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How can Spanish toy manufacturers achieve intercultural competence in English? A contrastive study of Spanish and U.S. business websites

¿Cómo pueden alcanzar una competencia intercultural en inglés los fabricantes españoles de juguetes? Un estudio contrastivo de sitios web comerciales españoles y estadounidenses

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Abstract: The general purpose of this paper is to study the way in which context dependence (Hall 1976) and the individualism index (Hofstede 1991) influence the communicative strategies used by U.S. and Spanish toy manufacturers to express information and to establish a social relationship with the consumer in their business websites. Consequently, we will try to achieve two specific aims: (a) to analyze how the cultural orientations held by Spaniards and North Americans towards both cultural dimensions are reflected in the communication strategies used in their business websites to describe and promote the product and (b) to determine what kind of communicative strategies should be considered appropriate to improve the intercultural competence of Spanish translators, in English, when designing and translating web sites targeting the U.S. market.

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Key words: intercultural communication; cultural dimensions; business websites; communicative strategies.

Resumen: La meta general de este estudio consiste en examinar el modo en que la dependencia contextual (Hall 1976) y el índice de individualismo (Hofstede 1991) influyen en las estrategias comunicativas que emplean empresarios jugueteros españoles y estadounidenses para expresar la información y establecer una relación social con el consumidor en sus páginas web de negocios. Por lo tanto, intentaremos alcanzar dos objetivos concretos: (a) analizar el modo en que las orientaciones culturales con que españoles y estadounidenses responden a dichas dimensiones culturales se reflejan en las estrategias de comunicación con que describen y promocionan el producto en sus webs de negocios y (b) determinar qué tipo de estrategias comunicativas se deben poner en práctica para mejorar la competencia intercultural en inglés de los traductores españoles en el diseño y traducción de páginas web de negocios destinadas al mercado estadounidense.

Palabras clave: comunicación intercultural; dimensiones culturales; páginas web de negocios; estrategias de comunicación.

1. INTRODUCTION

From an intercultural point of view the concept of *culture* is understood in the sense of «a shared system of attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviour» (Gibson 2000, 7). This definition refers to the way a particular group of people is trained from a very early age to internalise the behaviour and attitudes of the group.

These patterns of thinking that we have internalised since our childhood make up our *cultural frame*, which can be defined as «the perceptual lens through which an individual filters the information provided by our physical senses and comes to grips with the world» (Guillén 2005, 99). Our physical senses provide us with information and we can make meaningful sense of it all only by passing new information through the selective filters derived from our cultural beliefs, attitudes and values embedded in our cultural frame (Walker, Walker and Schmitz 2003, 206).

In this study we will particularly focus on two cultural dimensions: (a) *context dependence* and (b) *the individualism index*. The former was designed by the North American anthropologist and pioneer in the studies of intercultural communication Edward T. Hall (1976). The latter was proposed by the well-known Dutch psychologist and anthropologist Geert Hofstede (1991).

The cultural dimension of *context* relates to the way individuals from different societies communicate in their daily lives. As such, to communicate effectively across cultures the correct level of context has to be found. According to Hall (1976, 91), this cultural dimension can be labeled as high or low on a sliding scale.

In *high-context* cultures much of the information to function in a group is intrinsically known, and there is little information that is transmitted as a part of the message. In

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these cultures people use more symbols and non-verbal strategies to communicate and most of the meanings are embedded in the situational context. On the contrary, in *low-context* cultures people communicate in a rational, verbal, and explicit way to communicate concrete meanings through rationality and language.

In relation to the level of context dependence that Spanish and U.S. people use to communicate, the observations made by Hall reveal that Spain can be considered a moderately high-context culture whereas the USA is regarded as a low-context culture.

The *individualism* cultural dimension is closely related to the concept of the *self*, namely the way individuals from a particular culture define their own identity and their relationship with other people. Hofstede (1991, 51) describes this world dimension as a *continuum* along which two main cultural orientations can be followed by individuals: (a) *individualism* and (b) *collectivism*:

In *individualist* societies people value self-reliance, achievement, independence and freedom. However, in *collectivist* societies individuals are connected with strong societal bounds and there is emphasis on group decision-making and conformity.

