HCC 629 Introduction to HCC

Assignment 2 – Web Sites and Culture:
Military Recruitment

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Introduction

As global web access increases, so does the need for cultural awareness in web site design. What started as a North American skilled white male market now includes all nations, creeds, and task use (Smith et. al. 2004). An understanding of the importance of culture in web site design and use is becoming critical for global companies (Smith et. al. 2004) and should be of concern to any organization who’s web site has more than local appeal. As a study in cultural understanding of web sites, this paper analyzes four international web sites according to Hofstede’s five dimensions of culture as described in Marcus and Gould (2000).

We chose the subject of military recruitment web sites for this paper because:

- The purpose of the military is similar across countries and cultures providing a common basis for comparison
- The culture of the military is closely allied with the culture of the nation
- Recruitment sites must appeal to the culture of individuals to attract volunteers
- As a practical matter, many recruiting sites are available in English

We reviewed a number of candidate sites and chose four based on the geographic diversity of countries represented and the range of scores assigned by Hofstede to their cultural dimensions. We also thought that one site, Israel, was particularly interesting because it recruits both domestic and foreign volunteers and has a strong religious component in addition to nationalism.

The web sites analyzed are:

- Israel Defense Forces: [http://dover.idf.il/IDF/English/information/default.htm](http://dover.idf.il/IDF/English/information/default.htm)
- Go Army recruitment site for the U.S. Army: [http://www.goarmy.com/](http://www.goarmy.com/)

We analyzed the four web sites according to Hofstede’s five dimensions of culture: Power distance, Collectivism vs. Individualism, Femininity vs. Masculinity, Uncertainty Avoidance, and Long-term vs. Short-term Time Orientation (Marcus and Gould 2000). Our analysis was informal but patterned after the examples in Marcus and Gould (2000). In large part, this is a review of the cultural attractors of the site. A cultural attractor is defined as “the interface design elements of the web site that reflect the signs and their meanings to match the expectations of the local culture.” (Smith et al. 2004 pg 70). We examined symbols, icons, photographs, text, vocabulary, phrasing, site structure and navigation. Not all elements of cultural attractors were reviewed (such as color or currency formats) as these were not part of the Marcus and Gould criteria. Note that, not being an expert in the various cultures; it is quite likely we misinterpreted a great deal (Smith et al. 2004 pg. 70).

Our analysis process consisted of independently reviewing each site for examples meeting the criteria in Marcus and Gould for each cultural dimension. Based on the number and
types of examples found, we made a subjective, qualitative rating for the cultural dimension. We then compared our independent evaluations and re-examined the ratings until we reached consensus. What follows is a discussion of this analysis. (Note: During our analysis, the Singapore site was significantly updated so the examples cited below are drawn from both the old and revised site.)

**Web site analysis**

One of Hofstede’s criteria most relevant to the intersection of civilian and military culture is the Power-Distance dynamic, wherein the depth and rigidity of social hierarchies are at issue. Since military service is usually predicated upon discipline and oaths to uphold a country’s social order, portrayals of nationalist language and symbols, as well the tall hierarchies typical of armed services would be expected. However, perhaps intending to entice a civilian audience, the sites reviewed sometimes curtail usage of some of Hofstede’s high Power-Distance traits such as overt nationalism and deference to leadership (Marcus and Gould 2000 pg. 8).

The most overt appeals to nationalist sentiment appeared on the welcome screen of the Singapore Army Recruitment Centre web site (ARC 2010)(since updated). A soldier wearing night-vision goggles and festooned with combat equipment is shown in front of a time lapse nightscape of a ferris wheel and the Singapore skyline. To the far left in large type, explicitly linking the nation and this branch of the military, is the statement “Our Home, Our Army, Our Singapore.” This is subtitled “45 Years of Independence: Ready, Relevant, Decisive.” Further, at bottom left of the welcome screen is a small link to the main Army site, stating the Army’s mission in context of the state, “Our Army is to deter aggression, and should deterrence fail, to secure a swift and decisive victory...Click to Know More.” However, past this initial screen, nationalist slogans and symbols are absent. Instead, Singaporean military insignia and unit crests are often shown, as the message shifts to personal and professional development for the individual.

