Creating Web Experiences for a Global, Multi-Cultural Audience

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Hi There, I'm Tiffany! Your UX and Tech Mentor.

As a UX & Technology leader specializing in website and app development within large organizations, I've created this resource from the valuable lessons I've learned. Dive in and make the most of it!

In today's interconnected world, the power of the web transcends borders, making it imperative for designers to forge experiences that resonate across diverse cultural landscapes. This necessity often highlights a critical gap in traditional design practices dominated by a WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) perspective, which may alienate vast segments of a global audience. This guide illuminates the path toward creating more inclusive and universally engaging web experiences.

Embracing cultural differences is not just about expanding market reach; it's about crafting web interactions that respect and reflect the diverse worldviews of users worldwide. By delving into cross-cultural research and adapting design practices, we lay the groundwork for web experiences that are genuinely inclusive. This comprehensive guide offers insights and actionable strategies for designers, content creators, developers, and strategists committed to making the web a more inclusive space.

Within these pages, you will find two pivotal sections: Cross-Cultural Research Considerations and Cross-Cultural Design Considerations. Each section is designed to guide you through the essential processes of integrating cultural awareness into your work—from tapping into low-cost research sources and recruiting local experts to adjusting your visual and textual content for broader cultural relevancy. This guide is your first step towards transforming standard web designs into rich, culturally-adaptive experiences that appeal to and engage users from all corners of the globe.

This resource serves as both a primer for those new to culturally-conscious design and a detailed manual for seasoned professionals aiming to refine their craft. By the end, you'll be equipped not only with the knowledge but also the practical tools needed to challenge personal biases and reframe user personas to better meet the needs of a diverse global audience. Welcome to the future of web design—broad, inclusive, and resonant across cultures.

Warm regards,

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01:
Explore Common Cultural Differences

To create culturally relevant web experiences, it's important to understand the digital habits and behaviors of the target audience. This may include researching their preferred devices and platforms, browsing and purchasing behaviors, and attitudes towards technology. By understanding these differences, designers can create web experiences that align with the cultural norms and preferences of the target audience.

Each culture possesses unique mindsets, behaviors, and digital technology access and usage patterns. It's crucial to understand these differences when designing for diverse audiences.

Digital Usage

Access to modern technologies, the internet, and smartphone ownership varies widely across cultures and regions. This discrepancy, known as the "Digital Divide," underscores the importance of exploring digital usage in your target culture. To learn more about digital usage by region, consider:

- Access to modern technologies: Research the availability of devices like smartphones, laptops, and tablets, as well as internet connectivity, in different regions or cultures.
- Internet usage statistics: Look for data on internet penetration rates, frequency of internet use, and popular online activities in your target region.
- Mobile technology adoption: Explore the prevalence of mobile devices and mobile internet usage, as well as the use of mobile apps and services.

Digital Preferences

Cultural differences also influence how people use the internet for communication, research, social interactions, shopping, and financial transactions. Examples of digital preferences by culture include:

- Communication: Some cultures prefer face-to-face or voice communication over written communication, while others may prefer text-based communication.

- Research: Cultural attitudes towards information seeking and research methods can vary, influencing how people search for and consume information online.
- Social interactions: Social media usage and etiquette can differ significantly between cultures, impacting how people connect and interact online.
- Shopping: Cultural norms around shopping behavior, such as preferences for online vs. offline shopping and attitudes towards online payments, can vary.
- Financial transactions: Trust in online payment systems, perceptions of security, and preferred methods of online transactions can differ between cultures.

Mindsets & Behaviors

While individuals across regions or cultures may exhibit common characteristics, significant differences within the region or culture can exist in terms of mindset, personal identity, self-perception, behavior, and social relationships. To navigate these complexities, it is essential to start by examining Geert Hofstede's research on cultural dimensions from the 1970s.

Hofstede's research provides a framework for understanding cultural diversity by identifying dimensions based on data from over 100,000 individuals across 50 countries.

These dimensions help highlight variances across cultures:

- **Power Distance:** Reflects the degree of inequality that is acceptable in a society.
- **Individualism vs. Collectivism:** Describes the extent to which individuals prioritize themselves over the group.
- **Masculinity vs. Femininity:** Examines societal expectations regarding gender roles and behaviors.
- **Uncertainty Avoidance:** Reflects the level of discomfort individuals feel in uncertain or unknown situations.
- **Long-term vs. Short-term Orientation:** Describes the focus on future rewards versus immediate gratification.
- **Indulgence vs. Restraint:** Reflects the extent to which individuals allow themselves to enjoy life's pleasures.

