The Readership of Corporate Websites: A Cross-Cultural Study

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1. Introduction

Corporate websites are defined as websites maintained by companies chiefly for the purpose of presenting the organization to external stakeholder groups, such as customers, investors, or the press. The premier advantage of Web-mediated communication for companies is that the content they disseminate over the Web is not filtered by gatekeepers before it reaches its audience (White & Raman, 1999). Over the past ten years, corporate websites have grown substantially in terms of content and service level (Heinze & Hu, 2006). In the same period, corporate websites have also become more homogenous in terms of navigation interfaces and design structures (Jones, 2007). While corporate websites grow in size and scope, the messages companies disseminate on their websites may never reach external audiences, since online media give audiences much more control over what they want to see than traditional media do (Gallagher et al., 2001a). Thus, companies have less control over corporate communication than ever before (Argenti, 2006).

Authors in the field of organizational communication argue that most corporate messages that are directed to external audiences actually have employees as the main recipients. This phenomenon is referred to as corporate auto-communication (cf. Broms & Gahmberg, 1983; Christensen, 1997; Christensen & Cheney, 2000; Morsing, 2006). Broadly, auto-communication is defined as "self-referential acts of communication that organize a sender around its own perspectives and images" (Christensen, 1997, p. 200). It is also argued that messages change when they take the form of auto-communication, as the sender/receiver interprets them in an ego-enhancing manner (Broms & Gahmberg, 1983). Auto-communicational messages sent out by companies do typically not involve the same individual as sender and receiver. Rather, different members of the organization send messages on behalf of the organization to its other members (Broms & Gahmberg, 1983). Morsing (2006) holds that most corporate messages about corporate social responsibility are auto-communicational, with employees rather than external stakeholders being the most interested audience.

In view of these premises, it is critical for companies to know whether consumers or citizens in general are at least potentially interested in the messages they disseminate on their websites. This is of equal relevance to educators in business communication who teach communication technology courses (cf. Planken & Kreps, 2006; Arney, 2006). Companies may have some knowledge about what visitors are interested in, if they track how users move through their websites and which search terms

they use (Morville & Rosenfeld, 2006). However, companies have little interest in disseminating this information outside of their organizations. Hence, scholars, educators, communication consultants, or website designers do generally not have access to such information. To fill this gap, this paper investigates the readership of corporate websites on the basis of an international survey to shed light on which information people are most likely to read on corporate websites.

2. Previous Research

In previous research, corporate websites have been studied as vehicles of corporate communication from two different angles. First, one line of research has analyzed and evaluated features of corporate web presences. Early analyses of corporate websites have focused on their broad content categories (Perry & Bodkin, 2000; Huizingh, 2000) and the features these websites include (Ho, 1997; Liu et al., 1997). More recently, studies concentrated on the content and features that corporate websites offer to particular stakeholder groups, including potential employees (Young & Foot, 2005), new employees (Flanagin & Waldeck, 2004), investors (Debreceeny et al., 2002; Ettredge et al., 2002; Marston, 2003; Gowthorpe, 2004), and journalists (Callison, 2003). Further, previous research has focused on the extent to which companies adapt their websites to different cultural settings (Okazaki & Rivas, 2002; Robbins & Stylianou, 2003; Cyr & Trevor-Smith, 2004; Singh & Matsuo, 2004; Singh et al., 2004). Researchers have also examined how companies employ their websites strategically to manage crises (Segars, 2003; Stephens et al., 2005), enhance their public images (Winter et al., 2003; Pollach, 2005; Ahern-Connolly & Broadway, 2007), communicate their ethical stance (Esrock & Leichty, 1998; Pollach, 2003; Chaudhri & Wang, 2007), voice their mission (Williams, 2008), and disseminate social and environmental reports (Shepherd et al., 2001; Bartkus et al., 2002; Cormier & Magnan, 2004). Ultimately, this line of research also includes two longitudinal studies on the increase in content and design features in the period from 1996 to 2006 (Jones, 2007; Heinze & Hu, 2006).

The second angle adopted in research on corporate websites is their effectiveness. User perceptions of and satisfaction with corporate websites have been investigated focusing on visual design elements (Ward & Marsden, 2003), usability (de Marsico & Levialdi, 2004), quantity of content (Kang & Kim, 2006), and personalization (Greer & Murtaza, 2003). Also, the impact of corporate website characteristics on job applicants' attitudes toward the organization has been assessed (Cober et al., 2003; Williamson, 2003; Cober et al., 2004). Cross-cultural research in this realm includes studies on quality expectations (Tsikriktsis, 2002) and design preferences (Cyr et al., 2005).

