Freiburg Universität Website Globalization:

A Global Technical Communication Analysis

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Global Technical Communication Fall 2019

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Introduction:

The University of Freiburg is a German university in Freiburg, Germany, that hosts over 24,000 students from over 100 nations. It regards itself as a place of pluralism, open-mindedness, and international exchange (Freiburg Universitat 2019). The university takes its "global responsibility very seriously, and wants to grasp the opportunities to cooperate internationally with partners and students whilst searching for solutions to global challenges through research" (Freiburg Universitat 2019). "Global responsibility guides all our international engagement" (Freiburg Universitat 2019). "The University of Freiburg regards interculturality and diversity as driving forces and important features of teaching and research as well as organizational development within the university" (Freiburg Universitat 2019). The university also includes in its mission a "comprehensive gender and diversity perspective in internationalization, governance, personnel policy, research, teaching, and infrastructure" (Freiburg Universitat 2019). Currently, the university is partnering with other institutions in Ghana, Europe (France, The Netherlands, Poland, Austria, and Greece), and the United States (Pennsylvania) to host graduate programs and other research programs (Freiburg Universitat 2019). The university has released an "internationalization strategy" that "bundle the skills of all of their scientists, doctoral students, and students in a strong research and economic region between France, Germany, and Switzerland. The aim is to establish a clearly profiled cross-border science area with an international appeal" (Freiburg Universitat 2019). Given the broad, international scope of the students attending the university and the university's mission to prioritize intercultural interactions, I argue that the University of Freiburg's website serves as an artifact of global technical communication. Therefore, this paper will analyze the context and components of the University of Freiburg's website and make implications for potential and accessible future design ideas of the website, followed by a reflective memo of the analysis. Figure 1 below presents an initial snapshot of the University website's Homepage for general reference.
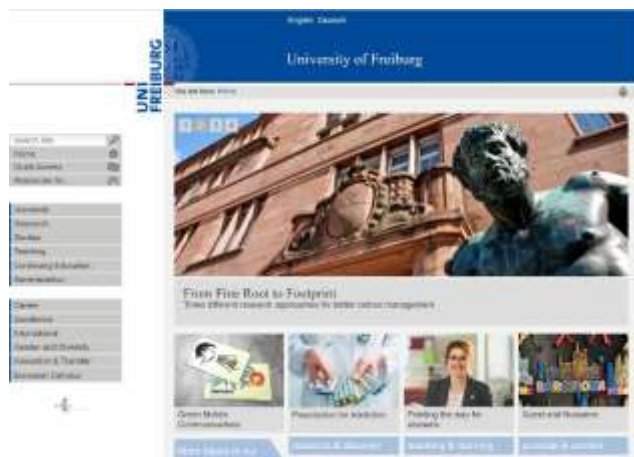

Figure 1: University of Freiburg Home Webpage on https://www.uni-freiburg.de/

Context:

Despite the
university's mission to promote intercultural interactions, cooperation, and research, as well as
the immensely diverse current student body and alumni, and the more recent developments
(the 2019-2023 internationalization strategy) of the university to be part of what is called the
European campus (EUCOR)—in which multiple countries and cultures are involved in pursuing
research and cooperating and collaborating—the general layout of the university's website has
not been updated since at least several years ago (2015). The website's interfaces are not
offered as domains for other countries, nor are there more linguistic options for its interface.
Despite not being able to obtain an official date for when the layout of the university's website
was last updated, I know that it has not been because I recall seeing the same design in 2015,
before the implementation of the current internationalization strategy, while I perused the
website to contemplate applying to the university. The figures below present snapshots of the
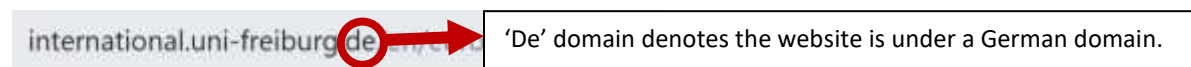website's domain and interface options.

'De' domain denotes the website is under a German domain.

Figure 2: University of Freiburg's Website Domain https://www.international.uni-freiburg.de/en/european-campus

Figure two recognizes that the website is only offered in the "de" (German) web domain.

The only linguistic options offered by the site.

Figure 3: University of Freiburg Website Linguistic Interface Options https://www.international.uni-freiburg.de/en/european-campus.

Figure three recognizes the linguistic interface options (English and German) offered by the
website.