In addition to these dimensions, understanding identity classifications and historical dynamics within a region is crucial when studying cultural differences:

- **Identity Classifications:** Cultural identity classifications such as race, ethnicity, gender, social class, age, religion, and individual identity play a significant role in shaping perceptions. For example, a businesswoman in the Western world may perceive herself differently from a businesswoman in regions where gender inequality is more pronounced. Additionally, there are intersectionalities across these categories, adding complexity to cultural identities.
- **Historical & Political Dynamics:** Many countries have histories of oppression and discrimination that influence cultural mindsets, behaviors, and social relationships. Understanding these dynamics is essential to comprehensively grasp cultural differences.

By exploring these aspects, you can gain deeper insights into the nuances within and across cultures.

TAKE ACTION

Conduct thorough research on digital usage and preferences in your target culture or region. Look for reliable sources such as government reports, academic studies, and industry publications to gain a comprehensive understanding. Discuss your findings with your team to inform your design decisions effectively.

02:
Tap into Low-Cost Research Sources

Conducting research can be expensive, but there are many low-cost research sources that can provide valuable insights into the target audience. These may include online surveys, social media monitoring, and web analytics. By tapping into these sources, designers can gather data and insights that inform their design decisions.

Direct observation is the quickest way to arm yourself with information about your target audience. But travel can be expensive, time-consuming, and impossible with COVID restrictions. Here are low cost tactics to get solid cultural insights:

- Read literature and poetry from your target culture. Old and new.
- Check local colleges for lectures, performances and events.
- Consume media. Newspapers, radio stations, podcasts, movies, TV.
- Visit cultural centers within your own city if available.
- Visit ethnic neighborhoods where target culture lives.

03:
Recruit Local Experts

Local experts can provide invaluable insights into the cultural nuances and preferences of the target audience. These may include cultural consultants, translators, and local marketing teams. By working with local experts, designers can ensure that their web experiences are culturally sensitive and relevant to the target audience.

Now, let's delve into the importance of recruiting local experts for projects targeting specific cultures or regions. There are three compelling reasons to find and engage local experts:

1. **On-the-Ground Experience:** Local experts offer invaluable, firsthand experience in the culture you're targeting. Their insights can uncover perspectives you might have never considered, challenging your team to think more broadly.
2. **Enhanced Study Facilitation:** Utilizing local researchers to conduct studies can significantly enhance their effectiveness. Participants tend to be more comfortable, vocalize concerns more honestly, and engage in more natural interactions, especially in markets where slang is prevalent.
3. **Access to a Creative Community:** Local experts are often part of a larger creative community. Tapping into this network provides you with access to a culturally-relevant pool of professionals who can contribute to your project.

With this in mind, here are some ideas for finding local experts:
1. Look for culture-specific design publications on sites like ResearchGate: These publications often feature articles and case studies that provide deep insights into local design trends and practices.
2. Sign up for regionally focused newsletters about creative and technology-related news: These newsletters can help you stay updated on industry trends, events, and opportunities specific to the region you're targeting.
3. Search for relevant designers on portfolio sites like Behance: Reviewing designers' portfolios can give you a sense of their style, expertise, and experience, helping you identify potential collaborators.
4. Ask stakeholders for referrals and introductions: Engaging with stakeholders who are familiar with the local creative scene can lead to valuable connections and recommendations.

5. Use LinkedIn to connect with researchers: LinkedIn offers a professional networking platform where you can connect with researchers who specialize in the region or culture you're interested in.
6. Engage with the local creative community: Participating in local creative events, workshops, and meetups can help you build relationships with local experts and gain a deeper understanding of the cultural context.
7.

In conclusion, while recruiting local experts may present some challenges, the benefits far outweigh the effort. Their insights, facilitation skills, and access to a creative community can greatly enhance your project's success.

TAKE ACTION

Your action item is to conduct quick research on local experts in the regions you are working in, using the ideas we have shared

04:
Use Creative Research Techniques

Traditional research methods may not always be effective for understanding the cultural nuances of the target audience. Designers can get creative with their research techniques by using methods such as ethnographic research, cultural probes, and contextual inquiry. These methods can provide deeper insights into the target audience's cultural norms, beliefs, and behaviors, which can inform more effective web design decisions.

When working with cultures, differences in language, mindsets, and approaches can create barriers and cause the traditional research process to fall apart. Get creative with your research efforts. Consider the following techniques shared in the book Cross-Cultural Design:

Cultural probes
Ask research participants to complete activities which will provide you with insight into their culture. Provide them with a kit and let them complete the exercises independently. The instructions might ask them to do things like fill out a diary or draw pictures or share photographs.