While the first line of research has furnished a large inventory of content and design features found on corporate websites, previous research has only examined audience responses to various design features and interactivity features but not to content features. It has not been studied whether anyone actually reads the content disseminated on corporate websites and, in particular, those content features that seem to be targeted at no specific stakeholder group. Also, no previous study frames corporate websites from an auto-communication perspective, questioning whether anyone apart from employees is interested in the various content features found on corporate websites.

3. Research Questions

First and foremost, this study investigates which content features of corporate websites people are interested in. However, it needs to be taken into account that people may look at corporate websites out of private interest in their roles as citizens and consumers or in their roles as employees fulfilling a task. The latter also includes students and researchers visiting corporate websites for research purposes. Therefore, the paper makes a distinction between visits to corporate website out of private

interest and visits to corporate websites out of work-related or study-related interests. Further, no previous research has studied which external variables are associated with people's visits to corporate websites. This paper will therefore test a number of variables that may be connected to people's likelihood of retrieving content from a corporate website. Demographics may also affect this behavior. These considerations can be summarized into the following three research questions:

- RQ 1: Which content features on corporate websites do people read most frequently out of work-related interest and out of private interest?
- RQ 2: Which external variables are associated with people's visits to corporate websites?
- RQ 3: What role do demographics play in determining people's inclination to visit corporate websites?

While RQ 1 and RQ 3 are exploratory in nature, RQ2 will be answered in a confirmatory research design, since previous research provides some direction for developing hypotheses.

4. Hypotheses

Based on findings from previous research, five website-external variables will be studied, too. They include trustworthiness of corporate websites, company reputation, hedonic Web use, utilitarian Web use, and online activities in general. They will be described in turn together with the hypotheses derived.

Trustworthiness and Source Reputation

Previous research on journalists' information gathering practices found that journalists approach websites rather skeptically and are more likely to retrieve information from well-known websites than from lesser known ones (Hachigian & Hallahan, 2003). Likewise, it is hypothesized that people's perceptions of corporate websites as trustworthy sources of information is related to their inclination to gather information there. Their likelihood of visiting a corporate website is hypothesized to be higher, if the company is well known.

- H 1: People who perceive corporate websites as trustworthy sources of information are more likely to retrieve content features from them.
- H 2: People whose predisposition to visit websites of high-repute companies is high are more likely to retrieve information from corporate websites.

Utilitarian and Hedonic Web Use

Broadly, Web use can be categorized into people's desire to obtain functional benefits, e.g. when they gather product information or compare prices, or their desire to obtain experiential benefits, e.g. when they play online games or use the Web for the sake of the experience. These two tasks are also referred to as utilitarian and hedonic Web use (Childers et al., 2001). While utilitarian Web use is

task-focused, hedonic Web use is characterized by people's search for sensory stimulation (Cotte et al., 2006). These two concepts originate from the marketing field, where hedonic consumption denotes "those facets of consumer behavior that relate to the multisensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of one's experience with products" (Hirschmann & Holbrook, 1982, p. 92). Utilitarian consumption, meanwhile, "is motivated by functional needs and typically involves products that are considered practical or necessary" (O'Curry & Strahilevitz, 2001, p. 37).

Although originally used to categorize product types (Woods, 1960), hedonism and utilitarianism have become a common distinction between two different motivations behind people's Web surfing behavior (e.g. Childers et al., 2001; Cotte et al., 2006; Hartmann et al., 2006; Overby & Lee, 2006). Accordingly, it is hypothesized that there is a positive relationship between people's hedonic and utilitarian use of corporate websites and their likelihood of retrieving content from corporate websites.

H 3: There is a positive relationship between people's hedonic use of corporate websites and their likelihood of retrieving content from corporate websites.

H 4: There is a positive relationship between people's utilitarian use of corporate websites and their likelihood of retrieving content from corporate websites.

Online Activities

People's Web activity in general functions as a predictor of their use of specific online services (Chadwick-Dias et al., 2004). Accordingly, people who participate frequently in commercial and non-commercial online transactions are assumed to retrieve information from corporate websites more frequently than those who are less active online.

H 5: People who are generally active online are more likely to retrieve content from corporate websites.

5. Method

This section describes the data collection process, the sample characteristics, and the development of the variables. It further shows how the hypotheses posited earlier were revised based on the results of two factor analyses.

Data Collection

The instrument for data collection was a questionnaire containing 16 questions representing external variables, 42 questions representing content variables, and 5 demographic questions. The questionnaire items are described in the sections entitled 'External variables' and 'Content variables' below. The demographic variables are described later in this section. The questionnaire was drafted in English and then tested for clarity and validity to identify flaws, check whether instructions and questions are clear, and confirm that questions gather the types of answers which are being sought. Subsequently, the questionnaire was translated into German and back into English by trained

translators. Differences were reconciled by adjusting either the English or the German version of the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was administered to respondents in Austria and Singapore to investigate people's interest in corporate websites. In both countries, two sampling strategies were employed. First, online discussion forums were identified in both countries using a search engine and the search operator 'site:at' and 'site:sg' to restrict the search to Austrian and Singaporean websites, respectively. Second, students enrolled in a large undergraduate class at a university in Singapore and at a university in Austria were asked to complete the questionnaire online. The fact that students may look at corporate websites as part of their coursework or research was accounted for in the questions. Since the response rate of self-administered questionnaires tends to be low (Ilieva et al., 2002), gift vouchers were raffled among all respondents.

