japan, while U.S. and UK maintain a low score on uncertainty avoidance dimension (Hofstede, 2010).

Long-term vs. short-term time orientation

This dimension describes how every society has to maintain some links with its own past while dealing with the challenges of the present and future. Hofstede (2011) claims: "Long-term orientation stands for



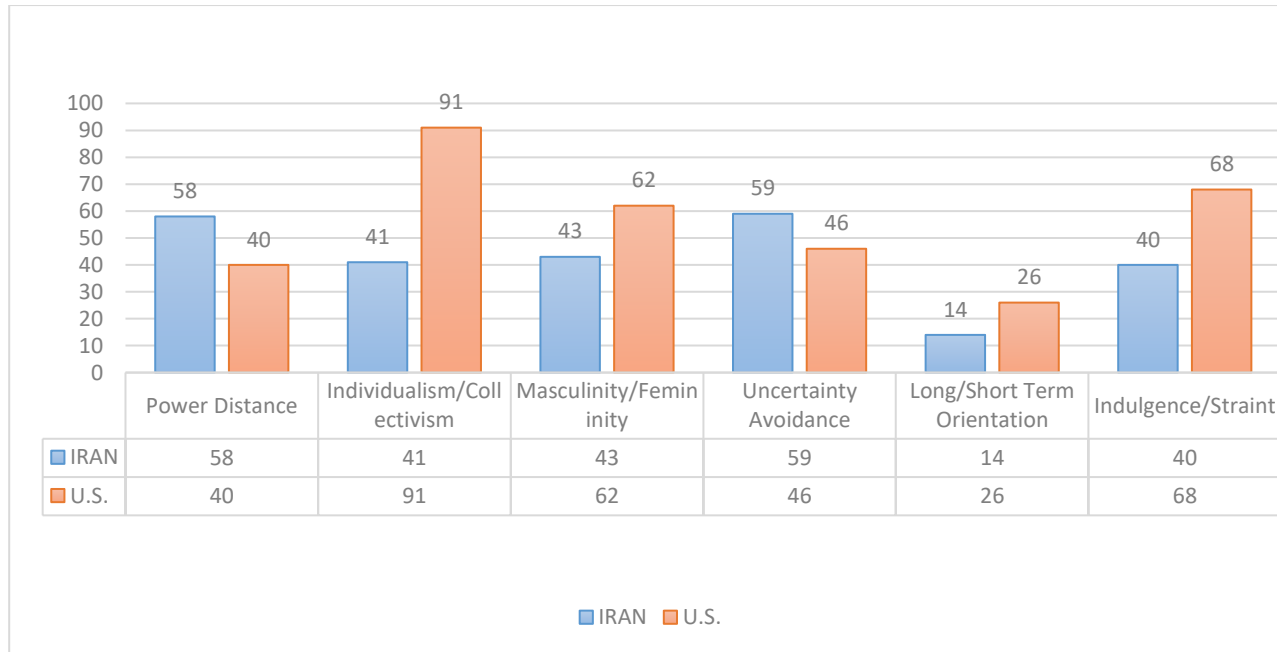
the fostering of virtues oriented towards future rewards, in particular, perseverance and thrift” (p. 359). No doubt, in countries with long-term orientation, individuals’ persistence and adaptability are emphasized; however, in communities with short-term orientations, quick results and personal steadfastness are expected (Hofstede, 2011). The long-term and short-term dimension refers to the postponement of material, social, and emotional needs of citizens in a country. Societies with long-term orientation sacrifice short-term success in favor of long-term prosperity. To put it simply, short-/term orientation index is the indicator of a focus on near future and emphasizes the present rather than the future (Hofstede, 1980). China and Japan show a high score on long-term orientation, but short/long-term orientation is highlighted in British and American cultures.

Indulgence vs. restraint

This category of Hofstede’s model concentrates on individual happiness and well-being with the importance of leisure time and freedom. This is in contrast with restricted cultures in which positive feelings are rarely expected and leisure time, freedom, happiness seldom receive sufficient attention (Hofstede, 2011). In societies with high indulgence scores, the following concepts are appreciated: declaration of happiness, perception of higher life control, high importance of freedom of speech, and leisure time as well as more involvement in sports. However, countries with high restraint scores have less importance for freedom of speech, a high degree of helplessness, less importance of leisure time, less involvement in sports (Hofstede, 2011). In South and North of America and Western Europe, indulgence index is higher; in contrast, restraint index is higher in countries of Eastern Europe, Russia, and Asia.

