Localization and Cultural Adaptation of Museum Websites: A Case of the Chinese Website of The British Museum

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Abstract

This paper examines the approach to localizing a high-level website through cultural adaptation, focusing on the six elements of cultural adaptation in web localization: spatial orientations, navigation modes, translation equivalence, country-specific symbols, icons, and color symbolism. Using the 10 most-searched Chinese museum websites as reference objects, the paper analyses the level of cultural adaptation in the Chinese website of The British Museum and provides suggestions to increase its localization level, including the use of sticky sidebars, icons plus textual descriptions, and bright colors. The paper highlights the importance of understanding cultural differences in website design and the potential impact on user experience. Overall, the paper offers insights and practical recommendations for web localization practitioners to effectively adapt websites to different cultures.

Key Words: Localization, cultural adaptation, museum website, The British Museum

1. Introduction

The museum has been an integral part of human civilization throughout history. It serves as an organizational entity and physical space that collects, conserves, and displays tangible and intangible evidence of human history and nature. In addition to preserving cultural heritage, museums have evolved into essential educational and touristic hubs. Defining the concept of a museum has been a subject of debate among institutions and scholars, with the International Council of Museums (2022) providing an up-to-date and comprehensive definition:

> A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing. (p. 3)

This definition emphasizes one mission of a museum: serving the public. A museum serves as a custodian of heritage, preserving and interpreting it for future generations, promoting cultural understanding and awareness, and contributing to the development of identity and memory.

However, due to constraints of time and space, serving all audiences becomes an impossible mission for traditional museums. Most traditional museums have been limited in their capacity to provide services. These limitations manifest in the form of geographical barriers, physical access constraints, and overcrowding. Not all individuals can travel to a museum location, and the limited capacity to receive visitors may discourage attendance. These challenges pose significant obstacles to the mission of traditional brick-and-mortar museums as non-profit and public good institutions, which aim to serve the entire population.

In recent years, museums have increasingly turned to alternative ways to reach wider audiences. Online exhibits, virtual tours, and digital platforms have emerged as popular approaches, extending the accessibility of museums beyond physical space and time. While acknowledging that online museum visiting cannot substitute the experience of in-person visit, it extends the accessibility of a museum. As a result, the museum website has drawn significant academic attention, with researchers highlighting the positive impacts of museum websites on audience engagement and education (Mateo, 2021; Cook, 2007). Furthermore, scholars have explored the effectiveness, usability, and design of museum websites (Wu and Liu, 2021; Cristobal-Fransi et al., 2021; Kabassi, 2019). However, despite the growing number of multilingual museum websites, little research has focused on the localization of museum websites, which involves adapting website content and format to meet the linguistic, cultural, and functional requirements of different regions or target audiences. Specifically, the principles of museum website localization and the standards for localized websites remain under-researched.

In contrast to building a website from scratch, website localization entails "the adaptation of digital content on the web and through mobile applications or software applications to meet the cultural, linguistic, legal, and other requirements of a target market where it will be deployed" (Benmamoun et al., 2021, p. 216). A localized website is based on an established website and, technically and culturally, adapts itself to the target community. Localizing a website is not merely a matter of translating its content into another language. Rather, a localized website must be customized to the unique needs and preferences of the

target audience, taking into account factors such as cultural norms, user preferences, and technical requirements. This may involve adjusting the content, format, and structure of the website to better suit the needs of the target audience.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the cultural issues that arise in the localization of museum websites, with a specific focus on cultural adaptations to web content and format. Using the Chinese website of The British Museum (referred to as TBM), this paper seeks to answer two key questions: 1) how is cultural adaptation manifested on localized museum websites? And 2) what strategies should be employed in the web localization of museum websites to achieve effective cultural adaptation?

By addressing these questions, this research aims to contribute to the understanding of cultural considerations in the localization of museum websites and provide insights into effective strategies for achieving cultural adaptation. The findings of this study can inform museum professionals and website designers in their efforts to enhance the accessibility and engagement of diverse audiences in the digital realm.

2. Methods

This study adopts a comparative analysis method to examine the cultural adaptation of TBM's Chinese website. Specifically, the Chinese website of TBM is compared with other successful Chinese museum websites and the English version of TBM. The top 10 most-searched Chinese museum websites, as identified by the Chinese Museum Trending Searches (CMTS), are used as the benchmark for successful cultural integration.

Table 1. Top 10 most-searched Chinese museum websites.