A total of 563 people completed the questionnaire. After excluding cases containing missing information, the sample then consisted of 527 respondents (253 from Europe, 274 from Asia). Respondents were from nine Asian countries (52.4%), ten European countries (47.6%), and to a minuscule extent from Africa, Australia and the US. Therefore, six additional questionnaires were removed, resulting in a final sample of 521. The majority were nationals of Singapore (43.5%), Austria (32.69%), and Germany (11.42%). Table 1 shows details on gender, educational levels, employment status, and age of the respondents for the total sample and the two sub-samples.

Variable	Values	Total	Europe	Asia
Gender	Male	33.21%	37.43%	29.75%
	Female	66.79%	62.57%	70.25%
Completed education	University/college	21.11%	18.81%	22.84%
	High school	73.13%	76.20%	70.44%
	Some high school	5.76%	4.99%	6.72%
Employment status	Employed	31.86%	42.03%	23.61%
	At university	57.01%	49.33%	63.53%
	At high school	5.57%	1.15%	9.21%
	Not employed	5.57%	7.49%	3.65%
Year of birth	Mean	1982	1980	1984
	S.D.	7.16	7.53	6.32

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Sample

External Variables

Constructs measuring trustworthiness of information from corporate websites and the impact of corporate reputation on people's likelihood of visiting a particular corporate website were measured with three items each, which were adapted from scales developed for another study (Hachigian & Hallahan, 2003). Both trustworthiness and the impact of reputation were measured with agreement scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha was calculated to measure how strongly each item in the scale correlates with the sum of the remaining items. It

therefore measures the consistency among items that have been grouped into one scale. Cronbach's alpha was 0.828 for trustworthiness and 0.796 for reputation. Alpha values should be 0.7 or higher (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), but can be lower for exploratory studies (Robinson et al., 1991). Since the values obtained exceeded the 0.7 threshold, reliability was considered acceptable. The same was done for the four items measuring online activity, which were obtained from Chadwick-Dias et al. (2004). Cronbach's alpha was 0.701 and therefore acceptable.

To measure utilitarian and hedonic Web use, a set of six different activities were identified that users could engage in when they visit corporate websites. The variables capture activities other than merely looking at particular content features. They include applying for a job online, preparing for a job interview, sending questions or complaints to a company via an online form, playing games at a corporate website, looking at the design of the site, and watching animated Flash intros. These six variables were generated by three researchers in information systems who were not involved in this study.

The frequency with which people engage in these activities was measured on a scale including the values 'never' (1), 'rarely' (2), 'sometimes' (3), 'often' (4), and 'very frequently' (5). These six variables were subjected to an exploratory factor analysis in order to reduce the number of variables with minimal loss of information. Essentially, the goal of factor analysis is to identify meaningful clusters of variables (called factors) that are strongly interrelated. The variables included in one factor correlate maximally with one another and correlate minimally with the other variables (Henson & Roberts, 2006). The criterion employed in this study to decide how many factors to retain was that eigenvalues had to be greater than 1 (Fabrigar et al., 1999). Eigenvalues indicate the amount of variance explained by each factor.

The solution obtained is not unique, but is actually a matrix of factors that can be rotated in various ways, arriving at different solutions. Various techniques are available to guide the rotation process. This study applies varimax rotation, since this technique identifies the simplest solution among a variety of solutions that explain the greatest amount of variability. The factor analysis with varimax rotation identified two different factors with eigenvalues greater than 1. The factors were labeled 'Utility' and 'Hedonism'. The items, their means, standard deviations, communalities, and factor loadings are displayed in Table 2. Communalities indicate the proportion of variance in each variable that is accounted for by the retained factors (Hogarty et al., 2005) and are ideally above 0.50 (Hair et al., 1998). Two of the communalities do not reach this level, but were maintained nevertheless, given that the sample size is very good (>500), which compensates for lower communality (cf. Hogarty et al., 2005). Factor loadings indicate the strength of the correlation between the variables and the factors and are the reason why variables have been grouped in a particular configuration. Loadings of 0.50 or higher are considered significant (Hair et al., 1998). As can be seen from Table 2, all factor loadings are significant and all cross-loadings of items onto factors are very low.