Bollywood technique
Provide participants with a story prompt. Ask them to use their imagination to fill in the details. This gives them permission to think outside their usual norms.

Walking Havana method
Ask participants with help for creating a movie or some other creative work. Have them walk you through their environments, pointing out potential locations or even scouting folks for the movie. Participants put together their own scripts or creative works. This provides rich insight into the culture itself.

Possession personas

Possessions can be a manifestation of a persons identity. Ask participants about their possessions, especially related to the project topic. Ask about any adaptations they have made and why. Ask how they define the person.

05:
Develop Culturally-Relevant Personas

Customer personas are fictional representations of the target audience and are used to guide web design decisions. When designing for multi-cultural audiences, it's important to adjust customer personas to reflect the cultural differences and preferences of the target audience. This may include factors such as age, gender, education level, income, and cultural background. By adjusting customer personas, designers can create web experiences that are more relevant and resonant with the target audience.

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06:
Challenge Personal Bias

Personal bias can unknowingly influence web design decisions, leading to experiences that are unintentionally exclusionary or insensitive. To create culturally relevant web experiences, designers must challenge their own personal biases and assumptions by conducting research, seeking out diverse perspectives, and being open to feedback. By challenging personal bias, designers can create web experiences that are more inclusive, respectful, and effective for the target audience.

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Key takeaway(s):
- Don't be *WEIRD (western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic). Ask Yourself. Am I being WEIRD?*
- Constantly challenge your assumptions.
- Encourage others to do so also.

07:
Color

Different cultures may associate different meanings with colors, so it's important to choose colors that are culturally appropriate and meaningful. For example, red may be associated with luck and prosperity in China, but it may be associated with danger or warning in other cultures.

Study how color psychology and preferences differ across target cultures or regions to avoid negative associations and promote positive connections.

08:
Typography & Formatting

Typography can also vary across cultures, so it's important to choose fonts that are legible and appropriate for the target audience. For example, some cultures may prefer more ornate or decorative fonts, while others may prefer more simple and straightforward typography. Also consider designs may look different due to text expansion factors, visual density factors, and web font availability. Select typography with all cultures and regions in mind. Consider how typography and formatting may need to be adjusted for each situation.

Stereotypography
Fonts can sometimes perpetuate inaccurate and troublesome stereotypes. For instance, using tribal looking fonts for African-African American focused marketing or fonts like Madarin Regular to represent the Asian culture can alienate the very people that you want to attract.

Webfonts
Google Fonts are a great way to add style without compromising website speed, SEO and accessibility, but they have a downside. They are blocked in mainland China. Understand what content blocks exist in the countries that you are designing for and have a fallback font. You may also consider using special region-specific webfonts.

Multiple script systems
Different types of scripts have different shapes, weights, and contrast implications. Spend time upfront considering multiple script types in your designs. Minor tweaks to attributes like line height, font-size, and letter spacing can often avoid visual weirdness down the line.

Visual density
CJK (Chinese, Japanese, Korean) alphabets have more complex characters and shapes than *Latin* (English, French, Italian, etc.) letter forms. Because of this, they have a higher visual density. You may need to do some extra work to make sure that the fonts are slightly larger and the line heights have more space or breathing room.

Text expansion factors
Text expansion or language swell can and will happen. Some languages require more characters and longer text strings than others. Account for this extra text in designs. Pay special attention to microcopy, calls to action, and menus, which are more prone to failure in the face of expanded

text. To estimate swell in different languages, use an expansion-factor table, like the one provided by Salesforce. [1]

Formatting

For each region or language, ask if the following needs to be adjusted:

- Names – Name order, Name Letters and Length
- Locales – Postal codes, Formatting addresses, State / region/ provinces
- Dates – Swap days and months
- Currency – Inauspicious numbers, Currency presentation, Multi-currency / Exchange rates, Tax / Value-Added Tax (VAT)

Directionality

Consider how text directionality might require you to make adjustments to your design. When a user's reading from left to right (LTR) rather than right to left (RTL), you may want to adjust the placement of images and scannable elements.

09:
Images, Illustrations, and Icons

When choosing images, illustrations, and icons for a multi-cultural website, it's important to consider whether they are culturally appropriate and sensitive. Certain images or symbols may have different meanings or connotations across different cultures, so it's important to do research and choose visuals that are inclusive and respectful.

Within a singular culture, icons, images, and illustrations can be challenging to select because people interpret what they mean using their own personal filter and cultural lens. Conduct research to uncover issues and use globally accepted icons to avoid confusion.

