A Study on the Multimodal Localization Strategies of Multinational Corporate Websites: A Comparative Analysis of the Homepages of Chinese and Foreign Consumer Brand Websites in China

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Abstract. This study investigates the multimedial structures of websites of multinational companies and Chinese local brands, paying special attention to the multimedial localization methods used by multinational companies when they enter the Chinese market. In our investigation, we select the official Chinese websites of 10 foreign consumer brands and 10 Chinese consumer brands, in the same product categories (such as beverages, fast food, household products, automobiles, coffee, technology and retail). By using the multimedial annotation framework, a quantitative analysis is performed on 31 basic elements to compare the utilization of multimedial resources like text, images, videos and charts between Chinese and foreign brands. The results indicate that after entering the Chinese market, the foreign brands cannot fully match the multimedial webpage designs of the Chinese local brands. A tendency towards 'partial localization' has been discovered. This finding implies that the localization strategies of multinational company websites are influenced by a complicated procedure which takes into consideration both the need to preserve the global brand image and the necessity to adapt to the Chinese market. In fact, this 'partial localization' can serve as useful guidance for companies intending to expand internationally; they can selectively localize the culturally important aspects while maintaining a general consistent structure.

Keywords: multimodal analysis, localization strategy, multinational corporations, Chinese websites, paired comparison

1. Introduction

In the present age of information technology, corporate websites play a significant role in the communication between multinational companies and Chinese consumers, not only as information sources but also as main platforms for cross-cultural identity building. However, when multinational enterprises enter the Chinese market, they need to consider an important strategic problem, i.e., whether to keep their global brand consistent or to modify their websites according to the cultural tastes of Chinese consumers. This problem is related to the traditional discussion on standardization and localization in academia. But, most of the previous research has focused on this issue from a macro-marketing viewpoint and has paid little attention to the multimedial design of corporate websites as the company's 'digital front' [1]. Therefore, the symbolic choices at the micro-level which form this front have not been sufficiently investigated. Although Xu and Shi carried out a detailed comparison of the multimodal differences between Chinese and American corporate websites, their study used a 'national independent sample' method and thus could not directly solve the main question about how multinational companies adjust their website designs to meet the needs of the Chinese market [2].

To fill this research gap, we use a paired comparison method. Ten foreign consumer brands and ten Chinese consumer brands, which are the same in the same product category, are chosen. The highest domestic brands are taken as a cultural reference. By keeping the same industry and product factors, the multi-level localization of the foreign brands in the Chinese market is studied with reference to the symbolic convergence to the local design standards.

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. Do foreign brands' Chinese websites and Chinese local brand websites show distinct uses of multimodal resources?
2. If differences exist, which multimodal elements mainly reflect these differences?
3. What localization strategies are revealed by these differences?

2. Literature review

2.1. Localization strategies of multinational corporations

Localization is a complicated task: in both real world and virtual environments, companies need to adjust their strategies towards various interacting factors, such as physical and electronic facilities, legal-political systems, cultural traditions, consumer buying habits of the products, economic situations and market competition rules etc. [3, 7]. The research on localization strategies of multinational enterprises started from the 1980s and mainly discusses how to coordinate globalization and localization. Bartlett and Ghoshal put forward the transnational integration theory which indicates that multinational enterprises should balance global efficiency and local adaptability [8]. In terms of website designing, localization is regarded as the procedure of modifying the content, framework and visual style of the website according to the cultural preferences of a particular target market [3]. Localization is no longer just a process of translating the contents but a more refined cultural re-arrangement. Cultural dimension theory [9] and Hall's high-context and low-context culture theory [10] are widely used to clarify the cultural differences in website designing. For instance, the websites of high-context cultures frequently employ more visual images whereas those of low-context cultures depend more on textual information [11]. Although these classification schemes form a solid basis, they need a deeper insight into the semiotic resources when applied to digital interfaces.

Recently, Wu et al. put forward three website localization methods concerning the identification between consumers and companies: web similarity, web distinctiveness and web prestige [12]. At the social media stage, Zhang et al. compared the Twitter and Weibo contents of western information technology enterprises and found three localization styles: adaptation, non-adaptation and cautious adaptation, which suggests that cultural adaptation is a multi-dimensional process which cannot be fully explained by the present cultural dimension models [13].