Factors	M	S.D.	Communality	Factor Loadings	
				1	2
Job application	2.65	1.20	0.83	0.91	0.03
Job interview	2.92	1.19	0.79	0.89	0.06
Question/complaint	2.68	1.12	0.42	0.59	0.25
Games	2.38	1.14	0.60	0.01	0.77
Design	2.54	1.05	0.61	0.12	0.77
Animation	2.26	1.11	0.45	0.16	0.65
Eigenvalue				2.01	1.68
Variance explained				33.46%	28.03%
Cronbach's alpha				0.746	0.596
Factor name				<i>Utility</i>	<i>Hedonism</i>

Table 2. Rotated Factor Matrix of Activity Items

Content Variables

The content variables represent various content features on corporate websites. An inventory of 21 items was identified from previous content analyses of corporate websites (Perry & Bodkin, 2000; Huizingh, 2000; Esrock & Leichty, 2000; Okazaki & Rivas, 2002; Robbins & Stylianou, 2003; Pollach, 2005). People were first asked to indicate how frequently they look at these content features on corporate websites out of private interest. Then they were asked to indicate how frequently they look at the same 21 features out of work-related – or if they were students – study-related interests. The items were presented in random order. Frequencies were measured on a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very frequently).

A factor analysis was conducted for both sets of variables (private and work-related). Both factor analyses with varimax rotation identified five factors with eigenvalues greater than 1. After removing three items with acceptable but low loadings (<0.6) and performing a second factor analysis for both sets of items, the factors identified were identical for private (P) and work-related (W) use. The ten factors were labeled P_Finance, P_Customer, P_Hiring, P_Background, and P_PR for private interest and W_Background, W_Customer, W_Finance, W_Hiring, and W_PR for work-related interest in corporate website content. The five P factors and the five W factors explain 73.8% and 74.02% of the total variance, respectively.

Tables 3 and 4 display the factor loadings, together with eigenvalues, variance explained, and Cronbach's alpha of the factors. All factor loadings are above 0.50, with an average of 0.75. Cross-loadings were generally low. Tables 3 and 4 also state the mean frequency, standard deviation, and communality for each item. All communalities for private and work-related items exceed the 0.50 threshold. In view of the straightforward interpretability of the factors as well as their satisfactory eigenvalues and alpha values, the two factor solutions were maintained.

Factors	M	S.D.	Communality	Factor Loadings				
				1	2	3	4	5
Stock price	1.92	1.17	0.80	0.87	0.11	0.09	0.17	0.03
Quarterly report	1.70	0.94	0.85	0.85	0.05	0.10	0.27	0.20
Annual report	1.94	1.00	0.80	0.81	0.09	0.12	0.20	0.29
Products/services	3.54	1.07	0.81	0.00	0.84	0.14	0.20	0.22
New products	3.55	1.05	0.78	0.09	0.83	0.09	0.14	0.25
Product support	3.10	1.16	0.71	0.10	0.79	0.01	0.08	0.27
Contact	3.17	1.16	0.54	0.11	0.54	0.42	0.24	-0.02
Job vacancies	3.18	1.15	0.88	0.09	0.13	0.89	0.19	0.15
Career opportunities	3.20	1.15	0.86	0.17	0.13	0.84	0.17	0.28
Top mgmt bio	2.01	1.07	0.78	0.21	0.01	0.03	0.77	0.38
Top mgmt names	2.10	1.05	0.78	0.22	0.03	0.04	0.74	0.42
Company history	2.51	1.06	0.63	0.17	0.27	0.12	0.68	0.22
Global operations	2.32	1.07	0.63	0.20	0.22	0.29	0.67	0.01
Company overview	2.73	1.17	0.70	0.17	0.31	0.34	0.67	-0.05
Media coverage	2.78	1.11	0.70	0.17	0.33	0.09	0.14	0.73
News, press releases	2.91	1.10	0.74	0.11	0.41	0.16	0.08	0.72
CSR & Sponsorship	2.32	1.05	0.65	0.15	0.20	0.16	0.30	0.68
Diversity	1.99	0.97	0.65	0.36	0.05	0.28	0.35	0.56
Eigenvalue				2.58	2.90	2.09	3.09	2.63
Variance explained				14.33%	16.11%	11.62%	17.16%	14.58%
Cronbach's alpha				0.87	0.90	0.83	0.86	0.83
Factor name				<i>P_Finance</i>	<i>P_Customer</i>	<i>P_Hiring</i>	<i>P_Background</i>	<i>P_PR</i>