Given that there are over 4.5 billion people on the internet and regular internet access in the
United States increased by over 75% in the past 15 years. Over 90% increase has occurred in
multiple countries of Europe (Norway, Denmark, Spain, and France), as well as increased
digitization of educational and social communications—this is observable in institutional
libraries, where research is increasingly becoming available online—this is an age of online
communication and digitization (Our World in Data). Thus, the websites for universities and
educational institutions are becoming increasingly important because it is highly likely that an

institution's webpage may serve as the first—and sometimes only—point of access for prospective students. The University of Freiburg's website, therefore, serves as the online point of access for many prospective students. Since the university implemented an internationalization strategy and advocated for a broader, European campus, prospective students' cultural base has considerably widened.

Components:

Upon arriving at the University of Freiburg's website successfully, users land on the website's home page:
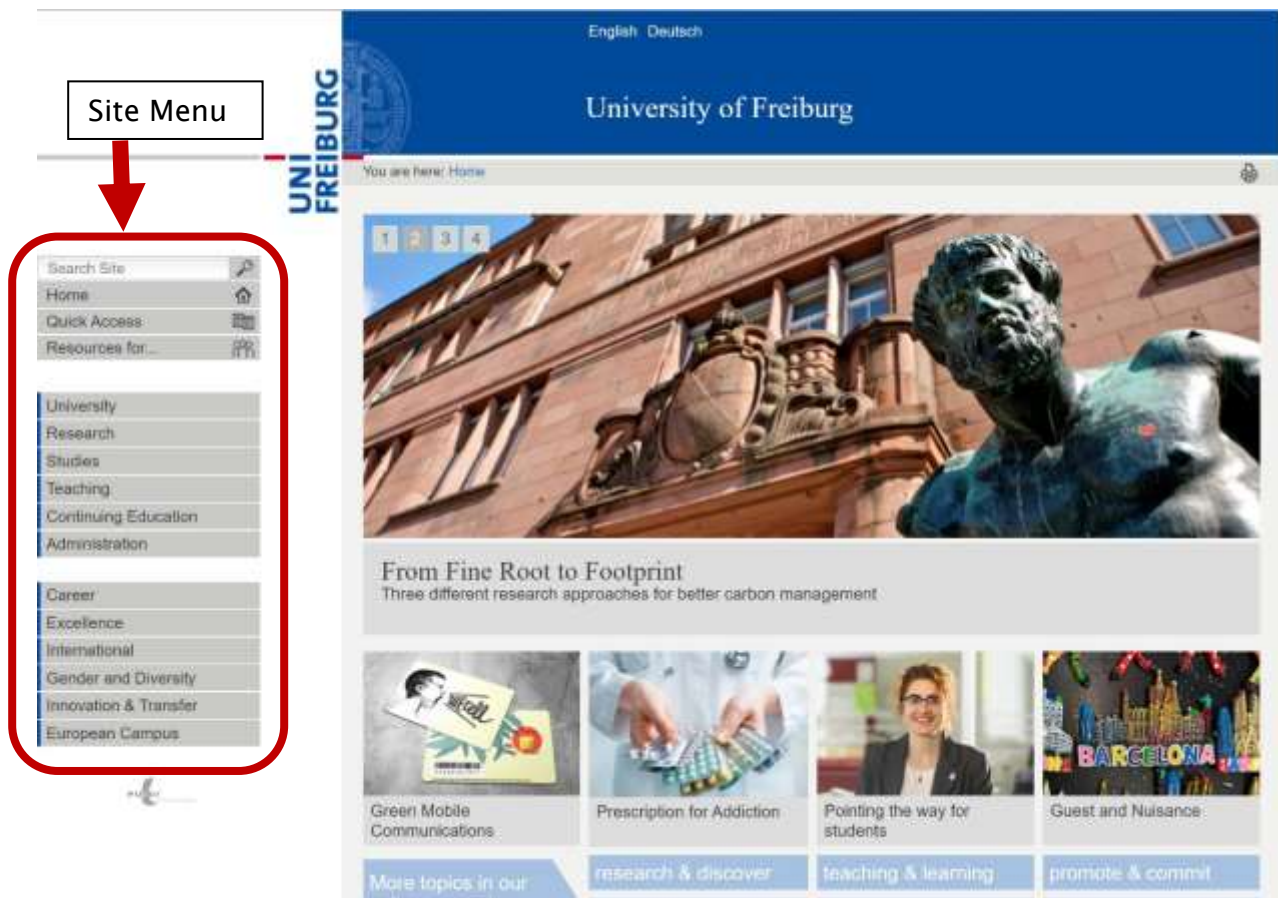

Figure 4: University of Freiburg Home Webpage on https://www.uni-freiburg.de/

Immediately, most users can observe the layout of the website. The menu bar is vertical and on the left-hand side of the screen. Within the menu are options for navigating the website. There are buttons for 'Home,' 'Quick Access,' 'Resources for...' 'University,' 'Research,' 'Studies,' 'Teaching,' 'Continuing Education,' 'Administration,' 'Career,' 'Excellence,' 'International,' 'Gender and Diversity,' 'Innovation and Transfer,' and 'European Campus.' There is a search bar for users on top of the preset menu options if they cannot find what they are looking for in the

preset menu bar. Next to the menu bar, there are a series of large pictures that rotate every few seconds, below which are a series of smaller images with headlines from the university.