In contrast, the United States Army and Israeli Defense Force (IDF) foreign volunteers recruiting sites avoid acknowledging overtly the potential motivation of upholding a national social or moral order, although both nations are in active conflicts. Instead, the Israeli web site obliquely shows a small photo of a group soldiers in combat gear holding an Israeli flag (IDF 2010). The site states repeatedly that all foreign candidates must be Jewish in order to volunteer in any military unit, such as the Mahal and Garin Tzabar. However, the religious requirements and unit descriptions are almost devoid of language addressing potential motivations to serve, simply referring to “those seeking to voluntarily serve in the IDF.” The plainly stated religious requirement for service is unlike any other military site reviewed, but no deliberate appeal is made to the potential IDF recruit on the grounds of supporting their faith or the state. Also, the site includes a news feed that describes very recent combat actions, sometimes only hours old. This feature is also unique among sites we reviewed (references to ongoing conflict in Afghanistan are actually more prominent on the Singaporean site than the US Army’s). While the choice of news subjects and event descriptions are favorable to an Israeli military viewpoint, the language, like that of recruiting pages on the same site, is strikingly dispassionate in tone, and makes no overt appeal to the visitor linking service to defense against perceived aggression. A clearer link to Hofstede low Power-Distance characteristics is the Israeli site’s deference to leadership. Most news article headlines and content featured senior officers, rarely the words of rank-and-file soldiers. Similarly, the US Army site is extensive and designed for visual impact, but the image of the American flag, a ubiquitous, fundamental national symbol, is almost nowhere to be seen. Additionally, the site has an online chatroom feature called “Ask a Soldier”,

HCC 629, Assignment 2  B. Braunschweig, F. Wolf  Page 3 of 11
that states explicitly “we can not and will not discuss any topics dealing with the current military
operations, events, religion, or politics.” (U.S. Army n.d.).

The Singapore and US Army sites both have interactive sections featuring soldiers
descrying their experiences in the first person. In both cases, the tone of the autobiographical
passages is familiar and reassuring. The soldiers depicted, in some cases senior officers, relate
how military service has offered maturity, rewarding experiences and valuable job skills. Rather
than exercise any sense of moral or social authority over the visitor, the soldiers sound like peers
in a conversation, confidently explaining their experiences. Their autobiographical stories speak
about leadership, but as a skill that the visitor can acquire through joining up as they did. The US
Army site is also unique in prominently featuring links for visitors to use social networking sites
such as Facebook and MySpace. They can both visit US Army presence on those sites, and also
post a notice of their visit to their own public profiles. This last option could serve to establish
peer-centered approval of their interest in the military, in effect building a set of secondary low
Power-Distance relationships to reinforce their potential service.

In stark contrast, the South African Defense Department’s Directorate Human Resource
Acquisition web site hardly addresses the visitor at all. Visually, while being the least immersive
of any of the sites, the rudimentary top and bottom banners exhibit the national flag and military
seals throughout. This display of ceremonials images of both national and military authority is
more prominent and consistent in the South African site than any others. In comparison, the
Israeli site has an anchored IDF seal throughout, but no consistent national symbols displayed.
The US Army site employs a highly stylized logo, reminiscent of a sport brand, and only rarely
includes a unit insignia if it applies to the content. The Singapore site uses military symbols
throughout, but the tone and content are otherwise aimed at shrinking the Power-Distance
relationship with the visitor. On the South African site, the written content rather pointedly
extends the Power-Distance relationship with the visitor. The site makes its most thorough
statement of purpose, not about the visitor’s interests or the benefits of a military career, but about
the Directorate’s own organizational prerogatives. On the main page, the visitor is told, “D HR
ACQ (Directorate Human Resource Acquisition) represents a career stage for young, fit and
healthy members who are Citizens of the Republic of South Africa.” (Republic of South Africa,
Department of Defence 2010). The striking lack of a sales pitch continues briefly below, where
branches of the South African military are listed, with simply “Brochure” and “Application” links
adjacent. Almost all actual content is held in PDF files that open in external browser windows.