Table 3. Rotated Factor Matrix of Items for Private Interest

Factors	M	S.D.	Communality	Factor Loadings				
				1	2	3	4	5
Top mgmt bio	2.24	1.09	0.74	0.77	-0.04	0.17	0.13	0.31
Top mgmt names	2.52	1.12	0.70	0.71	0.13	0.15	0.12	0.36
Company overview	2.54	1.05	0.71	0.67	0.41	0.29	0.07	0.06
Company history	2.74	1.06	0.67	0.65	0.30	0.19	0.07	0.34
Global operations	2.38	1.14	0.60	0.61	0.31	0.27	0.14	0.20
Products/services	3.50	1.13	0.85	0.21	0.85	0.07	0.22	0.17
New products	3.43	1.09	0.82	0.10	0.81	0.09	0.21	0.32
Product support	3.00	1.16	0.71	0.12	0.77	0.09	0.13	0.27
Contact	3.29	1.17	0.58	0.46	0.57	0.13	0.17	0.00
Stock price	2.10	1.16	0.81	0.11	0.09	0.87	0.18	0.10
Quarterly report	1.98	1.00	0.81	0.28	0.02	0.81	0.09	0.26
Annual report	2.29	1.06	0.76	0.30	0.20	0.78	0.03	0.17
Job vacancies	2.96	1.16	0.91	0.17	0.27	0.12	0.89	0.04
Career opportunities	3.02	1.13	0.90	0.13	0.23	0.16	0.87	0.20
Media coverage	3.08	1.13	0.73	0.18	0.33	0.14	0.02	0.76
News, press releases	3.12	1.12	0.73	0.17	0.38	0.12	0.02	0.73
CSR & Sponsorship	2.37	1.08	0.65	0.33	0.12	0.15	0.12	0.70
Diversity	2.16	1.03	0.67	0.34	0.04	0.27	0.23	0.65
Eigenvalue				3.14	3.11	2.46	1.86	2.76
Variance explained				17.44%	17.28%	13.64%	10.33%	15.33%
Cronbach's alpha				0.86	0.86	0.85	0.89	0.83
Factor name				<i>W_Background</i>	<i>W_Customer</i>	<i>W_Finance</i>	<i>W_Hiring</i>	<i>W_PR</i>

Table 4. Rotated Factor Matrix of Items for Work-Related Interest

Since it could not be readily assumed that people's response to work-related and private visits to corporate websites really differ, a Wilcoxon Matched-Pairs Test was performed in order to decide whether the distinction is meaningful. Results are included in Table 8 below, indicating the Z value and 2-tailed probabilities for each pair of variables. The results indicate that individuals generally differ significantly ($p < .001$) as to how frequently they view certain content features on corporate websites out of private or out of work-related interests. The only exception is customer information, where the responses collected for W_Customer and P_Customer do not differ significantly. With only one pair of variables not differing significantly, the five work-related content variables and the five content variables for private interest were thus maintained.

Revised Hypotheses

After the factor analyses and the Wilcoxon Matched-Pairs Test, the five hypotheses were split into 5 sub-hypotheses each, taking into account the five content factors identified. Each content variable was further split into work-related (W) and private (P) interests. These changes resulted in the proposition of the positive relationships listed in Table 5. Overall, these changes gave rise to 50 different relationships to be studied.

H	Content V	External V	H	Content V	External V
1a	Trustworthiness	PR (W/P)	3d	Hedonism	Customer (W/P)
1b	Trustworthiness	Hiring (W/P)	3e	Hedonism	Background (W/P)
1c	Trustworthiness	Finance (W/P)	4a	Utility	PR (W/P)
1d	Trustworthiness	Customer (W/P)	4b	Utility	Hiring (W/P)
1e	Trustworthiness	Background (W/P)	4c	Utility	Finance (W/P)
2a	Reputation	PR (W/P)	4d	Utility	Customer (W/P)
2b	Reputation	Hiring (W/P)	4e	Utility	Background (W/P)
2c	Reputation	Finance (W/P)	5a	Online activity	PR (W/P)
2d	Reputation	Customer (W/P)	5b	Online activity	Hiring (W/P)
2e	Reputation	Background (W/P)	5c	Online activity	Finance (W/P)
3a	Hedonism	PR (W/P)	5d	Online activity	Customer (W/P)
3b	Hedonism	Hiring (W/P)	5e	Online activity	Background (W/P)
3c	Hedonism	Finance (W/P)			

Table 5. Hypothesized Positive Relationships

6. Results

The findings of the external variables and the content variables are presented first, before the results of the hypothesis tests are reported. Ultimately, the role of demographic variables is examined.

External Variables

Table 6 displays the means of European and Asian subjects' responses to the constructs measuring trustworthiness, reputation, hedonism, utility, and online activity. The table further shows the results of a Mann-Whitney-U test, which compares the results of two unpaired groups, in this case European and Asian respondents. Respondents from Asia and Europe do not differ significantly regarding the

trust they have in websites as information sources, but they differ significantly ($p < .001$) regarding the impact of corporate reputation on their inclination to visit corporate websites, with Asian respondents reporting higher levels of agreement.

