# Buddhist website

The future exploratory study will identify how the multimedia factors contributing to Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) – graphic usage, audio/video usage, merchandise section, etc. – affect Thai user's attitude toward Buddhist website. The dissertation also seeks to determine whether the abovementioned factors make user to have either positive or negative or indifferent attitude toward the site. The study will employ a two-part qualitative methodology, and the results, it is hoped, will lead to more informed policies for the assessment of Thai user's attitude toward Buddhist websites.

This dissertation will employ heuristic and field research methodology to perform a high-level cultural analysis on Website design for the purposes of future research. The analysis of socio-economical and cultural issues (religion, Human-Computer Interaction, e-commerce, ethnography) relating to Website design is especially valuable from the perspective of the Thai-speaking Buddhist audience. Future research on the matters stated above is expected to clarify what kind of information people from the particular cultural region expect and how it should be designed.

Literature Review Mayhew once compared a website to a book which anyone can display on The World Wide Web (WWW) which is " a repository of public information and transactions created by the public and accessible to the public via the Internet" (Mayhew, 2003, p. 3). The characteristics of the WWW are tensely linked to the ones of the website. Any website incorporates multimedia data such as text, static graphics, sound, animation, movie clips and virtual spaces arranged as hypermedia documents.

These are the " documents that contain links to other pages of information" (Dodge & Kitchin, 2001, p. 3). The key issue about a website is its interactive, multimedia and hypermedia nature. The present research should be inevitably wrapped around the principles of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), user interface (UI) design, website usability engineering, and their influences on the website users. Alty defined the goal of HCI as " the efficient transfer of information between persons and computers" (2003a, p.

100). According to Alty, HCI is [...] a generic term that describes all the activities concerned with the research, design, analysis, development, implementation and evaluation of the interactions across the interface between computer applications and human beings (often called users or operators) who are interacting with the application. (Alty, 2003b, p. 228) An authentic website should be constructed according to the principle of user-centered design.

It means that " the needs, capabilities and limitations of the intended users [should be] properly taken into account during the design process" (Alty, 2003a, p. 100). Among the Internet user interface capabilities and constraints affecting users' perceptions Mayhew listed modem speed, browser capabilities, browser controls and interpreters, installed " helper applications" or " plug-ins," windowing, direct manipulation, and color (2003, p. 11).

Within the context of HCI, a website utilizes output (text, graphics, sound, music, speech, color, animation, still pictures, moving video) and input (text [keyboard, handwriting], gesture [mouse, pen, dataglove, eye-movement], audio [voice or sound]) media to produce an effect on the user. Most

literature investigates the tokens of user-friendliness in regard to a website (Mayhew, 2003; Mayhew & Bias, 2003; Opaluch, 2003; Boardman, 2004). Acknowledging the importance of this concept, Kurosu (2003) relied on cultural aspects of web usability such as " cultural variety" and " depth ofculture" (p.

48). The researcher utilized Suzuki's (1997) definition of the culture as " the response pattern shared by some specific group of people that is shaped through interaction with theenvironment" (Kurosu, 2003, p. 48) holding " the response pattern" as " how people will interact with the Website," and " interaction with the environment" as " the interaction with the Website through the PC environment, including the browser. " Laney (1998) in his investigation of religious Christian Web sites relied on the Media System Dependency as well as uses and gratifications perspectives.

Some researchers (Weeks & Goodman, 2003; Proctor & Vu, 2003) investigated HIC within the context of human information processing and perceptual-motor behavior, whereas the other group of scholars (van der Veer & del Carmen, 2003; Yoshikawa, 2003) emphasized the mental modeling as the core of HCI. Finally, Brave & Nass (2003) researched emotional implications of human-computer interaction. There is also a considerable body of research (Mayhew & Bias, 2003; Carey, 2001; Steinbock, 2000; Varey, 2001) dedicated to the issues of e-commerce and marketing relating to websites.

Taken into account the field of the present research, reaction of Thai users towards Buddhist websites, the abovestated mechanisms and structures of HCI with astressof user-friendliness should be analyzed within the religious

and cultural context. The relation to culture in terms of geographical location is distorted and made complex within the WWW context (Couldry & McCarthy, 2004; Miller, 2004; Dodge & Kitchin, 2001; Kurosu, 2003). Geographical boundaries (the areas where people confess Buddhism, Thailand as a state unity) do not coincide with cultural zones (Thaicultural identity) and virtual areas (the WWW).