2.2. Multimodal analysis of corporate websites

Multimodal analysis comes from Systemic Functional Linguistics. The visual grammar proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen is the basis for the image analysis [14]. Pauwels developed this field by establishing a complete multimodal system which regards web sites as multi-level cultural products, defining six steps in the analysis process, from the identification of prominent characteristics to the interaction between different modes and the contextual study, in order to systematically reveal the cultural expressiveness of the web design components. In the research of corporate web sites, scholars pay more attention to the cooperation of various modes such as text, pictures and videos in constructing the brand identity. The combination of different semiotic modes - textual, visual and interactive - forms a multimodal combination which conveys the brand values in a more comprehensive way [15].

Furthermore, Charalampidou and Meex investigated the localization of technical contents and brand stories on the websites of LG and Miele on their German and Greek sites respectively, showing that cultural adaptation is not merely accomplished through translation but also by properly modifying metaphors and narrative techniques in accordance with Hall's high and low context classification [16]. Zhu and Wu [17] combined the Hyland's metadiscourse model [18] with multimodal analysis to investigate the "About Us" pages of 30 Chinese and 30 American Fortune 500 companies. They discovered that American companies employed more attitude and engagement indicators (such as "we", "let's") both in words and visually, while Chinese companies tended to use fewer personal and more objective statements, which might be due to cultural differences in power distance and individualism and collectivism.

2.3. Research gap and positioning of this study

Previous research has some shortcomings. Firstly, most cross-cultural comparative studies use an independent sample design of each country, which is unable to accurately evaluate the localization degree of multinational enterprises. Secondly, many investigations do not properly take into account the industry factors, although there is a great difference in website designs among various industries. Thirdly, the integration of multimodal analysis has not been sufficient in the study of localization strategies. The existing research mainly points out the differences but gives little explanation of the strategic importance. In order to fill these gaps, this study applies a paired comparison method, taking into consideration the product sectors and directly comparing the Chinese websites of foreign companies with those of Chinese companies to show the precise multimodal localization strategies of multinational enterprises. By standardizing the foreign companies with their corresponding local Chinese companies in the same sector, we conduct a detailed analysis on how the multimodal resources are strategically utilized to adapt to the Chinese cultural environment.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Sample selection

This research chooses the Chinese official websites of 10 foreign consumer brands and 10 Chinese consumer brands, which are matched according to the product sector. As shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The sample Chinese and foreign companies

Product Category	Foreign Brand	Chinese Brand
Beverage	PepsiCo	Nongfu Spring
Beverage	Coca-Cola	Beijing Sinoarc (Arctic Ocean)
Fast Food	McDonald's	Yum China
Daily Chemicals	Procter & Gamble (P&G)	Blue Moon
Automotive	BMW	BYD
Coffee	Starbucks	Luckin Coffee
Technology	Microsoft	Lenovo
Retail	MUJI	MINISO
Technology	Apple	Huawei
Daily Chemicals	Unilever	Midea

Selection criteria:
Well-known consumer brands with strong recognition in China
Official websites with complete content and functional navigation
Data collected in January 2026

3.2. Multimodal annotation framework

This research uses the multimodal annotation framework put forward by Xu & Shi [14]. Website elements are divided into four categories and 31 basic units. The specific annotation framework with the corresponding explanations is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Annotation framework for base unit analysis of corporate homepages

Unit type	Base Units	Explanations
Textual	T1 Sentence	Sentences in normal format
	T2 Emphasized text	Text in bold, with bigger font, or in salient color
	T3 Vertical news item	News items vertically displayed in list
	T4 Vertical menu item	Menu items vertically displayed in list
	T5 News headline	Headlines, titles, and headings of news
	T6 Read-more item	Items indicating "more", "Read more", etc.
	T7 Webpage header	Usually include features such as language selection, zone selection, etc.
	T8 Webpage footer	Usually include features such as website legal, registration information, etc.
	T9 Text in picture	Recognizable texts embedded in pictures
	T10 Title of picture	Heading or title of pictures
	T11 Digit button	Digit buttons for selection
	T12 Digit & number	Separately displayed digits or numbers
	T13 Date	Separately displayed dates
	T14 Headline list	Horizontally or vertically displayed headline or heading lists
	T15 Title of column	The titles of web columns with different themes and content

Table 2. (continued)

