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FACULTY OF ARTS

SEO STRATEGIES OF FOREIGN BRANDS IN CHINA

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I declare that I am the author of this bachelor's thesis entitled "SEO Strategies of Foreign Brands in China" with the professional supervision of my supervisor and all the sources have been cited and acknowledged in the Bibliography section of this paper.

in Olomouc on the 19th of April 2017   …………………………………………

Michal Pecánek

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CONTENT

PREFACE

People on the Internet are used to finding answers to their questions within a matter of seconds these days. Search engines process all the available information on the Internet with the ultimate goal of serving users the most relevant results. Understanding the user and their search intent is essential for providing such service, leaving us with an even more complex problem than all the algorithms behind search engines – the human brain.

Website owners naturally want their websites to be seen. Ranking high on the result pages of search engines is an efficient method how to boost site's visibility. It is done by analyzing how search engines work and applying this knowledge to adjust the website. This adjustment is called Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and it should be an important part of any marketing efforts done on websites. It is a process leading to unknown results as both main variables, humans and search engines, are difficult to predict.

Google is one of the best known companies in the world and their search engine is used by most Internet users on a daily basis. Google's market share in countries differs because there are other search engines in the world, some of them being only local. Furthermore, there is an enormous marketplace where Google has little to no power at all – China. Google services are officially banned by the Chinese government and even though there are well-known and frequently used ways how to access banned websites, it makes no difference in the fact that Chinese search market belongs to local search engines, with Baidu being the most prominent one.

During my stay in China for 2 semesters I discovered that Chinese websites look completely different to what Western users are used to. With my increasing interest in marketing, especially SEO and related fields, it became natural to start researching how the digital marketing world in China looks like. However, English resources were scarce and it seemed that even Chinese authors wrote more about optimization for Google than for Baidu. Moreover, I did a small research among a few foreign companies doing business in China and many of them did not have their sites optimized at all. I believe this thesis could bring a fresh insight into SEO in China because my knowledge of Chinese Studies could be applied.

The aim of this thesis is to present the most important factors which should be considered when creating and optimizing a website, then put it in a Chinese market context and lastly analyze SEO strategies and efforts of selected foreign brands doing business in

China. This thesis will not focus on in-depth SEO analysis as it would require access to private data, but will provide a comprehensive and comparative perspective on SEO landscape in China. It will point out the differences in Chinese approach and findings from the analyses will be summarized into a list of recommendations.

1   SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION FUNDAMENTALS

This chapter is dedicated to SEO fundamentals in order to describe many aspects which encompass this marketing discipline. It is necessary to understand SEO in general to be able to compare it with the Chinese environment later on in this thesis. Everything written in this chapter applies to Google, if not stated otherwise, and might not be applicable to other search engines in some cases.

1.1   SEARCH ENGINES

It is essential to understand how search engines work before even applying any SEO techniques. However, with the progress in science, technologies and particularly artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, search engines constantly get more complex and refined. Therefore fully understanding what goes on behind the code of search engines is impossible, and as admitted by Haahr (2016), software engineer at Google, not even Google employees know what exactly their machine learning technology called RankBrain does.

Process of Getting the Right Answers

Modern search engines are able to look up information in whole text documents, thus they are being referred to as full-text search engines. In order to match up with the user's query in the best possible way, search engines are trying to go through all public pages on the World Wide Web. It all begins with crawling the Web. Pages on the Internet are connected with links and search engines start crawling with a seed set of high quality websites (Enge et al., 2015) where they follow links to other internal or external pages and they repeatedly follow this path until the crawling process is completed. *"Through links, search engines' automated robots, called crawlers or spiders, can reach the many trillions of interconnected documents."* (Enge at al., 2015, p.78)

These robots constantly visit pages and index them, which means saving or updating them in an enormous database of important data later used for serving the search results. Pages can be crawled (if it is not disallowed by webmasters) but that does not mean they will get indexed. There are various reasons for this and it will be further discussed in the Technical SEO section.

When a user enters a query, the search engine will return a list of pages that were already indexed. This list consists of individual Search Engine Results Pages (SERPs) and is arranged according to relevancy and quality. SERPs do not usually look the same for different users even if they use exactly the same query. This is an effect of personalization which uses cookies[1], location data and social media signals and it is something to take into account when evaluating ranking positions. Therefore, pages that are ranking high in SERP are considered by search engines as those providing the highest value to the particular user. Search engines use lots of ranking factors and algorithms to do this and understanding what is going on behind these processes is the main goal of everyone involved in SEO.