On the one hand, Thailand is ready to enter the global community with its rather developed media network (Hamilton, 2002; Mccargo, 2002). On the other hand, the Thai national cultural identity is of introvert type with its " assertion of distinctiveness in relation to a powerful external world of ' others'" (Hamilton, 2002, p. 153). One should also take into consideration the cultural elements constituting the religion of Buddhism. Haynes (2003) stated that over 90 per cent of the Thais are Buddhists.

In Thailand Buddhism is " the sasana pracham chat, that is, the ' inherent' national religion" and constitutes " an ideological basis and political legitimacy" for the state (Haynes, 2003, p. 365). However, Haynes (2003) noted that the role of the state religion is flexible and " open to debate" (ibid. ). Swearer emphasized the unusual orientation of Thai Buddhism towards "[t]he cult of relics, images, icons, and amulets" (2003, p. 10). The religion in Thailand became more " secular and commercial" (ibid. ).

The discussion seems especially interesting when religious issues are projected onto the virtual reality in the form of a religious website. Miller & Slater acknowledged " the coming together of a widespread interest in the spiritual implications of thetechnology, found in some of the cyberutopian literature, together with an interest in the use of the Internet on the part of

established religions" (2000, p. 173). Laney (1998) noted that the simplification of web technologies and, thus, their cheapening contributed to the proliferation of religious websites.

Unfortunately, the accessible literature concentrated on Christian websites with no comparison to other confessions. Last (2005) provided an interesting statistics on the Christian websites in regard to the goal of the website users in their accessing the religious websites. According to the source, 32 percent of the web-surfers are interested in religious news, 17 percent search for places to worship, 14 percent plan religious group meetings via the Internet, and 7 percent donate to charity with the help of the WWW.

Besides, 11 percent of Internet users download spiritual music, 35 percent send online greeting cards, and 38 percent email spiritual messages. Unfortunately, the statistics is rather modest in regard to Buddhist websites. Within the Thailand context, Hachigian & Wu observed such HCI problems as " the lack of IT access in rural areas where most of the population lives, lack of literacy in English/lack of Thai content, incompatible systems in different parts of the government, and inadequate training of officials" (2003, p. 88). Most of the Buddhist websites found by a plain search via search engines (Yahoo, Google, etc.

) are written in English. Therefore, the present investigation is associated with difficulties in locating authentic sites for analysis. Problem definition It is true that literature about the WWW and general principles of website user interface (UI) design has grown lately. However, religious usage of websites is significantly underexplored. It is especially evident in regard to non-Christian religious websites. Religious website usage may contribute

positively to the body of scholarly research on the motivations for religious Web use. The media being studied are Buddhist religious sites on the World Wide Web.

Large investments are being made into the construction and development of religious websites on the Internet. A great proportion of Buddhist websites are written in English and seeks to meet cultural expectations of the Westerners. Laney (1998) once defined the problem for his investigation of Christian websites as the poorly researched motivations of the English-speaking visitors. The American scholar would be astonished at the " black hole" in regard to the motivations of Thai-speaking web-surfers whose driving desires and emotions relating to Buddhist websites are unexplored even to a greater extent.

The present project seeks specifically to provide an exploratory study of Buddhist Thai-speaking website users and their motivations for using the religious Buddhist websites. Cultural theory as well as Mental Models theory and HCI theory construct a complex framework important for the present analysis. In order to investigate Thai users' attitudes toward Buddhist websites the following theoretical framework was constructed. Three issues taken as independent variables are taken: graphics usage, audio/video usage, and e-marketing strategies in regard to Buddhist religious items.

The first two issues are the types of output media whose effect on the user has been empirically proved. The issue of e-marketing is still being explored mainly from the perspective of user-centered design. A lot of elements may enter this concept including technical (e. g. , modem speed), user-oriented input (text, gesture, audio media), cultural (language, religion,

country/nation) and other issues. The aforestated independent variables are supposed to affect (either positively, or negatively, or neutrally) the variable of website user's perceptions.

It is supposed here that graphics and multimedia elements do correlate with web-surfers' emotions and attitudes. The second hypothesis is that religious background of a user (Buddhism) reinforces his/her positive/negative attitude toward Buddhist websites. In an effort to determine the presence/absence of correlation between website user design elements and Thai Buddhist users a revisit of previous implications of HCI and cultural paradigms is necessary. This research will attempt to provide a description of Thai Buddhism website usage.

An additional purpose of this study is to identify the website design elements which positively/negatively affect the users of Buddhist religious websites. This study is an exploratory step in growing research on religious websites usage and the motivations for its use. Numerous studies will be required to obtain sufficient knowledge to fully understand this audience's motivations and preferences for utilizing the most modern form of mediated religion. It is hoped that the present project will provide a starting point and contribute to the growing body of knowledge in regard to the Internet and its cultural and social significance.

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