	T16 Item in menu matrix	Menus items displayed in matrix
	T17 Horizontal menu item	Menu items horizontally displayed in list
	T18 Top menu item	Menu items displayed in the top navigation bar
Pictorial	P1 Theme picture	Pictures usually displayed under the header and at the center of the webpage
	P2 List box	A box that contains a list of options
	P3 Button	Buttons that appear in the form of picture or icons
	P4 Picture	Photos, pictures, drawing, etc.
	P5 Icon	Recognizable icons
	P6 Search box	Search boxes in the webpages
	P7 Social media icon	Icons for various social medium
	P8 Company logo	Logos of companies
	P9 QR code	Recognizable QR codes
Diagrammatic	D1 Table	Different types of tables
	D2 Figure	Figures, graphs, charts, etc.
Video	V1 Video	Different types of videos
	V2 Flash animation	Different types of Flash animations

3.3. Data collection and analysis

The homepages of the 20 websites were marked and the occurrence of each basic term was noted.After marking, the frequencies were examined to find out the differences between foreign and Chinese brands.To guarantee the accuracy of the marking, inter-rater agreement was evaluated by using Cohen's Kappa, which resulted in a coefficient of 0.86 ($p < 0.001$), indicating high agreement.A further cross-cultural comparison study was conducted to interpret how these multiform arrangements indicate localized advertising strategies and cultural adaptation.

4. Research results

4.1. Dominant visual and navigation elements

According to the analysis of the importance of images and vertical menu items, it is evident that images (P4) and vertical menu items (T4) are the two main and common elements on corporate homepages. This indicates the common goal in current web design of achieving an intuitive visual expression and a clear information structure.

Many uses of images (P4): The number of image elements in all samples is among the highest. For instance, Pepsi (22), McDonald's (19) and Procter & Gamble (17) have a lot of images on their homepages, which are used to show products, scenes and brand activities. It can be seen that no matter what the brand positioning is, the visual presentation is the main method for designing the homepage.

Vertical menu items (T4) are generally used for the organization of website contents: This component is commonly applied by international companies such as Apple (46) and Microsoft (39), and also by domestic companies like Huawei (23) and Midea (23). Among these, Apple's homepage makes the use of this item most prominent with a larger number than other companies, showing its special deep navigation structure.

4.2. Differences in design strategies between domestic and international brands

Not only do domestic and international companies have similarities, but there also exist statistically significant differences in the use of elements like QR codes, social media, interactive buttons and news content, suggesting disparities in their design strategies and user expectations.

4.2.1. Differences in localized digital marketing features

QR codes are used more often in Chinese domestic brands than in international brands (P9). In the 10 domestic brand samples, 3 (such as Nongfu Spring, Blue Moon and Luckin Coffee) have QR codes on their homepage, while only 2 of the 10 international brands (McDonald's and Pepsi) use them. This shows a characteristic feature of localized design.

4.2.2. Differences in interactive guidance and information density

Employing the buttons (P3): Generally, international website brands have more prominent button arrangements to aid user operations. For example, Microsoft (20), Procter & Gamble (17) and Miniso (20, although it is a domestic brand but follows an international style) have more buttons than most domestic brands (like BYD 3, Luckin Coffee 0). It appears that the design of international brands emphasizes rapid and easy access.

Presentation of news and dynamic information:

This element is used more frequently by international brands like McDonald's (16) and Coca-Cola (6), whereas domestic brands usually have less use of it except for some cases (such as Blue Moon 3, Luckin Coffee 3 and Lenovo 3). It suggests that the homepages of international brands pay more attention to displaying current news and public relations information.

4.3. Other noteworthy element usage

As a important part including text and pictures, this section is paid attention to by some companies like MUJI (17), McDonald's (12) and Lenovo (11), suggesting that these companies prefer to include main messages within visual pictures.

This item is commonly used in both domestic products (like Beibingyang 10, Blue Moon 12 and Lenovo 10) and some international brands (such as Microsoft 17), to divide the content sections on the homepage. It is an ordinary method for arranging content.

4.4. Overall differences

Table 3 shows the total differences in multimodal resource consumption among domestic and foreign brands' Chinese websites.

Table 3. Comparison of multimodal resource usage on Chinese websites of domestic and international brands

Resource Type	Foreign Brand (n=10)	Chinese Brand (n=10)	t-value
Text Resources	52.80	61.70	1.28
Image Resources	14.80	17.50	0.91
Video Resources	0.20	0.60	2.05*
Chart Resources	0.10	0.10	0.00

*$p < 0.05$

Usually, the textual resources on Chinese brand websites are more abundant than those on foreign brands (61.70 compared to 52.80) and the image resources are also more in number (17.50 compared to 14.80), although these differences are not significant. However, Chinese brand websites do employ a larger quantity of video resources in comparison with foreign brands (0.60 compared to 0.20, $p < 0.05$), which agrees with the conclusion drawn by Xu & Shi [2], stating that Chinese websites often contain more videos and Flash animations.