Evolution and Development

Google changes search algorithms 500-600 times a year and while most of the changes are minor and not noticeable, there are occasionally major algorithmic updates affecting ranking significantly (moz.com, 2017) and such updates even have their own names such as Panda, Penguin, Hummingbird or Caffeine. All of these changes and updates cause that SEO is a very dynamic discipline and it is essential to know about the latest trends because what worked half a year ago does not mean it will work now. This is also a reason why it is a must to follow official accounts of search engines and influential people working for them as well as SEO professionals around the world to keep up with the latest trends and discoveries.

The changes are not only implemented in order to provide the best service in terms of returning the most relevant and highest quality search results but also to penalize those who try to deceive search engines by using so called black hat SEO techniques. These practices are implemented with the sole purpose of ranking high in SERP. Pages using black hat techniques are optimized for robots, not for users, and it is in the search engine's best interest to reveal such pages and penalize them by lowering their rankings, and consequently learn from it in order to quickly discover other pages doing the same. It is very difficult to come up with something that would deceive Google for a longer period of time nowadays and while creativity and trying new things is very important for SEO, the goal still stays the same – do it for users, not for search engines.

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[1] Piece of data stored in user's browser used to remember and track information about the user.

Current trend of search engines is to provide as much information as possible without having the user click on any result on the results page which is convenient and saves time. Recent study conducted on the US market discovered that 34% of searches on Google get no clicks at all with a big difference between mobile and desktop devices (Fishkin, 2017). Good example would be weather forecast which appears right at the top of SERP and user does not need to click anywhere further. Out of Google, Yahoo, Bing, Chinese Baidu, Russian Yandex, Korean Naver and Czech Seznam, only Bing was not able to show the result in such form.

Picture 1: Weather forecast in Seznam, source: own screenshot
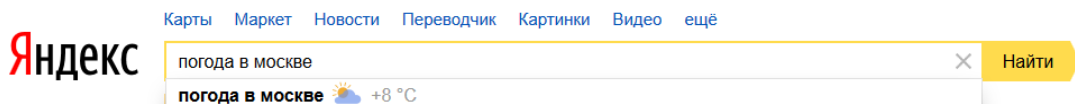
Picture 2: Weather forecast in Yandex, the result is already visible in the suggestion window, source: own screenshot

Picture 3: Weather forecast in Naver, source: own screenshot

Google has 80% global search engine market share on desktop (netmarketshare.com, 2017) and handles at least 2 trillion searches per year (Sullivan, 2016) but the actual number could be much bigger (Sullivan, 2016 and Fishkin, 2017) which provides gigantic amount of data. This is one of the reasons why Google leads the search engine market and sets trends which other search engines often try to follow. Other resources could help if there is not enough data, for example mobilizing and employing a lot of people to create the data as was recently demonstrated by Chinese Baidu. Understanding and processing natural language is indispensable for AI development and Baidu took advantage of China's huge population to employ thousands of translators throughout the whole country to produce valuable data (Ramli and Webb, 2017). One of the upcoming SEO trends will be dealing with voice search which needs such data for proper development. Voice search can be used in the standard search engine interface, usually on mobile devices, but it also serves as the main input for intelligent personal assistants such as Apple's Siri, Google Home or Amazon Echo.

Showing answers in SERP, or even in the search suggestion window as seen in Picture 2, is an indicator of search engines working on developing their own knowledge of relationships between people and things (Enge et al., 2015). *"In May 2012, Google announced the Knowledge Graph. Initially, this was a set of structured databases of information that allows Google to access information without deriving it from the Web."* (Enge et al., 2015, p.104) Results from Knowledge Graph are shown in a Knowledge Panel which always appears above the fold being one of the first things the user can notice. These panels provide quick answers and are very convenient because they connect a lot of information together. Google even makes connections between queries and can put things into context. I tried Google's voice search asking sequences of questions such as "who is the president of the United States" then "who is his wife" and lastly "do they have children", which resulted in showing the exact information I was looking for without having to click anywhere most of the time. It is worth mentioning that I tried this test in English, Chinese, Czech and Spanish and the returned results varied, English and Chinese provided the most contextual information for the tested queries. *"This is a critical first step towards building the next generation of search, which taps into the collective intelligence of the web and understands the world a bit more like people do."* (Singhal, 2012) Other major search engines develop their own knowledge graphs and it is very exciting to watch the search market progressing so quickly.