Names	Abbr.	URLs
故宫博物院 [THE PALACE MUSEUM]	TPM	https://www.dpm.org.cn
中国国家博物馆 [NATIONAL MUSEUM OF CHINA]	NMC	http://www.chnmuseum.cn
吴文化博物馆 [MUSEUM OF WU]	MW	https://www.wuzhongmuseum.com
广东省博物馆 [GUANGDONG MUSEUM]	GM	https://www.gdmuseum.com
湖南省博物馆 [HUNAN MUSEUM]	HM	http://www.hnmuseum.com
河南博物院 [HENAN MUSEUM]	HNM	http://www.chnmus.net
成都博物馆 [CHENGDU MUSEUM]	CM	https://www.cdmuseum.com
苏州博物馆 [SUZHOU MUSEUM]	SM	https://www.szmuseum.com
浙江省博物馆 [ZHEJIANG PROVINCIAL MUSEUM]	ZPM	https://www.zhejiangmuseum.com
洛阳博物馆 [LUOYANG MUSEUM]	LM	http://www.lymuseum.com/

The top 10 most-searched Chinese museum websites can be considered culturally-customized websites that have achieved the highest level of localization within the Chinese cultural context, despite not being explicitly localized. These websites successfully meet the expectations and preferences of Chinese web users for museum websites. By conducting a comparative analysis between TBM's Chinese website and these benchmark websites, this study aims to identify and evaluate the cultural adaptations present in the web content and format of TBM's Chinese website. The findings will shed light on effective strategies for achieving cultural adaptation in the localization of museum websites, particularly within the Chinese cultural context.

3. Localization Level and Cultural Adaptation

3.1 Localization Level

Localization level describes the extent to which a website adapts itself to the target culture and users. In commercial contexts, the decision on the level of localization often depends on Return on Investment (ROI) considerations. In essence, if the localized website is expected to generate greater benefits, more resources will be allocated by the localization commissioner to create a higher-level localized website (Yunker, 2003; Brooks, 2000). The categorization of localization levels varies widely depending on different criteria. Based on the degree of cultural adaptation, Singh and Pereira (2005) propose five categories of web localization levels:

1. Standardized websites: having the same web content for all users. There are no efforts made to create customized websites.

2. Semi-localized websites: providing contact information about local branches. Little else customized information is offered to address the needs of international users.

3. Localized websites: offering country-specific web pages with translation, but the functions and structures are not customized.

4. Highly localized websites: offering all content and site structure/functions fully adapted to the target users.

5. Culturally customized websites: totally immersed in the target culture and society. (pp. 10-15)

Different localization levels require varying degrees of re-engineering and re-structuring. To achieve a high-level localized website, not only the textual and visual information, but also the underlying program and coding should be adjusted and even recreated to customize itself to the target users. However, Singh and Pereira (2005) point out that only a limited number of websites are fully customized to the highest level, primarily due to time and cost constraints as well as the finite capacity of localizers. Thus, while high-level localization is desirable, practical considerations often limit the level of adaptation achievable in real-world localization projects.

Although Singh and Pereira's categorization offers a valuable framework for understanding various levels of localization, it fails to encompass all potential cases. One such case involves organizations that selectively localize certain web pages, while leaving others unlocalized and linking the localized and unlocalized pages through hyperlinks. This phenomenon is frequently observed in non-commercial organizations due to limited localization resources (Jiménez-Crespo, 2013, p. 35). This form of localization may be categorized as a "hybrid level", where a website comprises pages with varying localization levels.

3.2 Cultural Adaptation

The role of culture and cultural adaptation in localization has been widely acknowledged by scholars in both the localization industry and Translation Studies (Esselink, 2001; Katan, 2009). The purpose of cultural adaptation in localization is not "to trick users into thinking your company is local, but to let users know that you understand their specific needs and wants" (Yunker, 2003, p. 18). A well-localized website should fully immerse itself in the target culture to achieve this purpose. In general, a website with a higher localization level requires more cultural adaptations, which results in lower cognitive burden, more effective interaction, and greater acceptance from target users (Jiménez-Crespo, 2013, p. 32). These adaptations, as outlined by Singh and Pereira (2005), contribute to the establishment of perception, symbolism, and behavior among the target web users:

1. Perception: the process by which individuals select, filter, organize, and interpret information to create a meaningful picture of the world;