The following figures will present snapshots of several other site pages to allow a comprehensive view of the website's look and feel.
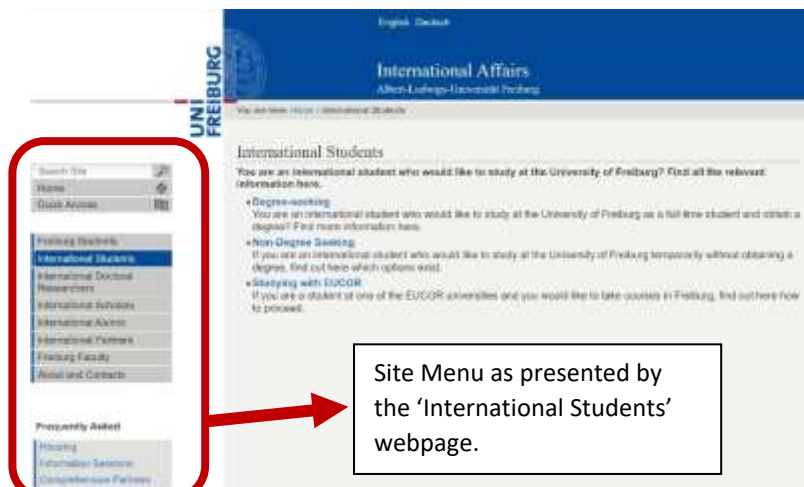

Figure 5: University of Freiburg International Students Webpage https://www.international.uni-freiburg.de/en/in

As observed in Figure 5, the menu bar contains different menu bar options initially presented on the Home Page. One of the things I found was that clicking the "Home" button on the menu for the webpage presented in Figure 5 and the webpage presented in Figure 1 is that both pages lead to different "Home" pages. If a prospective international student were to stumble upon a page with correct information but then needed information from the previous page, potentially leading them down an endless spiral of webpages searching for the previous page's information.
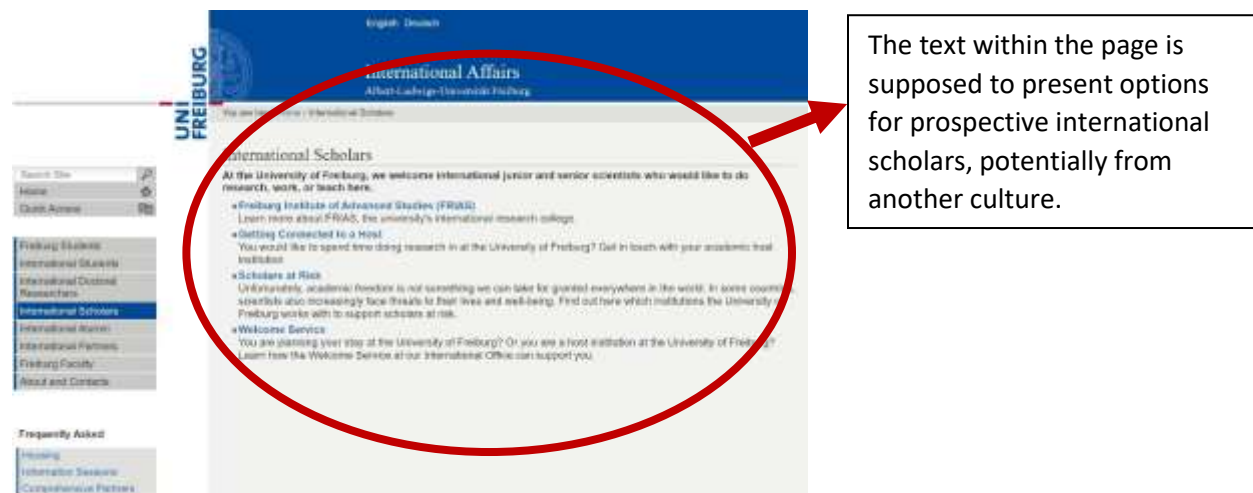

Figure 6; University of Freiburg International Scholars Webpage https://www.international.uni-freiburg.de/en/scholars