Vertical, Blended and Local Search

Sometimes users want to look up information in specific segments, e.g. pictures, videos, flight tickets, real estate or restaurants. For this purpose there are so called vertical

search engines focusing on particular formats and topics of web content. Information provided by vertical search engines are generally more accurate and provide better value than traditional search engines thanks to their focused crawlers and niche database of data. However, major search engines also offer vertical searches which can be blended into the general search showing different types of content within the SERP (text, images, videos, maps etc.).
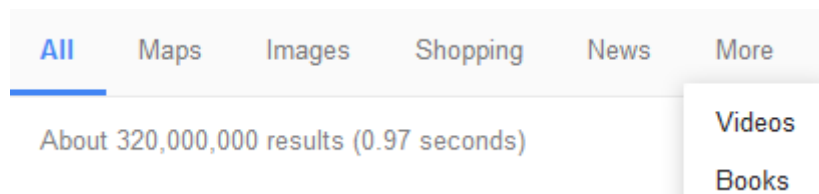
Picture 5: Vertical searches in Google, source: own screenshot

This brings more opportunities for SEO. According to Enge et al. (2015, p.122), *"high placement in these vertical search results can equate to high placement in the web search results, often above the traditional 10 blue links presented by the search engines."* Therefore optimizing all types of content[2] and being part of related vertical searches is recommended. It is essential to optimize for local search and be part of business listings for businesses catering only to local needs in order to appear for queries such as "plumbers in New York" or "best Chinese restaurants nearby".

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[2] e.g. well written titles and descriptions for videos, relevant picture file names and tagging
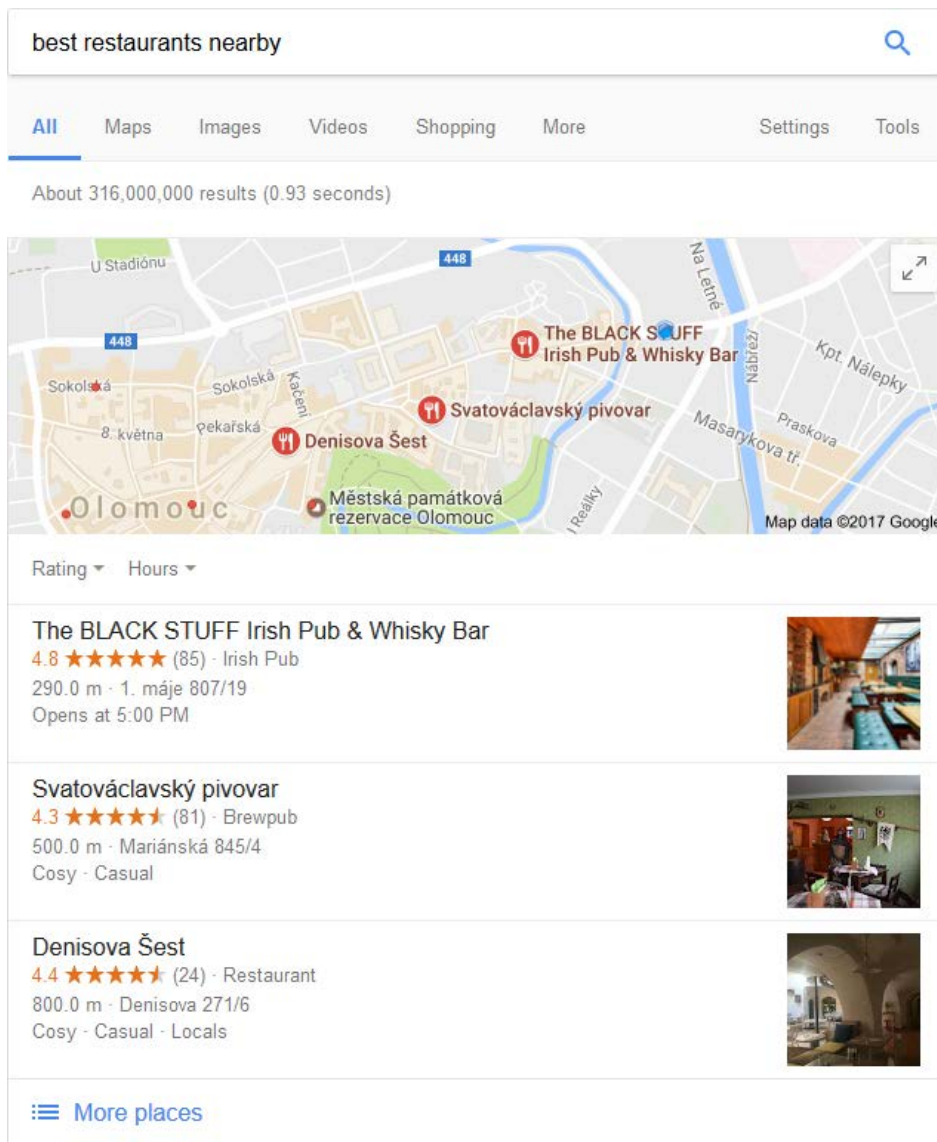
Search Engines throughout the World