4.5. Differences in textual resources

Table 4 presents the particular differences in different kinds of textual materials between domestic and international brands. The statistical analysis shows that Chinese brands use T4 vertical menu items, T15 section titles and T18 top menu items more frequently than foreign brands.

Table 4. Comparison of textual resource usage between domestic and international brands

Basic Element	Foreign Brand (n=10)	Chinese Brand (n=10)	t-value	Significance
T1 Sentences	5.00	3.80	-0.52	n.s.
T2 Emphasized Text	0.30	0.00	-1.00	n.s.
T3 Vertical News Items	0.70	1.10	0.80	n.s.
T4 Vertical Menu Items	17.10	13.70	-2.43*	$p < 0.05$
T5 News Headlines	3.20	1.30	-1.76	n.s.
T6 View More Items	4.00	2.80	-1.06	n.s.
T7 Web Header	0.40	0.60	0.87	n.s.
T8 Web Footer	1.10	1.10	0.00	n.s.
T9 In-image Text	4.90	5.20	0.20	n.s.
T10 Image Caption	0.50	1.20	1.32	n.s.
T11 Number Buttons	0.00	0.00	–	–
T12 Numbers	0.00	1.30	1.82	n.s.
T13 Dates	2.80	0.50	-1.14	n.s.
T14 Title List	0.00	0.00	–	–
T15 Column Titles	7.30	7.70	0.18	n.s.
T16 Matrix Menu Items	0.00	1.20	1.00	n.s.
T17 Horizontal Menu Items	3.90	3.10	-0.53	n.s.
T18 Top Menu Items	5.00	6.80	2.40*	$p < 0.05$

* $p < 0.05$

Vertical menu items (T4): The average score of foreign brands is 17.10 while that of Chinese brands is 13.70, the difference is significant ($p < 0.05$).

Top menu items (T18): foreign brands have an average score of 5.00, while Chinese brands have an average score of 6.80, the difference is significant ($p < 0.05$)

In contrast, Chinese brand websites usually employ more navigational textual elements, which is in agreement with the observation of Xu & Shi that Chinese websites use directional elements to promote interaction and relationship building [14].

4.6. Differences in image resources

Table 5 presents the detailed differences in image resource consumption among domestic and foreign brands.

Table 5. Comparison of image resource usage between domestic and international brands

Basic Element	Foreign Brand (n=10)	Chinese Brand (n=10)	t-value	Significance
P1 Theme Image	1.00	0.70	-1.26	n.s.
P2 List Box	0.00	0.00	–	–
P3 Button	4.00	6.00	1.50	n.s.
P4 Image	8.70	5.00	-1.56	n.s.
P5 Icon	1.40	1.30	-0.11	n.s.
P6 Search Box	0.10	0.30	1.15	n.s.
P7 Social Media Icon	2.40	1.80	-0.98	n.s.
P8 Corporate Logo	1.40	1.40	0.00	n.s.
P9 QR Code	0.20	0.70	1.67	n.s.

With respect to the image resources, there are no significant differences. However, the data indicate that the international brand websites have used more images (P4), while the Chinese brand websites have used more buttons (P3) and QR codes (P9). This pattern is partly consistent with Xu & Shi [14], since Chinese websites usually employ more QR codes which are closely connected with the mobile payment system in China.

4.7. Differences in video and chart resources

Table 6 shows the mean differences and statistical tests for both domestic and foreign brands' video and chart materials.

Table 6. Comparison of video and chart resource usage between domestic and international brands

Variable	Variable Description	Foreign Brand Mean	Chinese Brand Mean	t-value	p-value	Significance
V1	Video	0.20	0.50	2.05	0.056	$p < 0.10$ †
V2	Flash Animation	0.00	0.10	1.00	0.331	n.s.
D1	Table	0.00	0.10	1.00	0.331	n.s.
D2	Graph	0.10	0.00	-1.00	0.331	n.s.

Note: † indicates marginal significance ($p < 0.10$)

Chinese brand websites contain more video elements (V1) than those of foreign brands, and the difference is of marginal significance (p = 0.056). In China, a country with a high-context culture, more videos and other multimedia resources are used to give non-verbal signals and to make the website seem more human.