Like the Power-Distance criteria, the disposition of Hofstede’s Masculine-Feminine
criteria for these military sites might at first seem to be a foregone conclusion. Any nation’s
military would likely be a cultural outlier in terms of how fully the organization embodies
traditionally masculine ideals. However, while all these sites did make consistent use of language,
imagery and concepts which Hofstede identifies as masculine, there was more variation than
might be expected (Marcus and Gould 2000 pg. 16).

In the case of the Israeli site, while replete with images of tough, confident male soldiers,
as well as articles extolling masculine values of military skill and sacrifice in combat, there was
also overt portrayal of females. A full news article was dedicated to describing the gender
integration of the military, including combat units. This integration was described favorably as
the most complete in any armed service in the world. Photos of heavily-armed, smiling female
soldiers in combat gear appear throughout the site alongside photos of their heavily-armed,
smiling male counterparts, though rarely both in the same photo. Additionally, the description of
the Chayalim Bodedim program, for volunteers with both parents living outside of Israel, has
surprisingly detailed information on special considerations given to allow members to maintain
their family life, including additional leave and free phone cards. The deliberate focus on nurturing family and home lives in the presentation of this information, as well as overt acknowledgement and depiction of female soldiers throughout the site, suggests feminine characteristics interwoven with traditional masculine culture in the Israeli military. In contrast, the Singaporean site is thoroughly masculine. Only one very brief reference to females serving was found in written content. The site’s fullest representation of the individual is its interactive soldier biographies section, which has the decidedly masculine title of “Faces of Steel: Stories of Strength.” (ARC 2010). The stories are consistently focused on how the soldier overcame challenges and became an accomplished master of their specialized skills, in tsunami disaster relief and Afghan peacekeeping missions. Group cooperation and other feminine traits are rarely broached in the soldier’s stories.

Hofstede identifies the inclusion of games as a masculine trait, and one site stands out in this regard. The US Army site has six interactive games that can be played online, depicting military skill challenges like marksmanship and reflex-driven maze navigation. Also, the site has a fully-featured, first-person shooter videogame entitled “America’s Army” that can be downloaded from the site, as well as an animated 3D avatar named “Sgt. Star” that answers natural language, chat-mode questions. Otherwise, the site is replete with headlines and slogans such as “Army Strong” and “Are You Up to the Challenge” that invoke masculine traits of competition. Beneath these headlines, however, the site goes into great detail about living conditions, including married life on base, housing, healthcare and other considerations within the feminine range of Hofstede’s criteria (Marcus and Gould 2000 pg. 16). In one section, the US Army’s “Army Strong” brand is adapted to “Army Family Strong” for a section describing family benefits (See <http://www.goarmy.com/soldier-life/army-family-strong.html> ).

The main South African site has displays very few gender traits besides stating briefly, in somewhat masculine terms of a challenge, that after an initial service period “only the best of the best” will be retained in the career armed services (Republic of South Africa, Department of Defence 2010). However, the masculine tone is more unequivocal in the downloadable brochures. Here the South African Army describes itself as having “…the commanding presence and the power of a pride of lions, forever professional and ready…” (Republic of South Africa, Department of Defence 2010)