2. Symbolism: the system of representations and symbols carrying cultural information.

3. Behavior: individual's actions and aspirations guided by cultural values.

In the context of web localization, the aforementioned three factors impact the website design and influence web users' motivations and decisions. However, since this study focuses on the website itself rather than the web users, only the implications of perception and symbolism for localized websites will be discussed. Implications of perception and symbolism for localized websites include:

Perception:

1. Spatial Orientation

2. Navigation Modes

3. Translation Equivalence

Symbolism:

1. Country-Specific Symbols

2. Icons

3. Color Symbols

These six elements encompass both web content and format, reflecting user's expectations of a website in a specific cultural context. By analyzing the characteristics of the top 10 most-searched websites with regards to the six elements outlined, a reference framework for the highest-level web localization can be developed. This framework will be used to evaluate the localization of TBM's Chinese website and identify areas where improvements could be made.

4. Findings

4.1 Perception

4.1.1 Spatial Orientation

Spatial orientation refers to the organization of content on a website, which directly influences the visual perception of web users (Barber and Badre, 1998). The location of the main content can impact the user's perception of a website's visual appeal, with English-speaking users often preferring a left-side emphasis layout due to the left-to right reading direction of English. Additionally, web users familiar with symmetrical web structures may prefer to find information on the central part of the screen. Website layouts can generally be categorized into three types: a) left emphasis layout, with the main content appearing on the left side; b) right emphasis layout, with the main content appearing on the right side; and c) symmetrical layout, in which both left and right sides are emphasized. These layouts can be applied in website design solely or together.

Table 2. The homepage layouts of the 10 sampled Chinese museum websites.

Museum	Web Layout
TPM	Symmetrical
NMC	Right emphasis; Symmetrical
MW	Symmetrical
GM	Symmetrical
HM	Right emphasis; Symmetrical
HNM	Left emphasis
CM	Symmetrical
SM	Symmetrical
ZPM	Symmetrical
LM	Symmetrical

It is noteworthy that the symmetrical layout stands out as the predominant choice of the homepage layout among the sampled Chinese museum websites, accounting for 90 per cent of the cases. This layout type is, therefore, considered a visual convention for Chinese web users, who have a preconceived notion of how a museum website's homepage should be structured.

Nielsen and Tahir (2001) posit that users arrive at a new web's homepage with a considerable amount of mental baggage accumulated from prior visits to other homepages. As a result, users have formed a generic mental model of how a homepage should function. Hence, when a Chinese web user clicks on the Chinese website of TBM, they expect to encounter a website resembling other museum websites in China, that is to say, a website with a symmetrical layout in terms of spatial orientation.

The Chinese website of TBM adheres to the visual convention of symmetrical layout, which is prevalent in the homepage designs of Chinese museum websites. The comparison between the Chinese and English versions of the TBM website (Illustration 1 and 2) reveals that the spatial orientation of the homepage is unchanged in the Chinese version. Despite several adjustments in textual and visual content, the symmetrical structure of the homepage is retained, which is consistent with the expectations of Chinese web users.
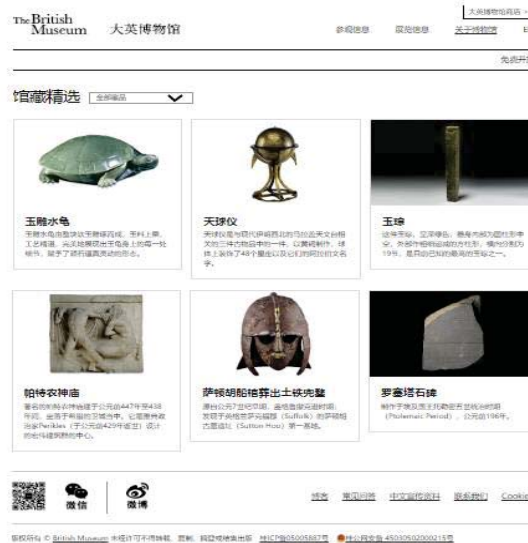