A Mann-Whitney-U test also revealed highly significant differences ($p < .001$) between Asian and European respondents for hedonic items (design, games, animations), which are of significantly higher interest to Asian respondents than to European respondents. Differences are not significant for utilitarian motivations, which include preparation for job interviews, online job applications, and questions/complaints sent to companies via online forms.

European respondents exhibit higher frequencies for online activities than Asian respondents. A Mann-Whitney-U test of significance indicates that these differences are highly significant ($p < .001$). In fact, each of the activities included in the scale is carried out significantly more frequently by European respondents.

Variable	Mean		Z	P (2-tailed)
	Europe	Asia		
Trustworthiness	9.24	9.40	-.8817	.3780
Reputation	9.93	10.61	-3.8215	.0002
Hedonism	2.008	2.735	-10.2285	.0000
Utility	2.633	2.583	-.8065	.4125
Online Activity	3.175	2.480	-7.9999	.0000

Table 6. Means and Results of Mann-Whitney-U Test for European and Asian Respondents

Content Variables

An analysis of the means and standard deviations of the ten content variables (see Table 8) suggests that product information and recruitment are the primary reasons why people visit corporate websites. People are less interested in general information on the company background, public relations information, and financial information. Mean frequencies of individual content features are also depicted in Figure 1 for both work-related and private visits to corporate websites, distinguishing between Asian and European respondents. The scale ranges from 1 (never) to 5 (very frequently). The letters after the item names on the horizontal axis indicate the factor to which these items belong, i.e. Customer (C), Hiring (H), Company Background (B), Public Relations (P), and Finance (F). As Figure 1 shows, content features on corporate websites are retrieved more frequently out of work-related (or study-related) interest than out of private interest. People are primarily interested in recruitment information and product-related information. Company background and public relations information are of less interest. Financial information turned out to be of very little interest to the respondents, even when distinguishing between private visits to corporate websites and work-related visits.

Figure 1. Mean Frequencies of Content Features

To examine the differences visible in Figure 1 in more detail, a Mann-Whitney-U test was performed to compare European and Asian respondents (see Table 7). As the Z scores and levels of significance (p) show, differences between European and Asian respondents are highly significant ($p < .001$) for public relations (W and P), hiring (W), and customer (W). There is also a significant ($p < .01$) difference for hiring (P). There are thus more significant differences for work-related web visits than for visits out of private interest.

Variable	Z	p (2-tailed)
W_PR	-7.0689	.0000
W_Hiring	-3.3699	.0008
W_Finance	-1.8065	.0708
W_Customer	-3.7822	.0002
W_Background	-.7602	.4472
P_PR	-5.5309	.0000
P_Hiring	-3.2163	.0013
P_Finance	-.2136	.8308
P_Customer	-.2103	.8334
P_Background	-.2619	.7934

Table 7. Mann-Whitney-U Test for European and Asian respondents

Tests of Hypotheses

The hypotheses were tested using correlation analysis. The reason for this choice was that none of these hypotheses has been tested before in previous research. The hitherto unexplored relationships proposed in this study were therefore conceptualized as statements of association between two constructs. The analysis therefore looks at the strength of associations between variables rather than at causal relationships between them (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

A correlation matrix of external and content variables can be found in Table 8. It displays the correlation coefficients for the 50 positive relationships between external and content variables that were hypothesized. The correlation coefficients in the tables indicate the strength and direction of these relationships. A coefficient of around 0.2 was set as the minimum level in order for a hypothesis to be accepted (cf. Miller & Salkind, 2002, p. 388).

Hypotheses 1a to 1e posit a positive relationship between people's trust in Web sources and their likelihood of retrieving content features on corporate websites for work-related (W) or private (P) purposes. Support was found for 1d (customer, W and P), but not for the other eight relationships. Hypothesis 1 is therefore only partially supported.

It was further hypothesized that there is a positive relationship between people's likelihood of visiting websites of high-repute companies and their likelihood of retrieving content from this website (Hypotheses 2a-2e). The data have confirmed that this relationship exists for content features related to public relations (W and P), hiring (W and P), customer (W and P), and company background (P), but not for finance, and company background (W). Therefore, only Hypotheses 2a, 2b, 2d, and 2e_P are accepted. Hypothesis 2 is thus only partially supported by the data.

Hypotheses 3a to 3e predict a positive relationship between people's hedonic use of corporate websites and their likelihood of retrieving content from corporate websites for private and work-related purposes. Support was only found for public relations (W and P), customer (W and P) and company background (W and P). This means that hypotheses 3a, 3d, and 3e are supported, while hypotheses 3b and 3c are not supported. Hypothesis 3 is therefore only partially supported by the data.

Hypotheses 4a to 4e posit a positive relationship between people's utilitarian use of corporate websites and their likelihood of retrieving content from corporate websites for private and work-related purposes. All relationships posited receive adequate support. Strong, positive relationships were found between utility and public relations, hiring, customer and company background. The correlation with finance (both W and P) is weaker than the other correlations, though. Nevertheless, hypothesis 4 is supported.