Hofstede also describes the Short-Long Term Orientation criteria, which addresses how accomplishment is defined and sought by the individual. These sites varied in expressing characteristics of Short and Long Term Time Orientation (Marcus and Gould 2000 pg. 22). The US Army and Singaporean recruitment sites both make constant reference to developing job skills, a high Long-Term Orientation trait. The US Army site states “Get the education benefits and skills that will serve you for the rest of your life.” (U.S. Army n.d.) The Singapore site expresses the practicality of military service to the point of a diagram, with a silhouette of soldier, and his career path from enlistment, through military schools and promotion, to retirement and successful civilian life. Both sites also have very detailed sections covering life “After the Army”, describing long-term healthcare and financial savings plans. Additionally, Hofstede identifies the value and credibility of relationships as key in high Long-Term Orientation societies (Marcus and Gould 2000 pg. 22). Again, the US Army and Singaporean sites feature immersive autobiographical sections in which pseudo-relationships are established between the visitor and the first-person narratives of soldiers. Over photos of these soldiers staring directly at the viewer, the informal narratives burnish the appeal of service, based on the impressive knowledge and credibility of the narrators. However, the practically oriented, long-term orientation of these messages is balanced by a number of appeals to short-term considerations, such as the desire for immediate results and achievement of goals. Both have “Soldier Life” sections that describe what
day-to-day duties entail, a much more immediate sense of “self-actualization” through military service, as opposed to a long-term career perspective. Also, both sites describe immediate access to new, exciting challenges and activities, and the promise of exploring unique and powerful military vehicles and weapons equipment.

The content and design of the Israeli and South African sites is less elaborate than the US or Singaporean sites, and mainly demonstrate short term characteristics. Both strongly assert rules, a source of credibility in Hofstede’s short-term orientation, mainly for terms of enlistment, as a source of credibility and information. Indeed, the perfunctory South African site does little else. Neither introduces any relationships with which the visitor may connect, or presents any long-term benefit to service. Hofstede’s short-term “certainty of belief”, in this case in the visitor’s drive to volunteer, seems to be a foregone conclusion, given that persuasion is so disregarded. Perhaps in the case of the IDF site, it can be assumed that Judaism may motivate foreign volunteers to serve in the IDF, but again the site is does not raise outright dogma or overt language and imagery to promote this (Marcus and Gould 2000 pg. 22).

Hofstede also describes the Individualism vs. Collectivism cultural dimension. Marcus and Gould (2000) propose that individualistic cultures will emphasize personal achievement over group achievement, images of solitary individuals vs. groups, and youth vs. tradition. Although the military itself is strongly collective, we expect that each site will strongly cater to the culture of their population in order to be persuasive. Individualistic cultures would be shown individual accomplishment; collective cultures would emphasize tradition and group membership. The results are not so clear, but tend to the individual in general. This may be due to the target age of the recruits, roughly 18 to 25, as youth is associated with an individualistic culture (Marcus and Gould 2000 pg. 12).

We found the U.S. Army demonstrated the greatest individualism, which is consistent with its top ranking by Hofstede. On the U.S. site, motivation is based in personal achievement such as pay, education, and life skills for after the army. The slogan “Become Army Strong” refers to personal development and is described in videos by soldiers. (See <http://www.goarmy.com/rsrs.html#/?channel=what-its-like-being-a-soldier&video=3de14f39-f3cf-488e-8260-919c5b0e6ef7>) The theme presented is “become a better person” and soldiers explain how they have grown in skills, confidence, and leadership. One soldier says Army Strong is “…having the strength within myself and knowing I’m part of something that is bigger than me” indicating the emphasis on the individual, but still acknowledging the group. Pictures on the U.S. site are primarily of individuals demonstrating their accomplishments, such as climbing a wall in training or piloting a helicopter. The emphasis is also on things new and current rather than traditional. There is an entire section on vehicles and equipment, emphasizing their advanced technology. Videos of this equipment are one example of the youth/action oriented theme found throughout the site.

