Chapter 15

The Moderating Role of Language on Perceived Risk and Information-Processing Online

Juan Miguel Alcántara-Pilar
University of Granada, Spain

Salvador del Barrio-García
University of Granada, Spain

Esmeralda Crespo-Almendros
University of Granada, Spain

Lucía Porcu
University of Granada, Spain

ABSTRACT

The present study analyzes whether the cultural values associated with a given language affect perceived risk online and information-processing by website users. We propose an information-processing model for the online context in which perceived risk online is an antecedent and consumer loyalty towards the service is the ultimate outcome. We chose a processing language (Spanish vs. English) between-subjects experimental design. The final sample comprised 227 individuals, 52% of whom browsed the site in their mother tongue, and 48% in a second language. The results demonstrated that the cultural dimension ‘uncertainty avoidance’ moderates the effect of perceived risk on perceived ease of use and usefulness. Attitude towards the website is influenced by perceived ease of use or perceived usefulness, depending on whether the language used to process the information on the site conveys cultural values with a shorter or longer-term orientation.

INTRODUCTION

In the majority of inter-cultural interactions, the individuals concerned speak different mother tongues, which act as vehicles that convey different cultural values. Whorf (1956) affirmed that linguistic factors shape the way in which people ‘dissect’ the world, organize it, and give it meaning. Thus, differences...
The Moderating Role of Language on Perceived Risk

in language become differences in perception. Being able to master a foreign language is undoubtedly a competitive advantage for those wanting to get ahead in a world that is increasingly globalized. Of the 7,106 living languages used by over 6,200 million people (as their first language, or L1), the three languages most widely spoken as a mother tongue are Chinese (1,197 million speakers), Spanish (414 million) and English (335 million) (Lewis, Gary & Fenning, 2014). Amongst the key languages worldwide as measured in terms of volume of Internet users are English (565 million users), Chinese (509 million) and Spanish (165 million) (Internet World Stats, 2014), these languages also being the most widely-spoken in the world in general. Those organizations and individuals who successfully handle these languages are at a distinct advantage in terms of their capacity to undertake commercial or other dealings on a world-wide scale.

This suggests that in order to achieve visibility in international markets, firms should ensure that the information on their websites be written in languages that will be understood both by native-speakers using their mother tongue (that is, written in L1) and also by non-natives (written in a second language, or L2) (Fox, 2000). For example, in Internet, the 80% of all the users speak and understand the English language, according to data derived from Internet World Stats (2014). What is more, over half of all users speak English as their second language. In this regard, Luna, Peracchio and De Juan (2003) conclude that it would be advantageous to many firms to translate their websites into English and thereby apply values that are congruent with those of users – both culturally, in terms of the messages conveyed, and visually, in terms of design. The authors go further, noting that for some users English might be considered the common language online, such that they might not respond favorably to websites in their native language, having acquired conceptual links in the second language in terms of Internet functions.

With regard to L2 processing, Tavassoli (2002) studied the moderating effect of language amongst native Chinese-speaking subjects, native English-speaking subjects, and subjects bilingual in the two languages. The author demonstrated that the way in which individuals process language is flexible, such that a bilingual consumer can exhibit information-processing styles that are similar to those of native speakers. Meanwhile Puntoni, Langhe and Van Ossealaer (2009) asserted that language influences the degree to which marketing communications are perceived emotionally, demonstrating that when information is written in the consumer’s mother tongue they perceive it more emotionally than when it is expressed in a second language, and thus may find it more appealing. Other works support the view that language is associated with cultural frameworks (Li, 2010; Luna, Ringberg & Peracchio, 2008; Marian & Kaushanskaya, 2004; Ross, Xun & Wilson, 2002; Wong & Hong, 2005) and can thus influence an individual’s cognitive processing style. It could be said that culture shapes and designs language, including its grammatical structures and semantic constructs. Such findings point to a line of research of significant interest for website content managers and marketers, particularly in terms of the potential to differentiate their communication strategies depending on the cultural values associated with the language in which the web content is to be processed.

With regard to the perceived risk online, numerous researchers have highlighted its decisive role played in consumer behavior and information processing (Featherman & Pavlou, 2003; Wakefield & Whitten, 2006). This, in turn, is largely determined by an individual’s culture of origin and that culture’s uncertainty avoidance (UA) dimension. To date there have been very few works that examine the moderating effect of language as a cultural framework on the perceived risk (Alcántara-Pilar, Del Barrio-García & Porcu, 2013; Li, 2010). Meanwhile, other studies have examined the moderating role played by the ‘long-term orientation’ dimension. For instance, Soares, Farhangmehr and Shoham (2007) link this dimension to