Hypotheses 5a to 5e posit that people who are generally active online are likely to retrieve content features from corporate websites. Support was only found for 5d (W_Customer, P_Customer), while no support was found for the other four relationships. Thus, Hypothesis 5 is only partially supported.

	M	SD	Z	Trust	Reputation	Hedonism	Utility	Online
P_PR	2.50	.86	-5.456	.160***	.292***	.363***	.399***	.034
W_PR	2.68	.89	p=.000	.161***	.286***	.380***	.342***	-.003
P_Hiring	3.19	1.09	-5.552	.109*	.201***	.097*	.536***	.120**
W_Hiring	2.99	1.08	p=.000	.149***	.234***	.086	.483***	.192***
P_Finance	1.85	.93	-7.060	.107*	.152***	.081	.291***	.140**
W_Finance	2.12	.94	p=.000	.145**	.145**	.041	.310***	.190***
P_Customer	3.34	.91	-.836	.298***	.320***	.305***	.446***	.259***
W_Customer	3.32	.96	p=.403	.241***	.241***	.223***	.452***	.259***
P_Background	2.33	.86	-8.448	.171***	.202***	.205***	.403***	.139**
W_Background	2.64	.88	p=.000	.199***	.198***	.217***	.395***	.115*

* p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001

Table 8. Means, Standard Deviations, and Pearson's Correlations for Content Features

The Role of Demographics

Data for several demographic variables were collected, including age, gender, and education. This section reports findings for correlations between these variables and the five external variables and ten content variables. No significant correlations were found for age or education with trust, reputation, hedonism, utility, and online activity. The highest correlation was .157, which is below the .20 limit set above. Also, a Mann-Whitney-U test found no significant differences between male and female respondents regarding trust, reputation, and hedonism. However, differences between males and females were highly significant for online activity ($Z=-3.482$, $p=.0005$) and significant for utility ($Z=-2.631$, $p=.0085$), with males showing significantly higher frequencies for both variables than women did.

No significant correlations were found between either age or education and the ten content variables. The highest correlations found was .146, which is below the .20 level stipulated above. In a Mann-Whitney-U test, significant differences between the genders were found only for P_Finance ($Z=-4.486$, $p=.0000$) and W_Finance ($Z=-3.756$, $p=.0002$), with male respondents showing significantly more interested in financial information than women did. Differences for the other eight content variables were not significant, which means that gender does not have an influence on people's interests, apart from their interest in corporate financial information.

7. Discussion

This section first summarizes the findings of the above analyses and then discusses their implications, before it goes on to point out limitations and avenues for future research.

Summary of Findings

Research question #1 asked which content features on corporate websites people read most frequently out of work-related and out of private interest. When ranked according to mean frequencies, the highest interest was found for customer-related information (P and W), followed by hiring (P and W), both of which are looked at somewhere between sometimes and often. PR (W and P) and Background (W and P) are somewhere in the middle and are looked at somewhere between rarely and sometimes. The least interest was found for finance (W and P), which is looked at rarely.

Research question #2 focused on website-external factors. In the analysis above, it was tested whether a number of external factors are related to people's likelihood of retrieving particular content features from corporate websites. These external variables were trust in websites, company reputation, hedonism, utility, and online activity. Figure 2 displays the relationships found between the external variables and the five different content variables. The black nodes represent the content variables, while the white nodes represent the five external variables included in the research design. In the relationships between external and content variables, the difference between work-related and private visits to corporate websites is only meaningful in the relationship between company background and reputation, which is only significant for private visits. For all other relationships depicted in Figure 2, correlations were found for both work-related and private visits.

Figure 2. Relationships between External and Content Variables

As Figure 2 further shows, utility is a stronger motivating factor than hedonism. Utility is in fact the only external variable that is connected to all content variables. The fact that hiring information is only connected to utility-driven visits to corporate websites and to company reputation is very plausible. Similarly, financial information is only connected to utility-driven visits to corporate websites. Reputation is also an important external variable, being connected with all content features apart from finance. We can also see that trust in websites and online activities in general only play a role for website content pertaining to customer relations. Information pertaining to customer relations is the only content node in the graph that is connected to all external variables.

Research question #3 addressed the role of demographics in determining people's inclination to visit corporate websites. The demographic variables included in the analysis were region of origin, gender, age, and education. It has turned out that region is a more important demographic variable than age, gender or education. First, European and Asian respondents differ more regarding work-related visits to corporate websites than regarding private visits. Second, cultural backgrounds do not seem to be connected to people's utilitarian use of corporate websites, but have a significant impact on their hedonic use of corporate websites. For example, Asian participants watch animated intros on corporate websites far more often than Europeans do. Similarly, they go to corporate websites to play games or just to look at the site's design, which Europeans do to a far lesser extent.