The Singapore site is interesting because different areas of the site vary in their support for individualism and collectivism. The main recruiting site emphasizes personal accomplishment much like the U.S. site, although the emphasis is not as strong. Faces of Steel (ARC 2010) provides “Our Stories, Our Experiences”, which, like the U.S. site, is about skill development and personal accomplishment. Under career descriptions, you are told to “realize your full potential.” However, the tone changes when addressing parents and siblings. A picture of parents, a girlfriend, and a little sister is accompanied by the phrase “It’s more than a job, it’s a calling” and the accompanying text explains that it is vital to the nation. This section also includes the slogan “Our Home, Our Singapore, Our Army”. These phrases demonstrate social-political agendas,
official slogans, and group achievement that is associated with a collective culture. This supports
the notion that the cultural traits of the web site vary with the intended audience and purpose.

The Israeli site is much more subdued than the Singapore and U.S. sites and is more
group oriented. There is almost nothing about personal accomplishment. There is a description
of benefits, but in a very dry, distant tone: “Lone soldiers receive a fixed monthly grant, in addition
to monthly wages and a rental subsidy.” (IDF 2010) A relationship with a group (Judaism) is
required to serve in many roles. Pictures are mostly of groups: in formation, applying
camouflage, or in training, and do not demonstrate accomplishments. Contrary to the action on
the U.S. and Singapore sites, the Israeli site is entirely passive. Although this site does not meet
the criteria as individualistic, it is weak on items for collectivism. Wise leaders, though present in
the news items, are not prominent, ideology is minimal, especially considering the country and
their current conflict, and tradition is not very evident either.

Though the South African site is sparse, the collective view is evident in the brochures
available for download. For example, in describing the role of Combat Engineer, the brochure
states “Our Motto “Ubique” Latin for Everywhere. Military engineering is as old as war itself.
Throughout centuries sappers, or Military Engineers as they are commonly known…” (Republic
of South Africa, Department of Defence 2010) This refers to tradition, slogan, and the collective
all at once. A description for the same role from the U.S.: “Having a combination of combat
ability and building skills is necessary when it comes to tackling rough terrain in combat
situations.” (U.S. Army n.d.) Predictably, this emphasizes personal skill and accomplishment. As
mentioned previously, the South African site is bureaucratic, describing the state and the structure
of the bureaucracy. Individuals are absent, including individual leaders.

Marcus and Gold (2000) suggest that high Uncertainty Avoidance (UA) cultures would
emphasize simplicity and limited choices, navigation schemes to keep users from getting lost, and
redundant cues. Low uncertainty avoidance cultures would emphasize complexity, many choices,
navigation that encourages exploration, and maximum information.

The Israeli site demonstrates many features of high uncertainty avoidance. It has a
simple, consistent structure, menu items highlight (color, bold) to show where you are, there are
breadcrumbs to remind you where you are, and a home link is always visible. The breadcrumbs
and the menu are mostly redundant, although the breadcrumbs have more detail. Most pages
contain links to other related information forecasting what the user may want to do next. The
recruiting site is just one section of the overall Israel Defense Forces web site and not a
recruitment specific site like the U.S. Army and Singapore. One consequence of this is that some
links from the recruiting site link directly to other parts of the site outside of the recruitment
section. For example, clicking on a news article takes you to the News Channels section. In this
case, however, the menu and breadcrumbs unexpectedly change to what they would have been if
you had navigated in from the other section which could lead to users feeling lost. Although this
is unexpected behavior, it is just as likely to be a side effect of the technology used as intentional
expression of culture.

