HF720: Localization and the Global Market

Assignment Two: The Global Core

America On-Line's Instant Messenger for Chinese, German, and Domestic Users

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Introduction

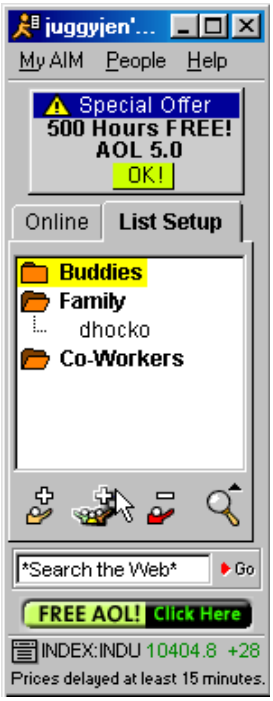
AOL's Instant Messenger (AIM) allows users who complete a registration and download process to send messages to other users of their service. Delivery of messages is instantaneous, and can essentially be thought of as a typed telephone conversation. In the U.S. domestic version of this freeware, users also have the ability to configure other features such as a user profile and a "buddy list," or to perform more advanced tasks such as inviting other users to a private chat room and customizing a stock ticker.

For the purposes of this assignment, I will examine the areas of conflict that may arise when Germany and China represent 50% of the product's user base (as opposed to "sales"), and the United States represents the other 50%. I will assume that users will converse with other users in the same locale (i.e. a German user will use a version of the software to converse with other Germans, not Chinese users), as this presents issues beyond the scope of this paper. Using this information, I will propose a global core that (hopefully) is a feasible balance among these markets and does not invoke a negative reaction from domestic users or product managers.

Areas of Conflict

Design

There are several aspects of the U.S. domestic AIM design that might be problematic to the German and Chinese cultures, but some that also might be beneficial. The design issues I will focus on here are the concept of the "buddy list" and the icons used throughout the AIM service.



The "Buddy" List

The Buddy list is a way for registered users to store other users' screen names, to determine when they are online, and to initiate a messaging conversation. In the present version of the AIM service, the default list groups consist of Buddies (i.e. friends), Family, and Co-Workers, but users can also add a new group. Since both German and Chinese cultures are highly dependent upon knowing with whom they are conversing (see *Interaction: Formality and Informality*), this is one way for them to gather the information necessary for comfortable conversation. On the other hand, the term "buddy" most probably needs to be altered to indicate "friend" in a more formal manner for international users. In cultures where friendships and work relationships are intertwined, this distinction may also be blurred and therefore hard to differentiate. Thus, there are pros and cons to the existing design.

Icons

Icons used to initiate tasks and format text (on the "Instant Message window", not shown) are represented by tiny, cartoon-like drawings or letters of the alphabet. While the cartoon drawings of people or groups would probably be acceptable to our international users, the icon for "Info" for example (designated by the letter "I") would require modification. For icons indicating other functions such as "Find" (a magnifying glass in the current product), it would be wise to evaluate if this can be recognized as an international metaphor for this task. According to the Internationalization of User Interfaces web site, the magnifying glass is considered a "multicultural" image and therefore should not pose a problem. However, the icon set called "Insert Smiley" might not be appropriate for use by other cultures with more formal styles of communication.

While customization of the AIM service can also be categorized as a design "issue", this aspect lies at a deeper level of the cultural model and will therefore be addressed in *Interaction: Individualism/Collectivism* and *Interaction: Uncertainty Avoidance*.

Language

Naturally, the language used throughout the AIM interface presents an area of conflict for international users. If this communication tool is to be used by Germans and Chinese people, it will need to support multiple languages.

Dialects

In researching this particular paper, I happened to discover a generous amount of information on dialects. For example, estimates on the number of German dialects vary, ranging from about 50 to 250 depending on the definition of the term "dialect" (German Culture Page). Chinese is spoken with seven major and more than 50 minor dialects, although Mandarin is the "official" dialect. For a user in China, "the right character can only be identified from the context or by viewing the written form", and there can be a discrepancy between what one can read versus what one can write. In Sacher's research, it was discovered that a dictionary represents a core component of Chinese input methods and is an instrumental part of the task, but that this functionality is very specific to Chinese users (31-36).