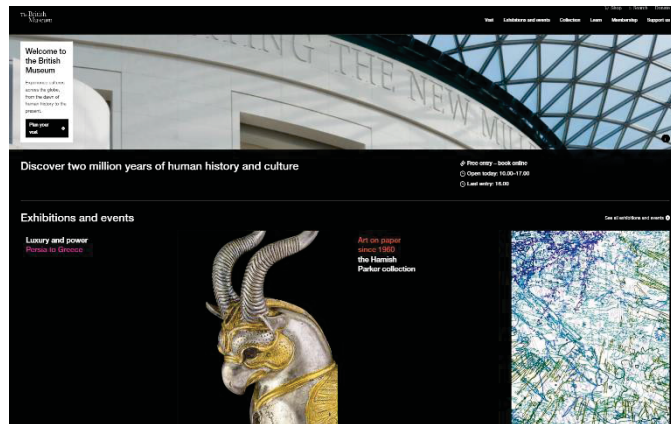Illustration 1 Chinese Homepage of TBM

Illustration 2 English Homepage of TBM

4.1.2 Navigation Modes

Navigation modes refer to the way in which web navigation is structured, including the placement, tags, and functions of navigation. In essence, web navigation acts as a road map for users. It is the table of contents of a website, which guides users throughout their exploration of the site. There are four different navigation approaches, as identified by WebsiteBuilderExpert (WBE):

1. Mega drop downs: large menu panels dropping down from the global menu header at the top of the website.
2. Footer menus: appearing at the foot of the web page, offering additional content and links.
3. Sidebars: appearing at the side of the web page and running horizontally alongside the content.
4. Breadcrumbs: hierarchical links showing sub-categorized pages.
5. Sticky navigation: staying fixed to the top of the page, not disappearing when a user scrolls down the page.

Some approaches in the WBE classification have overlapping characteristics. For instance, sticky navigation can be found at the top, side, or bottom of a web page, and can be classified as mega drop downs, footer menus, or sidebars, respectively. In this regard, the position and the stickiness/non-stickiness of navigations will be investigated separately in this paper.

Table 3. Navigation position and stickiness of 10 sampled Chinese museum websites

Museum Name	Navigation Position	Navigation Stickiness
TPM	Top; Side	Yes (Side)
NMC	Top; Side	Yes (Side)
MW	Top; Foot	Yes (Top)
GM	Top; Foot	No
HM	Top; Foot	No
HNM	Top	No
CM	Side; Foot	Yes (Side)
SM	Top; Side	Yes (Top; Side)
ZPM	Top; Side; Foot	Yes (Side)
LM	Top; Foot	No

Table 3 shows that 90 per cent of the sampled websites place their navigation at the top of the web page, while 60 per cent use sticky navigation. Additionally, 80 per cent of them apply two types of navigation. Notably, sticky navigation is often located on the side of the web page.

The Chinese version of TBM's website exemplifies a straightforward navigation design located at the top of the web page, as depicted in Illustration 3. In comparison to the English version's navigation (Illustration 4), the Chinese version has simplified both its functions and items. For example, the "Search" and "Donate" buttons present in the English navigation are absent in the Chinese version. While the "Shop" button is left, its web is not localized. Instead, the Chinese website of TBM employs a third-party e-commerce platform to fulfill this function. Clicking on the "The British Museum Shop" button in the Chinese navigation redirects users to TMall, China's largest e-commerce platform. According to Wang and Li (2022), the platform model of e-commerce is the dominant approach in Chinese market, with a growing number of consumers preferring to make purchases on third-party platforms rather than self-operated business websites. As a result, outsourcing to a third-party shop rather than operating a localized business website aligns with Chinese consumer habits and offers operational and logistical cost reductions.
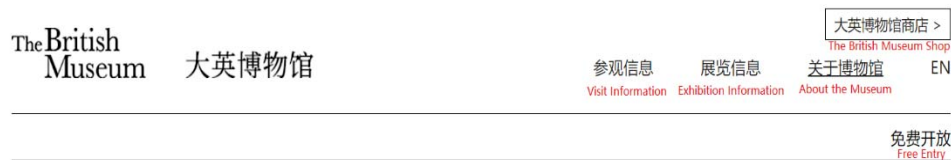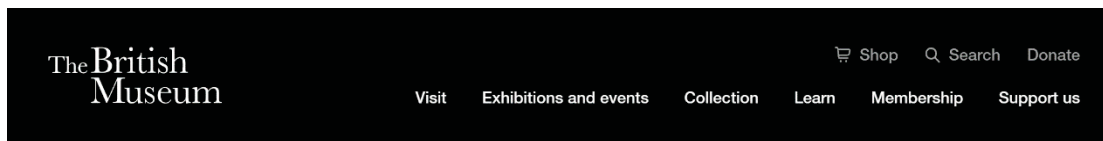

Illustration 2 Chinese Navigation of TBM

Illustration 1 English Navigation of TBM

The existing navigation design on the Chinese website of TBM is effective in serving its basic functions, despite being simplified. However, to achieve a higher level of localization and adaptation, it may be beneficial to incorporate a sticky sidebar that can offer additional information and features, such as contact details and search functionality. This could enhance the user experience by granting easy access to essential information and tools, while also aligning with the conventions of Chinese web design.