The South Africa page is certainly simple, spartan in fact. There is a home link and site
map on each page and breadcrumbs. Information is laid out in a simple bulleted, outline structure
with some boxes on the home page. These features support a high uncertainty avoidance culture.
However, the menu does not update to indicate your current location. Much of the information is
available in PDFs which open in a new window. There are few links to additional resources.
These imply less uncertainty avoidance than the Israeli site.
The Singapore and U.S. Army sites are very similar in terms of depth, complexity and navigation. They both have very polished Flash animations, video, great depth of navigation, and rich information. Navigation is well structured by an outer framework consisting of a horizontal top menu and sub-menus to let you drill down. As you drill down, however, the structure becomes more fluid and different areas have their own navigation styles within the framework. For example, on the U.S. Army site, the Careers & Jobs search has a left sub-menu of suggested searches which doesn’t parallel other areas. The Singapore Faces of Steel section is an interactive Flash object that allows exploring soldiers’ stories with the mouse and has no obvious navigational cues. Both sites use color to make the site more visually appealing, to highlight information, and to make the complex pages easier to comprehend. The U.S. Army site has much more content than the Singapore site, has more navigation options like sophisticated searching, and has the Ask Sergeant STAR virtual guide. The virtual guide consists of a natural language chat window where you can ask questions (by text) and receive answers in text and voice. Answers include links to relevant pages on the site in addition to the answer. This is clearly unstructured with no restrictions on navigation and a conceptual mental model rather than simple tasks. The Singapore site tends to a low uncertainty avoidance culture, but the U.S. Army site is clearly the lowest of the four.

A number of things complicate the process of evaluating these web sites with Hofstede’s criteria. Firstly, the subjective nature of evaluating culture makes interpretation of each web site’s content an inherently personal viewpoint, formed through the lens of an individual’s own cultural framework. In this instance, both authors’ found their own initial opinions about some web sites changed, both reinforced or diminished, through discussion and comparison of our observations of specific content. That content, such as news feeds on the Israeli site and the Singapore Army Recruitment Centre’s main page, also changed regularly, bringing new context. Secondly, the inherent culture of toughness and top-down discipline in most militaries would be expected to overshadow the expression of a number of Hofstede’s criteria, such as Masculinity-versus-Femininity or Individualism-versus-Collectivism. However, surprising variation was to be found in the expression of these criteria across the four sites. The non-homogeneity of these military web sites in this respect has a number of possible causes. In relatively prosperous countries without a draft, militaries must compete with diverse work and educational alternatives to recruit qualified young candidates. Additionally, in the case of at least two of these web sites, Israel and the United States, candidates must reckon with the risk of serving during wartime. Given these possible disincentives, militaries may need to soften and adjust their appeal, deliberately moving away from the mystique of adventure and rigor, towards a depiction of a military career ripe with personal development for the individual. Culturally influenced concerns, such as long-term professional prospects and character development must be addressed. Additionally, the gender integration of western militaries may also have contributed to the conforming the message of online military recruitment to broader social norms, instead of traditional military values.

A number of sites appear to contradict their rankings on Hofstede’s Dimensions of Culture Index Table. Israel’s Power-Distance rating of 13 on the table is quite low, ranking them 52nd amongst countries profiled, yet their site is very hierarchical, structured by military units rather than any user-centered orientation, and consistently only gives voice to senior leaders—all high Power-Distance traits. Similarly, South Africa is ranked 49th in this criteria, but their austere site mainly focuses inward on the organization rather than the visitor. Also, both Singapore and United States rank middle to low on Long-Term Orientation, 48th and 29th respectively, but their sites pay distinct attention to goals spanning the volunteer’s entire career and beyond.
Some dimensions do agree well with Hofstede’s rankings. The U.S. ranks #1 in Individualism and that is clearly reflected in the U.S. Army site. The dimension of Uncertainty Avoidance matches well for all four sites. Israel ranked 19th and we found them to have high uncertainty avoidance, Singapore and the U.S. ranked 53rd and 43rd respectively which agrees with our low assessment. South Africa’s rank of 39th is mid-to-low, and we judged it mid-to-high.

In conclusion, it is notable that even these four militaries, with inherently staunch observance of their own discipline and traditions, frequently skew their self-definition along the lines of their national cultural norms. If the messaging of such purposefully cloistered groups is changed by broader influences, then certainly commercial, educational and other public institutions will be as well. Consideration of Hofstede’s cultural criteria would be essential in creating and understanding such sites.
References