Direction and Layout

While translations into the German language may increase the spacing necessary to display text, the symbols used to communicate are essentially the same and are written in the same direction. For the pictorial language of China, however, matters become more complicated. As in the Japanese language, characters are intricate and may be written either vertically or horizontally (Sacher, 35).

Interaction

The most complex aspect of proposing a global core for AIM deals with users' interaction with the service and the potential communication between users. Because day-to-day interaction in real world cultures generally affects how people converse, it is interesting to examine how that factor would play out in an online situation when people from these cultures come together (Sacher and Margolis, 40).

Formality and Informality

During the registration process, AIM requires that users select a "screen name" by which they will be known to other users. While most people in the U.S. are used to providing this alias and even welcome the anonymity, this first aspect of the application may pose basic communication problems for users in other cultures.

In line with the formal communication styles that are at the deepest level of their culture, Germans and Chinese depend upon their knowledge of the other person's status, gender, age, education, etc. to determine the language they use (Samovar, 82). For example, the use of "sie" vs. "du" in German conversation depends upon the age or relationship one has with a person (German Culture Page). As Samovar et. al. point out, "Formality is also evident in how cultures use forms of address. Not knowing these differences can cause problems…American informality and the habit of calling others by their first names make Germans acutely uncomfortable…" (82).

The only way for a Chinese or German user of AIM to know exactly whom he or she is messaging is for the other user to choose their real name as their screen name or to complete a "buddy profile". However, neither of these is required, may not be completed honestly, and the user may not know the person in real life. This lack of background information about the person at the other end of the conversation may cause Chinese and German users to feel uncomfortable with the service.

Individualism/Collectivism

Many of the customizable features of the existing AIM product allow users to set themselves apart from others. For example, a user can choose a particular photo (called a "buddy icon") to be sent to the recipient of the dialog when communication is initiated. Users can also set default font colors, sizes, styles, and so on to be displayed to the other party. While some of this might be argued as a readability issue, it appears to be connected to the individualistic nature of American culture. The selection of these items facilitates the notion that "the individual is the single most important unit in [the] social setting, and [that] the uniqueness of each individual is of paramount value (Samovar et al, 67).

It is important to remember that not all cultures cater to this worldview, and that cultures like Chinese (Hong Kong, in particular) is a collectivist society. Identification is not based on "I", but on "we" (Samovar

et. al., 67-68), and therefore, users in these cultures may be reluctant or have a negative impression toward these "features". Although the research from del Galdo, Nielsen and Samovar et. al. (67) seem to indicate that Germany lies in the middle of the "individualism/collectivism continuum", it is a factor worth considering for German users as well.

Uncertainty Avoidance

Although this has been discussed in the *Individualism/Collectivism* section, it is important to note that the German and Chinese reluctance to customization of the AIM service may also be attributed to uncertainty avoidance. Proverbs, which are an important way for members to learn their culture, can help to illustrate a culture's level of uncertainty avoidance. For example:

> *One does not make the wind but is blown by it.* (Asian cultures).
> *Order is half of life.* (German culture).

These sayings tell us that the Chinese are highly attuned to change and impermanence, and that they may value more formal rules to help make order out of the chaos that is life (high uncertainty avoidance). While not shown to be as high on the uncertainty avoidance scale as even the U.S., the German proverb directly indicates that this culture values organization, conformity, and structure (Samovar et. al., 40).

Based upon these cultural conditions, it would be wise for product managers of AIM to consider just how much customization would be comfortable for Chinese and German users.

Low Context/High Context Cultures

Perhaps the most interesting interaction issue for Chinese, German, and domestic users of this product is found in basic intercultural communication differences. By this, I mean how likely the users from a particular culture will be to use the AIM service in the first place. Hall's "Context Square" indicates that the German is an extremely low-context culture, meaning that information should be explicitly stated (coded). While Chinese does not appear on this continuum, Samovar et. al. classifies them as a high-context culture, meaning that much information is implicitly stated (79). English falls in the middle of this scale, possibly indicating that the choice of low or high context communication may be dependent on the situation (del Galdo and Nielsen, 52).