Select universally understood icons
Icons have become highly commoditized and it is common for teams to use pre-designed icon kits. The challenge is that those kits don't always consider cross-cultural needs. To avoid this: (1) Use good ethnographic research to identify and eliminate icons that are culturally confusing or dangerous. (2) consider leveraging the icons published by the United Nations's Noun Project. It includes 295 humanitarian icons that have become a globally accepted design language for a wide-variety of humanitarian concepts.

Avoid stock photos
Target cultures prefer to see images that reflect their identity and cultural norms. Where possible, avoid western-focused stock photography. Stock photos are difficult to get right normally, but accounting for cultural diversity makes it even more challenging. Most stock photos have WEIRD people in WEIRD situations (western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic). It's best to get your own pictures, but if you have to use stock photos, try a library like Tonl. [5]

Notice cultural markers
Cultural dimensions (like individualism vs. collectivism or uncertainty avoidance) should inform which images might work best. Don't pick images that go against the audiences cultural norms.

Offer relevant versions
Switch images based on location and regions. Users prefer to see faces, images, and other content that visually reflects their identity. Also, pay attention to variances within a region. For instance, even within countries there can be variations in skin color (lighter hues vs. darker hues) and ethnicity. Be sure to match the variations of the market you are serving.

Beware of historical cues

Do research to understand the history, pivotal events, and cultural movements that have shaped the country. That way, you don't unintentionally run into challenges. For example, nostalgic photos of America often represent traditional families in quiet neighborhoods with manicured lawns, This may appeal to white, heterosexual, middle-and upper class members of the Baby Boomer generation. The same era, however as a dark, negative connotation for marginalized groups. ****

10:
Translations

Accurate translations are crucial for creating a successful multi-cultural website. It's important to work with professional translators who are fluent in the target language and have a deep understanding of the cultural nuances and idioms that may be unique to the culture.

Translations are important. In fact, more than 1/3 of all internet users are non-native English speakers. And these visitors stay for twice as long if the site is in their native language. [1] The mistake that many companies make is to treat translations as an afterthought. Or, they skip it all together because of the hassle and expense. Here are some considerations to ensure effective translations for your web experiences:

1. **Plan for translations.** Ensure that translations are a part of your project plan and budget from the beginning. Consider all costs including: technology costs- development, CMS, plugins, and software. Also, consider the additional time, coordination involved with translating and testing translated content.
2. **Don't forget about the nuances of second language speakers.** Often there is a mismatch between languages that the internet users and what people actual speak. They may be reading an alternative language on your site because that is all that you have available. The key is to focus on providing clear language, structured content, and prompts to help users as they navigate the largely English-speaking web.
3. **Remember: language does not equate to nationality**—millions of Spanish speakers live throughout the Americas, West Africa, and Europe, for example.
4. **Consider translating text *and* other forms of media**, like images and video.
5. **When possible, use human translation services.** Machine translation (like Google Translate) is easy and inexpensive, but it is: (a) not the most exact (b) cannot match brand tone and personality (3) does not consider the total experience.

11: Localization

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Localization involves adapting the website to the specific culture and language of the target audience. This may include changes to the website's layout, design, and content to better align with the cultural norms and preferences of the audience. It's important to work with local experts and conduct research to ensure that the website is culturally appropriate and relevant.

Create a localization kit to guide your project team and help them understand what areas to focus on. Your localization kit can include:

- A list of languages to be translated. This should include regional specifications as well—the Portuguese spoken in Brazil is different than that in São Tomé and Príncipe.
- Descriptions of your audience, their particular needs, and how to write for them. For example, [USA.gov](USA.gov), the official portal for all things American government, offers guidance on the appropriate voice and tone for government websites (FIG 6.12). This kind of style guide would be great to provide as part of your translation toolkit.
- A sitemap listing all pages and content that need to be translated.
- Any existing *translation memory*, a database that allows translation teams to store and reuse phrases and words that have been previously translated.
- A detailed description of your timeline. Translators will be able to turn around anywhere from 1,500 to 2,500 words a day, so plan accordingly.
- Information on your tech stack, including what your site is built on, and login details for the content management system

12: Internationalization

So far, we have been discussing **localization** techniques to adapt products to accommodate the language and cultural requirements of a particular region. But, internationalization should also be a consideration. **Internationalization** involves planning and developing products that can be adapted to multiple languages (i.e. ensuring there is no hard coded text)

Use the Internationalization checker to ensure that your website doesn't contain cultural-specific attributes: W3C Internationalization Checker.