Figure 2

Hofstede’s indices for Iranian and American cultures



Intercultural Analysis of Websites

Figure 2 reveals the differences between Iranian and American culture in light of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory. A comparison of these websites demonstrates that Iran advocates higher power distance (U.S. = 40, Iran = 58), Moreover, American culture values individualism to a great extent (Iran = 41, U.S. = 91). In masculinity/femininity, U.S also ranks higher (Iran = 43, U.S. = 62) and advocates overlapped gender roles. As U.S. scores 26 on long/short-term orientation dimension which is higher than Iran's score (14), it seems to be more pragmatic and relies on realistic and practical results of an action than the theoretical considerations. Interesting, though, both countries do not show high scores in this index. Uncertainty avoidance score for Iran is above the average (59) while U.S. scores below the average on this dimension (46). Indulgence and restraint dimension score, as figure 2 illustrates, is relatively high in the U.S (68) as compared to Iran's score on this dimension (40). Needless to say, the individualism and indulgence scores are high in the U.S., while Iran scores high in power distance and uncertainty avoidance. Eight websites from a variety of private and state sectors_ namely educational, commercial, and governmental sectors of Iran and the United States were the main focus of the current review. The following websites were compared based on Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory to find out how cultural dimensions were valued by Iranian and American societies: The website of University of Tehran, Iran, and the University of Berkeley, California from the educational sector; Ford and Iran Khodro (American and Iranian automobile manufacturing companies, respectively) and Whirlpool and Snowa (Home appliances companies of Iran and the U.S. respectively) websites from the commercial sector, and U.S Department of Commerce and Iran ministry of industry, mining, and commerce were compare from the category of governmental websites.

Educational Websites

The websites of two well-known universities namely Tehran University and Berkeley University were compared in light of Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory. What is noticeable on Tehran University websites is the priority of collectivism over individualism. As a case in point, important religious and national occasions, different events, and conferences have been focused on Tehran University website. Besides, visual and textual modes reveal a high degree of power distance in Iranian culture. The Dean of Tehran University has been highlighted as an important and influential figure at the top of power hierarchy. University students' photos and news about them can occasionally be seen on the homepage and the information about the university academic and administrative staff can only be accessible by scrolling the other pages. Moreover, very clear statements and strict rules encompassing students' university life emphasize the uncertainty avoidance dimension.

On the other hand, Berkeley University is entirely different from Tehran University in terms of depicting U.S. as a country where power distance is below average (PD= 40). Instead of attributing power to dean or heads of faculties or departments, Berkeley University portrays its power by its magnificent and impressive architecture of different buildings on campus. Quite contrary to Tehran University website, the power has been shown through the tradition of excellence at Berkeley University by focusing on successful and genius students and distinguished faculty members. Unlike Tehran University, photos and information about the Dean and heads of different departments can rarely be found. Individualism



and indulgence receive a special attention in terms of students and their campus life, needs, interests, fun and amusement, and sport activities. By scrolling down, one bold sentence attracts attention: “Why I chose Berkeley”. Students’ photos and their achievements at this university reveal why they are satisfied by the facilities provided at Berkeley. Although reflection of collectivism by reporting or announcing important occasions, events, and gatherings is obvious, it is not as highlighted as individualism or indulgence dimensions. Strict rules regarding students (e.g. their dress code) which involve uncertainty avoidance dimension can seldom be observed on the website of Berkeley. With respect to masculinity and femininity dimensions of Hofstede’s model, both genders (current students, alumni, and faculty and administrative members) have been depicted equally important.

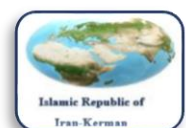
Commercial Websites

The study of the website of Ford_ a well-known American automobile manufacturing company_ reveals, individualism and indulgence are desirable cultural dimensions as the products are advertised. The phrase “Something for Everyone” or “Find Your Ford” are slogans implying that individual needs and tastes have carefully been taken into account, so every manufactured product fits a customer. Moreover, the company ensures its customers by offering technology that is essential in their everyday life by suggesting the slogans like “Everything is Going Smart” and “Good Things are Coming” which promise ease, comfort, and joy as indicators of indulgence and individualism.

In another section of Ford website, smart, tough, and reliable trucks have been displayed in a long-shot photo showing their capability to conquer the deserts. Ford adds to this capability by having the sign at the top right corner of its webpage: “41 years America’s Best-selling Trucks” indicating long-term orientation of the American culture.