For English and German speaking users, the AIM service would probably be a useful tool for online communication. However, since a large part of communication in Chinese depends on implicit "knowing", appropriate silences and other non-verbal cues (Samovar, 81), it is not clear how effective this messaging application would be for a Chinese audience.

Proposed Global Core and Further Localization Efforts

The potential issues previously identified in the *Areas of Conflict* sections are, for the most part, globalized in the existing domestic product. With some minor terminology modification (i.e. "buddy") and translation, the Buddy list provides a way of identifying users in categories familiar to most cultures, though some users may have difficulty distinguishing among categories. However, I would recommend leaving it as is, since this is often true in the United States as well, and categorizations have no real impact on the interface design or use of the service.

Icons are mostly visual in nature but all of them should be for this global core. The Internationalization of User Interfaces web site provides a list of multicultural images that could be used to replace the few that are not. Where the formatting icons (bold, italics, etc.) are concerned, it would first be important to investigate whether Chinese and German users require the same level of stylistic distinction among characters and letters. Either way, this toolbar (with appropriate representations for formatting characters) should be developed as a separate component that can be substituted into the application, based upon the localized version to be released.

Screen names and user profiles should remain anonymous and optional in the global core, but perhaps can be derived from the person's real name and flagged as required for our Chinese and German users. The information gathered in the buddy profile might also be different for the localized application, which would provide users in China and Germany with the information they require to feel comfortable in their communication with each other.

As for the many areas of customization that are available, the global core should allow users to set up their buddy list, but should initialize defaults for certain options (i.e. a standard "away" message, as is already available) so users need not worry about configuring them.

To handle various language issues, the default "Instant Message window" should be set to a rather large size, to accommodate differences in text size and direction.

While in most cases all users could benefit from a built-in dictionary of some sort, the purpose of this service is to provide "instant" messages. Adding a built-in dictionary to the global core would most likely slow down U.S. and German users, but would greatly decrease the time it takes Chinese users to input their characters. Therefore, the dictionary component should be integrated into the localized Chinese version only.

Potential Issues

This section identifies issues that may arise as a result of the proposed global core, such as cost and domestic user reactions.

Cost

Although America Online freely offers Instant Messenger to the Internet community, it does cost the company money to design, develop, and maintain. Marketing this service allows AOL to gather information about users and get its name known, which is the return on investment for this seemingly "free" service.

Most applications in today's world are already written in a modular form, so stripping the interface clean of certain Americanized toolbars or changing some icons should not be difficult. Additionally, the time it takes a programmer to modify a component for localized use should not be significant (the research involved in designing the component for China or Germany would). The time to market may also be affected for the various versions. On AOL's web site for international versions of Instant Messenger, the company states: "Not all versions will be the latest version of AIM, and may therefore not have all the latest features." Naturally, coding, compiling, and testing a specialized version of the software will take some time. In this case, however, it appears as though the benefits of worldwide use and recognition will far outweigh the costs.

Domestic User Reactions

Based on the issues discussed here, it is not likely that domestic users would even notice the minor modifications of the product. A few icons might be changed, but if they are truly multicultural in nature, they will not pose a problem. Further, the component-based architecture would prevent them from ever seeing most changes in the interface because these would be substituted only for users in China and Germany.

Conclusions

As alluded to in my previous paper and all recommended reading, there are countless areas that can be explored as part of the cultural model, at various levels of depth. By examining just a few of the design, language, and interaction issues involved in designing a global core for AIM, I have achieved a greater understanding of globalization, and have a good idea about the reservations that may arise from core business groups within an organization. Although some might argue that differences in users can more likely be attributed to type, tasks, or goals, it seems fairly certain to me that those discussed here are true cultural differences that impact the human-computer interaction model (Mrazek and Baldacchini, 20).

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