4.1.3 Translation equivalence

The translation of a website necessitates careful consideration to ensure the preservation of equivalence between two languages. Website translation here refers to the transformation of linguistic codes, and as such, adaptations are required in word processing to ensure that the message conveyed in the source language is accurately reflected in the target language. In the case of the Chinese-English language pair, for example, adjustments to the date format are often required for English-Chinese translation due to the different writing habits of the two languages. The Chinese date format is typically expressed as "year-month-day", whereas the common order in English is "day-month-year" or "month-day-year". To address this disparity, all dates on the Chinese website of TBM are adapted to the Chinese format. Similarly, time, currency, and other measurement units on the Chinese website adhere to the Chinese writing system. These adaptations are implemented to ensure that Chinese web users can easily comprehend the information presented on the website, thereby reducing their cognitive load in reading it.

Another notable difference between English and Chinese lies in entropy, a statistical parameter that measures the amount of information generated on average for each letter of a text in a given language. In general, Chinese characters carry more information and occupy less space than English words (Chen et al., 2017). Consequently, when translating all textual content on a website from English to Chinese, the resulting Chinese text occupies less space on the website, leading to a more scattered presentation of information on the website. To compensate for this, various approaches are commonly employed, including the addition of textual and image-based content. On TBM's Chinese website, this compensation strategy primarily involves the augmentation of textual content rather than images. For instance, the description of the collection "Indian terrapin (Kachuga dhongaka)" on the English website of TBM contains 307 words, while the corresponding description on the Chinese website contains 816 characters. However, the Chinese website only includes one picture of the collection, compared to 15 on the English version.

By incorporating additional textual content, the Chinese website seeks to mitigate the space disparity resulting from translation and provide Chinese users with a comprehensive understanding of the exhibit. However, it is important to acknowledge that the divergent approaches to textual and visual presentation between the English and Chinese versions may affect the overall user experience and perception of the website's content. With a greater number of images depicting the exhibit on the English website, users of the English version have a more direct and visually-oriented experience. In contrast, Chinese users gain access to more extensive background information about the exhibit due to the increased amount of textual content on the Chinese website. The disparity in presentation between the two language versions implies that the user experience and the way in which information is conveyed may differ based on the users' preferred habits in receiving information. English users may rely more heavily on visual elements to grasp the essence of the exhibit, while Chinese users have access to a more detailed textual narrative that provides them with a deeper understanding of the exhibit's cultural and historical significance. Consequently, the website's design and content adaptation reflect the cultural and linguistic preferences of the respective target audiences, thereby catering to their specific information consumption habits.

4.2 Symbolism

4.2.1 Country-Specific Symbols

Country-specific symbols refer to elements that represents a way of life or embody specific cultural values. These symbols hold particular meanings or connotations within different countries or cultures. For example, in Chinese culture, the hui-shaped pattern (resembling the Chinese character "回") serves as a symbol associated with tradition, wealth, luck and endlessness, which is commonly employed in the design of furniture, buildings and clothing. In the context of web design, such country- and cultural- specific symbols are usually utilized as decorative elements. Among the 10 sampled Chinese museum websites, only two of them incorporate country- and culture-specific symbols. The website of NMC features the hui-shaped pattern and the website of TPM employs flower-shaped and fish-shaped symbols as decoration for web buttons. All of these symbols carry connotations of wealth and luck. Conversely, the remaining eight sampled websites do not include country-specific symbols on their pages, suggesting that their presence may not be considered necessary. The Chinese website of TBM, meanwhile, do not apply country-specific symbols as well.

While country-specific symbols can add cultural significance and visual appeal to a website, their absence does not necessarily diminish a website's effectiveness. In the case of Chinese museum websites, the limited use of country-specific symbols suggests that they may not be deemed essential for the design of a museum website in China. However, the decision to include or exclude such symbols ultimately depends on the goals and target audience of the website. For example, if a museum website aims to attract tourists or visitors from specific countries, incorporating country-specific symbols may be more suitable and effective. Similarly, if a website aims to showcase a particular facet of a country's culture, the inclusion of relevant symbols may be beneficial. The consideration of country-specific symbols should align with the specific objectives and target audience of the website in question.