5. Discussion

5.1. Key findings and theoretical explanation

This study examined the 10 international and 10 Chinese brand's websites in China by a comparative method. Usually, the Chinese websites of the international brands have distinct multimodal designs from those of the domestic brands, but these differences mainly appear in some specific components (like vertical menu items and top menu items, videos). Among the 31 basic units, only two variables reached statistical significance, and one variable was of marginal significance. It suggests that the multinational enterprises entering the Chinese market do not fully adapt to the local conditions; rather, they adopt a policy of 'prioritizing the global brand image and making limited local changes' [19]. This partial modification indicates a contradiction in their strategy which aims to maintain the brand's symbolic consistency while meeting the local cognitive needs. The cultural adaptation is shown in the kind of media used rather than in the content level.

According to the data, the main cultural adjustment is seen in the increased use of video materials. The Chinese brand websites employ more videos, which corresponds to Hall's high-context culture theory: in high-context cultures, non-verbal and implicit communication cues are mainly used, and videos, as multimedia resources, can mimic the contextual cues in an online manner. They suit the holistic cognitive style commonly found in high-context cultures, where people tend to prefer visual stories rather than text-based pieces. Variations in the navigation structure indicate different information organization methods.

International brands have a larger number of vertical menu items (T4) possibly because of their global standardized information structure and a more complicated product classification. While Chinese brands use more top menu items (T18), this might indicate the preference of Chinese consumers for top navigation and the tendency of domestic brands to provide a clear and simple layout.

5.2. Further comparative analysis

This study both aligns with and diverges from the findings of Xu & Shi [2]. As shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Comparison

Finding Dimension	Xu & Shi [2]	Present Study	Interpretation
Video Resources	Chinese websites > U.S. websites	Chinese brands > Foreign brands	Consistent, verifying the explanatory power of high-/low-context culture theory
QR Code	Chinese websites > U.S. websites	Chinese brands > Foreign brands	Trend consistent; significance may be affected by sample size
Vertical Menu Items	Chinese websites > U.S. websites	Foreign brands > Chinese brands	Reversed, contradicting classic research findings, as a key focus

One of the main findings is the difference in the frequency of use of vertical menu items. Xu & Shi [2] indicated that in Chinese web sites, vertical menu items were used more frequently, whereas our research reveals that the vertical menu items of the Chinese web sites of international brands are more often selected. This variation might be due to the difference in the composition of the samples. The observed discrepancy suggests that the degree of organization complexity has a greater influence than the cultural similarity on the information architecture. In their research, Xu & Shi surveyed a number of large Chinese enterprises (including state-owned and major private companies), while our investigation focuses on consumer brands and the brands included in the sample are mainly giant companies from all over the world (such as Coca-Cola, Microsoft and Apple) with a great deal of information and various products, therefore requiring more menu items to arrange the contents.

The localization degree for consumer brands might be smaller than that for other industries (such as finance and energy), because consumer brands depend more on a worldwide consistent brand image and user experience. In order to keep the global brand reputation, multinational enterprises may choose to use standard navigation structures instead of modifying them for each local market [8].

5.3. Theoretical implications of localization strategies

The findings have several implications for multinational localization theory:

First, localization operates at multiple levels: MNEs keep interactive elements (e.g., menus) globally uniform while adapting media types locally, supporting stepwise cultural adaptation [19]. This highlights the gap between structural standardization and representational localization. Second, industry matters: per Xu & Shi [2], consumer goods may localize less than other sectors, so observed differences are not automatically localization. Third, extra vertical menus on Chinese brand sites stem from global product range complexity, not localization—thus global brand organization must be considered when explaining cultural differences.

6. Conclusions

According to the paired comparison of Chinese websites of domestic and international consumer brands, the main findings are:

International brands' Chinese websites have some differences with domestic brand websites in the multimodal design, especially in vertical menu items, top menu items and video resources, instead of showing a complete and systematic localization.

The Chinese brand websites employ more video resources (with a slight significance), which is in accordance with the predictions of high/low-context culture theory.

International companies use a "limited localization" method when they enter the Chinese market, modifying some of the multimodal features while keeping the global brand unity. This indicates the dilemma that multinational enterprises encounter between global efficiency and local adaptability [8]. In the digital sector, it is necessary for firms to deal with the contradiction between maintaining a consistent global brand image and adapting their online appearance to the local cultural requirements [20].

The reversal finding of vertical menu items indicates that cross-cultural differences cannot be simply regarded as "localization"; we should take into account the global brand structure, industry features and product complexity as well.

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