Aside from the different Menu bar presented in Figure 5, Figure 6 presents the University's webpage for International Scholars. Users from other cultures (besides those who are already a part of German or American higher education) may use the webpage to discover research opportunities at the University of Freiburg. The layout of the page presents an issue due to the text-heavy content. Other cultures may have a problem with such a layout, especially scholars who do not speak German or English well. Usually, "Edward Hall and Geert Hofstede on cultures provide the basis for the analysis of Web sites" (Würtz 2006). Thus, websites that have been appropriately localized or globalized usually present more multimedia components or a different layout, which does not isolate or confuse users from other cultures.
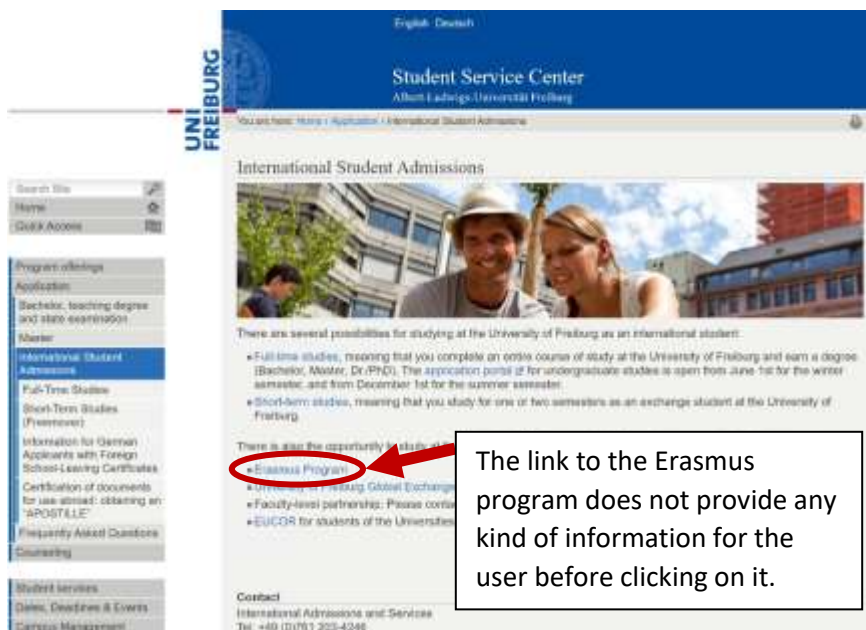

Figure 7: University of Freiburg International Student Admission Webpage https://www.studium.uni-freiburg.de/en/application/international-student-admissions/international-student-admissions

Figure 7 presents the International Student Admission page, which international students would visit to apply to the University. Again, the menu bar is seen on the left side, with the page's main content providing little direction and consisting of text-heavy content. The page's text-heavy content does not provide much information about where the links will take the user. For instance, one of the links, "The Erasmus Program," is undefined. A German user may open another tab and do extra work to understand what the Erasmus program is or click on the link. However, someone from another culture who has not established trust with the website may be hesitant to click on such a link. Either way, the link with little defining information creates more work for the user from a different cultural background. The way the components I provided figures for from the university's website interact with each other depends on the site's user. Users may want to learn something about the program for international researchers or international students before applying to the university. However, if a user has issues

understanding or accepting parts of the site, they could abandon the idea of applying or going to the University of Freiburg.

Implications:

According to Nielsen and Norman, good usability is invisible; therefore, because the intercultural users need to do extra work to understand the website, the website is less usable for global users (Norman 2013). According to Hofstede and Hall's dimensions, this sort of site— with relatively little multimedia content integrated meaningfully, and which does not provide much immediate background information about the links being clicked on—would not do well with cultures who prefer high-context communications or have higher levels of uncertainty avoidance (Hall 1990). The left-hand, vertical menu bar may confuse people from cultures who read in the opposite direction, or perceive everything in a hierarchical order.

Should this website be updated or evaluated by a usability professional, the university's goal of globalization and internationalization should be considered during the redesign of the site. The ethical implications should also be considered.

The current site only presents two linguistic options: German or English, presenting a barrier for users who understand neither of the languages. The site also presents a design layout that is culturally inconsiderate of cultures who may prefer high-context communications or have a high-power distance and level of uncertainty avoidance. Thus, given the university's mission to collaborate globally and prioritize intercultural scholarship, there is an ethical implication for the creators and designers of the site to include culturally sensitive layouts and perhaps national site domains that support more than two languages.