Implications of Findings

The study has shown that the various content features of a corporate website can be grouped into meaningful factors. Especially the fact that the same factor solution was obtained for work-related and private visits to corporate websites, speaks in favor of their usefulness for other studies. Also, the significant differences found for four of the five pairs of content variables indicate that the distinction between work-related and private visits to corporate websites is a meaningful one for future studies on uses of corporate websites.

The practical implications of the study pertain to the structure and design of corporate websites. One implication for the structure of a corporate website is that customer relations and recruitment information should always be a top-level menu item, if not a front-page item on a corporate website. Another implication emerges from the finding that information crucial for image building, such as company background or CSR information, is looked at rather infrequently and more out of work-related interest than out of private interest. This confirms the premises of corporate auto-communication, since the recipients of information on CSR, sponsorship, or employee diversity do not seem to be external stakeholders. While we can only speculate to what extent internal stakeholders retrieve this information, the findings at least show that external audiences have no interest in this kind of content, which leaves only internal audiences as the main recipients, together with institutional external stakeholders, such as NGOs or socially responsible investors. The challenge for companies thus lies in turning such auto-communicational messages into messages that actually reach external audiences. This suggests that CSR content, for example, should not be accessible only from the top-level menu, but should also be integrated into content on hiring and product information through contextual navigation, as it would otherwise not be seen. Companies may even give more prominence on their front pages to those content categories in which people do not have a prior interest, thereby exposing them to content they would otherwise not choose to see. This could, for example, be CSR content, which has no clearly identifiable target audience. If CSR is a central element of the corporate identity, CSR information is vital for expressing this corporate identity. In that case, CSR content placed on the front page of the corporate website can support image and reputation building. Conversely, front page placement would not make sense for financial content, which is also looked at infrequently. However, financial content is only connected to utilitarian motives but not to any other content category (see Figure 2). Financial content, therefore, has a clearly identifiable target audience who retrieves this content to accomplish a particular task, but is not necessarily interested in viewing other company information.

Although design considerations were not the focus of this study, design is captured in the external variable "Hedonism" through interest in visual design, animated intros, and games. All of these variables characterize the playfulness of a corporate website. Playfulness seems to be an important factor only when designing websites for audiences in Asia. The development of online games or animated intros for corporate websites in Europe does not seem to be worth the while, given that the European sample has indicated little to no interest in these features. While they may not appeal to adults in Europe, games on corporate websites – also referred to as *advergames* – may well appeal to a much younger audience. In fact, children spend most of their time online playing games (Moore & Rideout, 2007) and may be drawn to corporate websites solely because of these games. However, when *advergames* are specifically targeted at children, they clearly raise serious ethical concerns given the highly engaging nature of the brand messages embedded in these games (Mallinckrodt & Mizerski, 2007). The development of games for corporate websites therefore makes only sense if the games meaningfully complement the corporate brand or product brands with a view to aligning the corporate website with all other expressions of the brand. As regards the development of animated intros, the study has shown that they are of lower popularity in Europe than in Asia. Animated flash

intros have been deemed a "web design error" (Cappel & Huang, 2007) due to their lack of usability. The results indicate that this view may well hold true in Europe, yet not necessarily in Asia. Overall, the findings suggest that cross-cultural differences are more pronounced in design preferences than in content or structural aspects.

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

This study has four limitations. One limitation is the nature of the data collected. Self-reported information on frequencies may be distorted by the respondents' subjective interpretations of actual frequencies, and these interpretations may also be affected by different cultural backgrounds. To some extent, frequencies also assume cognitive consistency and purposive planning in website use. The fact that people are exposed to various content features while searching for specific content cannot be accounted for in a survey of self-reported frequencies. More experimental research is therefore needed to study people's information consumption on corporate websites.

Another limitation of this study is that the majority of respondents were from either Austria or Singapore. Thus, the findings are based on a study of two nations. Therefore, generalizations to European or Asian Web users in general are not possible, even though the two sub-samples include respondents from several countries each.

In addition, the fact that more than half of the respondents in both sub-samples were students might limit the generalizability of their results to a broader population. At the same time, however, previous research has shown that student samples certainly have characteristics in common with the general population (Dabholkar & Bagozzi, 2002; Pires et al., 2004; Ko et al., 2005). It has also been argued that student samples are actually more representative of Web users than random samples from the general population (Gallagher et al., 2001b). Given that the study is not based on a sample consisting solely of students, this is not considered a major limitation.

Ultimately, space did not permit to look at all relationships that could have been studied. Especially, the role of demographics within the two sub-samples could be explored in more detail. Also, qualitative research is needed to find explanations for the differences found between respondents from Asia and respondents from Europe, as the exploratory research design for this study is not capable of providing explanations for the differences found.

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