4.2.2 Icons

Icon serves as visual symbols that refers to links, options, or functions within a website. Their role in web design is crucial as they facilitate easier and more efficient navigation for users. Icons provide visual cues that can be readily recognized and understood, transcending language and cultural barriers. With the aid of icons, web users can obtain information speedily without language-related obstacles. It is therefore important to select icons that are culturally appropriate and easily understandable by the website's target audience. When analyzing the icons of a website, it is crucial to determine whether they are understood within a specific culture. For example, if a website uses Chinese characters as icons, they may be not understandable for British users. Additionally, icons should be used in conjunction with clear textual descriptions to ensure users grasp their intended purpose. This approach creates a seamless user experience, reduces cognitive load and enhances user engagement.

Table 4. How icons are applied on the 10 sampled websites.

Museum Name	How Icons Applied
TPM	Icons + Textual Description
NMC	Icons + Textual Description
MW	Icons
GM	Icons + Textual Description
HM	Icons + Textual Description
HNM	Icons + Textual Description
CM	No Icons
SM	Icons + Textual Description
ZPM	Icons + Textual Description
LM	No Icons

Table 4 demonstrates that the majority of websites employ a combination of icons and textual descriptions. This icon usage pattern enables users to quickly navigate to desired pages and functions, minimizing misunderstandings. However, no icons are present on the Chinese website of TBM, even though its English version applies this pattern (Illustration 5). Therefore, to achieve a higher level localization, it is recommended that the Chinese website of TBM also incorporate icons with textual descriptions to provide users with clearer guidance and enhance their overall experience.
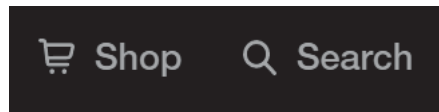

Illustration 3 Icons on the English Website of TBM

4.2.3 Color Symbolism

The selection of colors in web design can be influenced by cultural factors as colors carry different meanings and connotations across cultures. When localizing a website, careful consideration is needed in choosing a standard color, which refers to the main color used for the web logo, icons, navigation, and background, as it represents the website's image. It is important to be culturally sensitive to ensure that the chosen color aligns with the target audience's cultural understanding.

Table 5. Standard colors of the 10 sampled websites.

Museum Name	Standard Colors
TPM	Red
NMC	Red
MW	Black
GM	Red
HM	White
HNM	Red

CM	White
SM	White
ZPM	White
LM	Yellow

The analysis of standard colors used on Chinese museum websites reveals that white and red are the most commonly chosen options; similarly, the Chinese website of TBM also adopts white as its standard color, deviating from the black used in the English version. However, it is worth mentioning that many Chinese museum websites incorporate additional bright colors alongside their standard color. For example, the website of the Hunan Museum uses red and yellow, while The Palace Museum employs blue and yellow. These additional colors prevent the websites from appearing monotonous and enhance their visual appeal. In contrast, the Chinese website of TBM predominantly utilizes white, which can make the website appear tedious and unchanging. Therefore, to achieve a higher-level localization, it is suggested to incorporate other colors such as red and yellow, which are commonly seen on Chinese museum websites, into the design of the Chinese website of TBM. This would add vibrancy and align with the cultural preferences of Chinese web users.

5. Conclusion

This paper has investigated the approach to localizing a high-level website through cultural adaptation, by analyzing six key elements of cultural adaptation in web localization, namely spatial orientations, navigation modes, translation equivalence, country-specific symbols, icons, and color symbolism. In line with this objective, the study has drawn upon the CMTS and analyzed the top 10 most-searched Chinese museum websites, which are considered as culturally customized for Chinese users, to identify effective localization strategies. Specifically, the paper argues that a successful high-level localized website should align with the expectations of target users and existing websites designed for the local audience should serve as a norm for localization efforts. Through a comparative analysis of the Chinese website of TBM with the 10 sampled websites, this paper finds that the former has adopted some cultural adaptations in web localization, such as a symmetrical layout, the use of the Chinese writing system, and the application of white as the standard color. The paper also provides some recommendations for increasing the localization level of museum websites, including incorporating sticky sidebars, using icons with textual descriptions, and adding bright colors, all of which aim to enhance user engagement and satisfaction. These suggestions can be used as guidelines for web designers and developers seeking to create culturally customized websites that meet the needs and expectations for users in a specific cultural context. By considering the six key elements of cultural adaptation, museum web designers can create websites that effectively communicate with the target audience and provide an optimal user experience.

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