Theories to Incorporate while Redesigning the Site:

If the University of Freiburg's website were redesigned, I would suggest following the 'CLUE' approach presented by Huatong Sun in *Cross-Cultural Technology Design: Creating Culture-sensitive Technology for Local Users.*

The approach includes the following components and theories:

1)   *"integrating key concepts and methods from activity theory, British cultural studies, and genre theory" (81).*

    By integrating these theories, the CLUE approach succeeds in emphasizing the "actual practices of use activities in local contexts... Technology affordances unfold in this praxis of use and develop as a result of the interplay of habituated uses and sociocultural conditions. At the same time, the praxis is cultural consumption itself in which a user actively localizes the technology for his or her lifestyle and transforms a material user experience into a subjective and symbolic one. The praxis lens here helps to capture the

livedness and messiness of local culture and avoids the problem of stereotyping" (Sun 81)

2)   *"local culture constitutes the dynamic nexus of contextual interactions and manifests numerous articulations of practices and meanings (Sun 81).*

"The CLUE framework is based on a dialogic view of culture, which regards culture as an open set of practices and as an energetic process with meanings, objects, and identities flowing across sites in diffuse time-space in an age of globalization. Local culture is constantly in the making. It is both a site of the dynamic, ever-changing nexus of contextual interactions and an assemblage of myriad articulations as a semantic space consisting of meanings and practices" (Sun 81).

3)   *"User experience is both situated and constructed (Sun 82).*

"User experience, in regards to the CLUE framework, is the complex relation between a user and technology. "It consists of a material interaction with the artifact and its surrounding context and an interpretation process of this activity and constructed meaning. In this way, user experience is both situated and constructed in a local cultural context, and thus action and meaning are blended smoothly.

4)   *"Technology use is a dual mediation process" (Sun 82).*
Technology can help to create culturally localized user experiences that mediate not only instrumental practices but also social meanings. User experience is founded on and originates from the process of mediation. In simpler terms, user experience is a mediation process that includes tool-mediated production and sign-mediated communication. Only with this dual medication process in mind can we successfully design technologies that work in local contexts.

5)   *"Structured affordance comes from dialogic interactions (Sun 82).*
According the "CLUE approach, affordance cannot be designed but must be enacted through use. Affordance is the outcome of dialogic interactions between technology, user, and activity. It is described as a three-level activity-based structure consisting of operational, instrumental, and social affordances. This structure distinguishes different levels of affordances with a focus on social interaction. It can help designers to locate user needs and prioritize design goals in the design process

6)   *"Culturally localized user experience respects use practices of individual local users and values their efforts at user localization" (Sun 82).*

"The CLUE approach begins with an exploration of user activity in context for design inspirations, and continues and circulates in a cycle as users localize a technology according to their lifestyles. Users play a vital role in bringing something to the experience and in co-constructing the experience. Because user experience would not be meaningful without the involvement of users, user participation, interpretation, and contribution are important elements in the whole experience cycle. This stance toward local users, and its appreciation of user localization efforts show possibitlities for finding a balance in cross-cultural design between diverse user groups and individual subjectivity" (Sun 82-3).

7)   *"Design is both problem-solving and engaged conversation" (Sun 83).*

Another goal of the CLUE approach is to "foster an ongoing conversation between technology and users, technology and its surrounding local conditions, the local and the global, and designers and users. Technology use occurs on a cycle that gains momentum with constant interactions and ongoing dialogues. A dialogic methodology is essential to help create meaningful technology use experience. A CLUE perspective asks us to extend outr view of design from problem solving to engaged conversation in this era of participatory culture" (Sun 83).

Although Sun's approach does not give a concrete, verifiable method, her approach does constitute the importance of site localization, and studying the entire circuit of a culture before designing a technology with target users in a particular culture.

One could also follow the designs of successfully localized websites in the process of redesign. In my experience, successfully localized websites are often websites of large corporations, such as McDonald's, Pizza Hut, KFC, Domino's, Nescafe, BMW, United Arab Emirates Airlines, etc. Each has a specific domain for a different country. While culture may not be defined by nationality, people from individual nations are often accustomed to particular business or institutional designs. For instance, no matter where a student is from in the United States, a Bachelor's degree is typically designed to last for four years. Most websites present the menu bar near the top of the page, avoiding confusion for cultures who read the opposite direction, and avoiding any hierarchical order, implying perhaps less anxiety for specific users.

Conclusion:

Even though the University of Freiburg's website updates the "News" section of its website regularly and provides the linguistic option for its site to be in English, it does not present an alternative and culturally sensitive layout. Therefore, the message portrayed by the website and the university's online presence is that the preexisting culture is better than any culture that could be presented by researchers or scholars with a different cultural background. Given the university's value of intercultural collaboration in research and providing international

scholars opportunities, the university's website must be revised or updated to be sensitive toward the target audience of prospective international students and scholars.

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