On a scale that ranges from a low to a high level of individualism (0 is the most collectivist society and 100 is the most individualistic one) the overall results obtained in Hofstede's research indicate that Spain scores 51 points on the index of individualist values whereas the United States can be considered a highly individualist culture with a score of 91 points. These scores advise us that Spaniards are more oriented towards collectivist cultural orientations whereas North Americans are more concerned with individualistic values when defining the concept of the *self*.

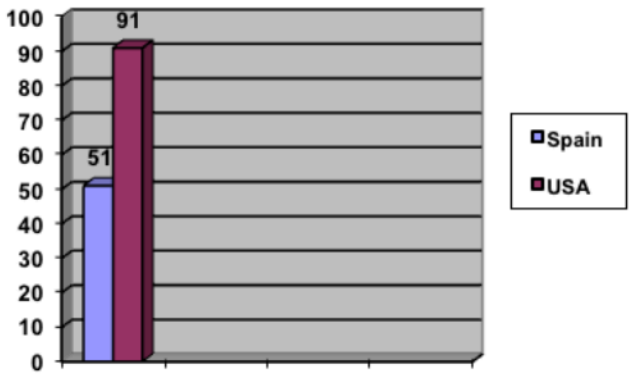

Figure 1. Spain and U.S. scores on the individualism index *(cf. Hofstede 1991, 53)*

Both context dependence or the individualism index and the role they play in the way people from different societies communicate and interact with each other have allowed linguists to study more in depth their influence on language for specific purposes. This is the case of advertising language from an intercultural perspective (Mueller 1987;

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Zandpour *et al.* 1994; Caillat and Mueller 1996; Albers-Miller and Gelb 1996; De Mooij 1998; Cho *et al*. 1999). In addition, there are numerous research papers which examine the impact of these cultural dimensions in the intercultural communication that takes place in digital texts like business websites.

Studies like those carried out by Marcus and Gould 2000; Simon 2001; or Würtz 2005 have focused on analyzing the effect of these cultural dimensions in the different linguistic elements that appear on the interface of business websites from different societies. Nevertheless, in our opinion these studies lack a deeper analysis and specific account of the influence of cultural values on the linguistic content that is displayed in each of the different sections that shape the structure of business websites.

More specific are the studies by Singh and Baack 2004; Singh and Matsuo 2004; or Singh, Zhao and Hu 2003. In their research, they propose a list of the most important web features that appear most frequently in business web pages and try to correlate each one with the cultural dimensions identified by Hall (1976) and Hofstede (1991). Regarding *context dependence* and the *individualism index*, we have decided to select for our analysis those web features which are most closely related to the description of the product(s). These are shown in Figure 2 below:

Context Dependence

High-context culture:
- Soft-sell approach: Use of affective and subjective impressions of intangible aspects of a product.
- Attention to aesthetic details: Emphasis on image and context.

Low-context culture:
- Hard-sell approach: Full description of the product and incorporation of aggressive promotions, discounts, coupons, as well as emphasis on product advantages using explicit comparison.

Individualism Index

Collectivist culture:
- Family theme: Pictures and themes based on social relationships like friends or family connections.

Individualist culture:
- Independence theme: Images and themes depicting self-reliance, self-recognition and achievement.
- Product uniqueness: Unique selling points of the product and product differentiation features.
- Personalization: Gift recommendations, individual acknowledgements and web page personalization.

Figure 2. Web features and their correlation with contextual *and* individualistic *cultural values (*cf. *Singh and Baack 2004; Singh and Matsuo 2004; Singh, Zhao and Hu 2003)*

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2. METHODOLOGY

In this study, four methodological steps have been followed: (a) a review of previous studies aimed at examining the cultural influence of both context dependence and the individualism index on the language of business and advertising from an intercultural perspective, especially in the language of business websites; (b) a selection of 100 business websites (50 from Spanish companies and 50 from U.S. companies) from the toy industry, which is presently one of the leading sectors in export activities; (c) a quantitative analysis, expressed in terms of percentages, to measure the degree of contextual or individualistic web features displayed in each of the websites selected for the analysis; and (d) interpretation of results and final conclusions.

3. OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESES

Through this research we wish to achieve two specific aims: (a) to analyze how the cultural orientations held by Spain and the USA in terms of context dependence and the *individualism index* may be reflected in the communication strategies used in their business websites to convey information and establish a social relationship with the consumer when describing and promoting the product and (b) to determine the appropriate communicative strategies to improve the intercultural competence of Spanish translators, in English, when designing and translating websites targeted for the U.S. market.