On the other hand, on Iran Khodro (an Iranian car manufacturing company) website, there is no trace of individualism. The new product of the company (Tara) has been advertised very plainly all by itself in a close-up photo. The photo is followed by a short paragraph referring to the vehicle features whether the customers like them or not. Such a website does not guarantee to satisfy the individuals’ tastes. Interestingly, though, Iran khodro website focuses on collectivism that all the processes were carried out as team work (relying on Iranian engineers and experts) in the manufacturing line trying to encourage a sort of collectivism together with patriotism.

Additionally, the websites of Whirlpool and Snowa Corporations_ American and Iranian home appliances brands respectively_ were compared in the present review. Extensive individualism and indulgence are visible on whirlpool website by advertising products which fit every customer’s taste. What is more is that, femininity has received a special importance on Whirlpool by a message of congratulation to a pioneer woman who has won the Annual National Awards for her excellence and leadership in this manufacturing industry. It is also worth mentioning that Whirlpool Corporation highlights commitment to environment, sustainability, social responsibility, and employee support in 2022. In another part of website, Whirlpool has been announced as the world’s most admired company for the thirteenth consecutive year which promises the long-term orientation. One cannot overlook the fact that Whirlpool Corporation has also helped families achieve strength, stability, and energy-efficiency through this most trustworthy company for 2023 and this shows uncertainty avoidance index in American culture.



Snowa Corporation, on the other hand, has introduced its products very plainly. Although there are a variety of products, the way these products may satisfy different tastes has not been emphasized. The company focuses on the idea of collectivism by highlighting the designs which fit Iranian families and encourages the idea of collectivism as it depicts an Iranian family facing back the camera. The index femininity is not paid any attention on the Snowa website since there is only one woman in the background of a photo and it is not known who she is. Although it may be expected that women are typically depicted as those involved with working with home appliances, they have surprisingly not been used on Snowa website and this shows Iran as a masculine country.

Governmental Websites

Two state websites have been selected for the present review: U.S. Department of Commerce and Ministry of Industry, Mine, and Trade of Iran. The U.S. Department of Commerce reveals the importance of “More Women in Tech” at the 2023 Select U.S.A Summit emphasizing the femininity dimension of Hofstede’s model. Furthermore, the mission of the U.S. Department of Commerce has been reflected on a part of its website as: “The Department of Commerce’s mission is to create the conditions for economic growth and opportunity for all communities through economic competitiveness and strengthening the domestic industry. U.S. Department of Commerce, serves as the voice of business in the Federal Government and at the same time, the department serves every American equally which show the importance of individualism and long-term orientation. The strategic goals of the Department are innovation, equity, and resilience, as the major concepts for improving America’s global economy. The U.S. Department of Commerce also promises providing 21st century facilities which refers to the indulgence dimension.

On the other hand, cultural dimensions have been reflected differently on the website of Ministry of Industry, Mine, and Trade of Iran. The website is indicative of highlighted collectivism by providing the visual and textual modes in Iranian website showing different business events, meetings, and seminars. According to the Iranian website, there are promises for controlling inflation and helping people with the economic growth both of which are related to uncertainty avoidance. Simply put, Iran as a strait culture has postponed the basic needs of people to a later time in future. Besides, the dimension of power distance is easily visible by looking at the photos of superiors and subordinators who have been shown through a hierarchy. What is more is the clear statement of strict rules regarding export/import issues, smuggling, transit regulations, currency issues, customs regulations, and goods manufacturing rules which concern the avoidance of uncertainty dimension of Hofstede’s model.

CONCLUSION

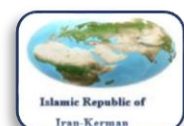
Cultural dimensions theory developed by Hofstede with noticeable contributions from Bond and Minkov, has been used as a practical tool for understanding cultural values and beliefs across the globe. It is also a framework to investigate the impact of culture on different disciplines. Hofstede’s model with its six dimensions serves as a concise tool for gaining intercultural awareness about values and beliefs of different countries and how they affect communication between nations.



The foregoing review attempted to identify whether Hofstede's six cultural dimensions differ across American and Iranian websites. The findings confirmed that there are considerable differences in cultural values on local Iranian and American websites. The study implies that efficient and appealing websites for companies, organizations, or institutions need to address their target users' needs, interests, and expectations in line with their cultural backgrounds. In sum, the current review supported the idea that the websites are culturally divergent; consequently, cultural diversity should be taken in to account when designing websites. To improve communication effectiveness and website usability, developers, therefore, need to be aware that websites are culturally sensitive rather than culturally neutral media. Further studies are surely needed to address more websites from various domains to identify cross-cultural differences. Further research, in terms of the number of countries, would be needed to confirm the generalization that cultural dimensions indeed matter in terms of web site design. It is hoped that future enquiries in website design will lead to a new generation of effective web communication.

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Biodata

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