After examining the cultural orientations that Spaniards and North Americans hold towards these two world dimensions, the following hypotheses are raised:

In relation to *context dependence* it is expected that:

(a) Spanish business websites will tend to incorporate a higher level of contextual communicative strategies whereas U.S. business websites will commonly reflect more verbal communication strategies when providing information about the products they make.

Regarding the *individualism* index it is hypothesized that:

(b) Spanish business websites will tend to have a predominance of collectivist communicative strategies while U.S. business websites will commonly incorporate a higher level of individualistic communicative strategies when informing about their products. In the next section we describe the results obtained from our study.

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4. RESULTS

On the one hand, the results show that Spanish websites, as compared to U.S. websites, use high-context communication strategies more frequently in order to convey information about their products. This difference is very significant in that they use the soft-sell approach (Spain: 88% vs. USA: 2%) and pay greater attention to aesthetic details (Spain: 80% vs. USA: 20%).

On the other hand, U.S. business websites, in comparison with their Spanish counterparts, use a higher degree of low-context communicative strategies, which is also very significant in that they use the hard-sell approach (USA: 54% vs. Spain: 4%). Thus, hypothesis (a) is supported.

As far as the individualism cultural dimension is concerned, important differences were also found. In the Spanish business websites there is a greater tendency to include collectivist web features than in the U.S. web pages, such as relationships themes (Spain: 90% vs. USA: 16%).

On the contrary, in the U.S. business websites there is a predominance of individualistic web features: the independence theme (USA: 84% vs. Spain: 6%), product uniqueness (USA: 88% vs. Spain: 8%) and personalization web features (USA: 86% vs. Spain: 8%). Consequently, hypothesis (b) is also supported. The findings obtained are discussed in more detail in the next section.

5. DISCUSSION

From the results shown above it seems clear that there are important differences in the way Spanish and U.S. toy manufacturers convey information and establish a social relationship with the consumer when describing the product in their business websites. Let us discuss these findings in the following subsections.

5.1. *The soft-sell approach*

Advertisements in high-context cultures tend to have a soft and more emotional appeal, that is, advertising tends to be more suggestive than direct. Emotions, sentiments and expressiveness are emphasized over direct appeals (Mueller 1987, 54; Cho *et al.* 1999, 68-69). In these cultures the product is described and promoted by incorporating implicit communication strategies like expressive and figurative language, as well as affective and subjective themes that imply a close relationship with the consumer (Mueller 1987, 54; Cho *et al.* 1999, 68-69; Singh, Zhao and Hu 2003, 139; Singh and Matsuo 2004, 869).

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With reference to the Spanish business websites analyzed in this study, the soft-sell approach is reflected in the use of expressive language and rhetorical figures along with affective communication strategies that convey more information on relationship building with the consumer rather than describe the product explicitly. These kinds of linguistic strategies can be observed in the Spanish business website depicted below:

Example 1. Spanish business website. Expressiveness and affective themes in the description of the product. (http://www.cayro.es/vivir-jugando.php)[1]

In order to describe the product branding the Spanish toy company (Ex. 1) uses affective communication strategies that convey a social interaction with the consumer, e.g. «En X[2] estamos muy muy cerca de esa gente que nunca ha dejado de jugar. Estamos con la gente que empezó a jugar de niño, le gustó y decidió no dejar de hacerlo [...], [...] Trabajamos para que encuentres entre nuestros productos el juego con que tanto te divertías cuando eras niña y lo compartas ahora con tus hijos [...]»[3].

The expresiveness in the language used may also be shown in the poetic style when describing the product. This is the case of the constant repetition of words and syntactic structures, e.g. «Jugar no siempre consiste en tumbarte en el suelo y lanzar un dado. Jugar es una actitud ante la vida [...], [...] Jugar es hacer de tu trabajo algo divertido [...], [...] Esta actitud convierte a la gente en optimista, y la gente optimista hace un mundo mejor. Hay personas que viven y hay personas que juegan a vivir»[4].

5.2. Attention to aesthetic details

The implicitness by means of which individuals from high-context cultures convey their messages is also shown in a predominance of non-verbal linguistic aspects over verbal ones (Mueller 1987, 54; Mooij 1998, 33; Cho *et al*. 1999, 65).

1. The visualization of websites and references made to individuals has been omitted for reasons of data protection rights. All the business websites appearing in this paper were accessed on December 20, 2014.
2. The letter X has been used throughout the study to avoid mentioning the name of the company.
3. English version taken from the Spanish website: «At X we understand those who have never stopped playing. We relate to those people who played as children, they liked it and decided to never stop [...]. We work to make sure you find a game among our products with which to have as much fun with as when you were a child and to share now with your children [...]». Accessed December 20, 2014. http://www.cayro.es/en/vivir-jugando.php.
4. English version taken from the Spanish website: «Playing doesn't always mean sitting on the floor and throwing dice. Playing is an attitude to life [...]. To play is to make your work fun [...]. This attitude turns people into optimists, and optimists make the world a better place. There are people that live and people who play the game of life:». Accessed December 20, 2014. http://www.cayro.es/en/vivir-jugando.php.

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More than half of the Spanish business websites examined in this study provide very little verbal information about their toys. On the contrary, they tend to incorporate non-verbal language, like images or animated effects to describe their products, as can be observed in the next example of a Spanish business website:

Example 2. Spanish business website. Incorporation of more images than text to describe the product.

(http://www.berjuan.com/berjuan/app/productos/productos.asp?idioma=es&cat=12&subcat=53)

5.3. *The hard-sell approach*

Individuals from low-context cultures communicate directly, explicitly and even express confrontational arguments with other interlocutors (Hall 1976, 91). Consequently, the use of direct and confrontational appeals in the form of advertising, aggressive sales promotion and hard-selling is very common in these cultures (Mueller 1987, 55; Lin 2001, 90). As for the U.S. business websites analyzed in this research, the hard-sell approach seems to be reflected in the following communication strategies: (a) full description of the product by means of explicit and verbal language; (b) product advantages using explicit comparisons; and (c) special discounts and offers.

5.3.1. Full description of the product by means of explicit and verbal language

People belonging to societies with a low level of context dependence appreciate the clarity and explicitness in the transmission of information. Therefore, advertising in these cultures tends to be primarily informational in nature, that is, a special emphasis is placed on describing the main characteristics of the product, the materials used in the manufacturing, the function or the effectiveness that it has for the consumer (Mueller 1987, 55; Zandpour *et al.* 1994, 38-39; Cho *et al.* 1999, 68-69; Lin 2001, 90). The following example of a U.S. business website illustrates this aspect:

Example 3. U.S. business website. Explicit information in the description of the product.

(http://www.fisher-price.com/en_US/brands/babytoys/products/3-in-1-Bounce-Stride-and-Ride-Elephant)

The company (Ex. 3) provides full information about the toy by means of explicit language. We can notice how information about the function of the product is offered in this example: «The elephant's big, soft ears move as baby moves—and the wobbly

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bumblebee, bat-at rollerball with rattle-bead sounds and two light-up buttons add even more fun and excitement!», the different parts that come with the toy, e.g. «Three «grow-with-me» ways to play: Sit & Bounce; Stand & Walk; Scoot & Ride! Over 30 sung songs, tunes, fun sounds and phrases Colorful light-up, buttons, wobbly-action bumblebee. Bat-at rollerball with rattle bead sounds […]», and the text also gives us information on the retail price, the recommended age, an instruction sheet, awards received, and so forth.

5.3.2. Product advantages using explicit comparison

A direct communication style and even the explicit contrast with products offered by competitors is very common in cultures with a low level of context dependence. This is why advertisements in these cultures contain verbal communication strategies that express rational arguments to convince the consumer that their products are better (Mueller 1987, 54; Cho *et al*. 1999, 65-68; Singh, Zhao and Hu 2003, 139-141; Singh and Matsuo 2004, 869), as can be seen in the U.S. business website mentioned below:

Example 4. U.S. business website. Product advantages of the product using explicit comparison.

(http://www.stuffingtonbear.com/why-stuffington-the-teddy-bear-company.asp)

The toy firm (Ex. 4) offers on its website a section to convince consumers that their products are the best in the market. To achieve this goal, the company appeals to rational arguments to persuade consumers to finally buy the product, e.g. «You may have noticed our depth and breadth is unlike most any other teddy bear or stuffed animal selection».

5.3.3. Special discounts and offers

In low-context cultures advertisements tend to incorporate special offers and discounts on the products manufactured by the firm, which is a good reflection of the hard-sell approach used in these cultures to describe and promote the product (Singh, Zhao and Hu 2003, 139; Singh and Matsuo 2004, 870; Singh and Pereira 2004, 147), as we perceive in this example of a U.S. business website:

Example 5. U.S. business website. Incorporation of offers and special discounts. (www.realgoodtoys.com)

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5.4. *The relationship theme*

In collectivist cultures people value group obligations, family security, and family ties (Han and Shavitt 1994, 10). People belonging to societies with a tendency towards collectivist cultural values conceive their identity in relation to their immediate and extended family, and also to close friends, work colleagues, and business partners.

After analyzing the Spanish business websites selected for our study, the relationship theme was found to be reflected in the following non-verbal and verbal communicative strategies: (a) depiction of images of family and friends along with the product and (b) incorporation of family and relationship themes when providing information about the products.

5.4.1. Depiction of images of family and friends along with the product

Pictures showing family enjoyment, togetherness, friendship, and family events together with the product can communicate the importance of family relationships in collectivist societies (Singh, Zhao and Hu 2003, 137-139; Singh and Matsuo 2004, 866-869; Würtz 2005, 19). Unlike the U.S. business websites, in more than half of the Spanish business web pages selected for this study images depicting children with their parents as well as groups of children making use of the product are frequently found, as we can see in the next two examples of Spanish websites:

Example 6. Spanish business website. Images showing friendship and family relationships together with the product. (http://www.cayro.es/vivir-jugando.php#mundo)

Example 7. Spanish business website. An example of a TV spot in which an image based on friendship in relation with the product is shown. (https://www.youtube.com/user/JuguetesBIZAK)

5.4.2. Incorporation of family themes

Not only is the relationship theme perceived in the images used with the product but also in the verbal strategies employed when providing information about it, as we observe in a high percentage of the Spanish business websites analyzed:

Example 8. Spanish business website. Incorporation of family themes in the description of the product. (www.injusa.com)

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This Spanish firm (Ex. 8) incorporates in its website communication strategies based on family topics when describing the toys they make, e.g. «Como fabricantes del juguete y como padres, tenemos muy claro a quién va dirigido nuestro producto […]», «[...] para garantizar que en cualquier momento los más pequeños estén tan protegidos como lo están entre los brazos de sus padres [...]»[5].

5.5. *The independence theme*

Social identity in individualist cultures focuses around I-*consciousness*. Therefore, the independence theme is common in cultures with high individualistic cultural values like the United States in which advertising has been shown to emphasize independence, determinism, autonomy and competition (Mueller 1987, 55; Albers-Miller and Gelb 1996, 60; Cho *et al*. 1999, 68-69).

With reference to the U.S. business websites analysed, the independence theme is reflected in the following communication strategies: (a) images of individuals alone together with the product and (b) personalization web features and product uniqueness.

5.5.1. Images of single individuals using the product

It is important to consider the values that are portrayed along with the product and how these connect with the individualistic or collectivist ideologies of the culture (Würtz 2005, 19). After examining the U.S. and the Spanish business websites chosen for the analysis we found that the vast majority of U.S. web pages depicted images of individuals alone, mainly a child together with the product. In the Spanish websites, the appearance of these images appeared less frequently. This can be explained by the fact that in individualist cultures, like the United States, the autonomy and independence of the individual is paramount and this is shown in the images that the companies use in their websites to promote the product. In example 9 we can see this marketing strategy:

Example 9. U.S. business website. Depiction of a little girl alone together with product. (http://www.douglascuddletoy.com/c/baby-plush-toy)

5. English version taken from the Spanish website: «As toy manufacturers and parents ourselves, we know perfectly well whom our products are addressed to [...], […] thereby guaranteeing that children who use our products are fully protected against hazards at all times, as if they were safely protected in their parents' arms […]». Accessed December 20, 2014. http://www.injusa.com/en/injusa-goals.htm.

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5.5.2. Product uniqueness and personalization features on web pages

Albers-Miller and Gelb (1996, 59) and Mueller (1987, 55) highlight the idea that in individualist societies the important thing is *standing out from the crowd*, which translates into autonomy, non-conformity and uniqueness. People in these cultures value products that help them become independent, distinctive, unique and appeal to their individual needs. That is why promotional appeals in these cultures should be addressed to and be made relevant to an individual.

In our study, many of the U.S. toy company websites make an explicit appeal to the uniqueness, originality and distinctiveness of the items they supply. Communicative strategies like product differentiation features, gift recommendations or suggestions are frequently found. More than half of the U.S. web pages examined include ways in which customers can share with others their personal experiences of the products offered. For example, many U.S. toy companies personalize their websites for individual customers so that purchasers can express their individuality by means of web features such as ratings, wish lists and reviews about the product, and even the incorporation of e-mail recommendations to invite friends to view the main characteristics associated with the toy, as we see in the following example:

Example 10. U.S. business website. Incorporation of personalization web features (wish lists, ratings, recommendations and unique differentiation features) (http://www.barbie.com/en-us/shop).

6. CONCLUSIONS

The results of this investigation confirm that there are significant differences in the way Spanish and U.S. toy manufacturers communicate information and establish a social relationship with the consumer in their business websites when providing information on their products. The main reason for these differences lies in the greater or lesser incorporation of contextual or individualistic communicative strategies that speakers of both countries use to interact socially with other people. However, the results of this study unveil that over 80% of the Spanish business websites analyzed offer sections written in English but with a literal translation of the Spanish version without taking into account the cultural values that make up the cultural framework of the English-speaking countries, especially the USA, and, what is more important, how those values exert influence on the communication strategies displayed in the description of the product, as we observe in these examples:

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Example 11. Spanish business website. Spanish version in the description of the product. (http://www.berjuan.com/berjuan/app/productos/detalle.asp?idioma=es&cat=2&subcat=4&prod=112)

Example 12. Spanish business website. English version in the description of the product. (http://www.berjuan.com/berjuan/app/productos/detalle.asp?idioma=en&cat=2&subcat=4&prod=113)

As seen above, this Spanish company (Examples 11 and 12) has important business relationships with the U.S. market and it incorporates in its website a section written in English. Nevertheless, as we can perceive, it seems that the Spanish firm does not take into account the different cultural orientations that constitute the U.S. cultural framework when designing its website for the USA. This is supposedly the reason why it provides a page written in English, but with a merely literal translation of the communicative strategies typical of high-context cultures like Spain's, communication with the typically low-context culture of the USA cannot be as effective as it was intended it to be. As we have seen, advertising in high-context cultures tends to feature more images than text in product descriptions and greater reliance on implicitness to communicate their messages.

This pragmatic transfer from one language into another may be a source of misunderstanding, since Spanish and U.S. individuals do not share the same set of cultural orientations towards context dependence and the individualism index. It may happen that U.S. retailers and customers feel disoriented when processing and interpreting the information offered about the product because they are interlocutors from a low-context culture and, as such, they would expect to read explicit information about it (e.g. *discounts and offers, full description of the product* or *comparisons*). In the same line, since the United States is a highly individualistic culture, U.S. companies will expect to find individualist communicative strategies in the description of the product, that is to say, web features that appeal to the autonomy and independence of the consumer (e.g. *images of individuals with the product*, *unique differentiation features* or *personalization strategies*).

The research that has been conducted in this study may be helpful for Spanish business professionals since the results can help them design better culturally-targeted international pages in their websites: foreign-language advertising copy should not simply be translated literally into English, no matter how natural-sounding the end result may be, but these highly sensitive texts should be translated in such a way that they are culturally adapted to different context dependencies. Web site copy adapted to the low-context and individualistic cultural values that constitute the U.S. cultural framework in the web pages of Spanish companies that target that market will encourage a better customer experience and increased business-to-business and customer-to-customer interactivity. What is more, advertising copy such as this will improve the quality of the electronic trading relationships between Spanish companies and U.S. companies and consumers.

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In our view, this study helps Spanish and U.S. toy manufacturers to become aware that there are linguistic and cultural differences in the interactional discourse of their websites. In this way, the findings obtained in this research can enable translators from these companies to identify which aspects are different and how cultural values contribute, in a greater or lesser degree, to these differences. This would be worth considering in the internationalization phase of the company when translators must face the need to translate and adapt the design and content of the website to the target market in which the products are going to be introduced.

To conclude, we have demonstrated that the study of cultural dimensions offers linguists and translators new lines of interdisciplinary research around the influence of cultural values on the language of business websites and allows further study on the achievement of intercultural competence in the business world.

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