Google leads the global search market but there are countries where Google loses a significant part of the market share or is completely dominated by other search engines. The way of optimizing websites depends heavily on the target market and the one or more search engines that are the most important in that market (Enge et al., 2015). As for the other major global search engines such as Yahoo or Bing, which is in fact just one search engine powered by Microsoft after signing a cooperation deal, the optimization process should be adjusted to them. Fortunately, there are usually only a few, both subtle and notable, aspects the optimizers should take into account and should not be in any way underestimated (Rende, 2015). Ranking high in Google does not automatically have the same effect in other search engines. On the other hand, it is useful to have accounts for

various search engines and use their data and tools. From my own experience, the keyword tool created by Czech Seznam actually provides more value and information for SEO in Czech than its Google's counterpart and is a great complement when doing keyword research.

The biggest Google rivals on country levels are Korean Naver, Russian Yandex, Czech Seznam and Chinese search engines with Baidu in the front. However, Google is only massively dominated in China because its services are blocked there. Up to date data differs a lot for the market share in other countries but the trend seems to be in favor of Google. People spend more time on mobile devices and Google services are nearer to those who have Android operating system which must be hard to keep up with for other search engines.

1.2 ON-PAGE SEO

SEO includes many activities and there are specialists focused on a certain niche within SEO nowadays. On-page refers to everything that can be optimized on the website and is fully under the control of webmasters. It includes both the content of the website and its source code. However, this part will be only focused on the content and the following part on the technical factors as both aspects of on-page SEO cover lots of various topics that could be discussed separately for clarity.

Keyword Research

It is important to understand the difference between keywords and queries as these two terms might be interchangeable in a casual conversation. Keywords are exact terms that marketers are targeting in organic (non-paid) or paid search and users do not care about them. Queries are inputs which users use to look up something, they do not need to make sense, they could be misspelled, but it is something marketers need to take into account to understand how people look up information on the Internet and use the knowledge to attract traffic. *"Search queries are a larger set than keywords, and by looking at search queries we can find new keywords to target in our search marketing campaigns."* (Gabbert, 2016)

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Keyword research is a backbone of SEO strategies. The output is a list of organized keywords which should be targeted by the website to drive performance. It provides information about which words to use in website's content, how the target audiences behave, and even how to build website's architecture because all important keywords or sets of keywords should ideally have only one landing page[3]. Otherwise pages targeting the same keywords could cannibalize on each other by splitting the rank between them. This demonstrates that SEO should be ideally done before launching a website.

Queries could be divided into 3 groups and it is helpful to label all relevant keywords with these:

- Informational queries – the user intent is to look up information and to find answers, they are sometimes typed in a form of a question (where, what, why, when, how, etc.)
- Navigational queries – the intent is to end up on a particular website, user already knows about certain brand or product and wants to visit its website
- Transactional queries – the intent is to make a conversion, usually buy something

SEO is naturally focused on all 3 groups and even though it may seem that targeting transactional queries is the most important, it would be a huge mistake not to target the

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[3] Page which shows up in SERP and users end up there after clicking on it.

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other 2 groups used to build relationships with the potential customers. People generally look up information before buying something on the Internet.

There are two types of keywords defined by their popularity. It is tempting to target the most popular keywords with millions of searches per month but these are usually very general and highly competitive.
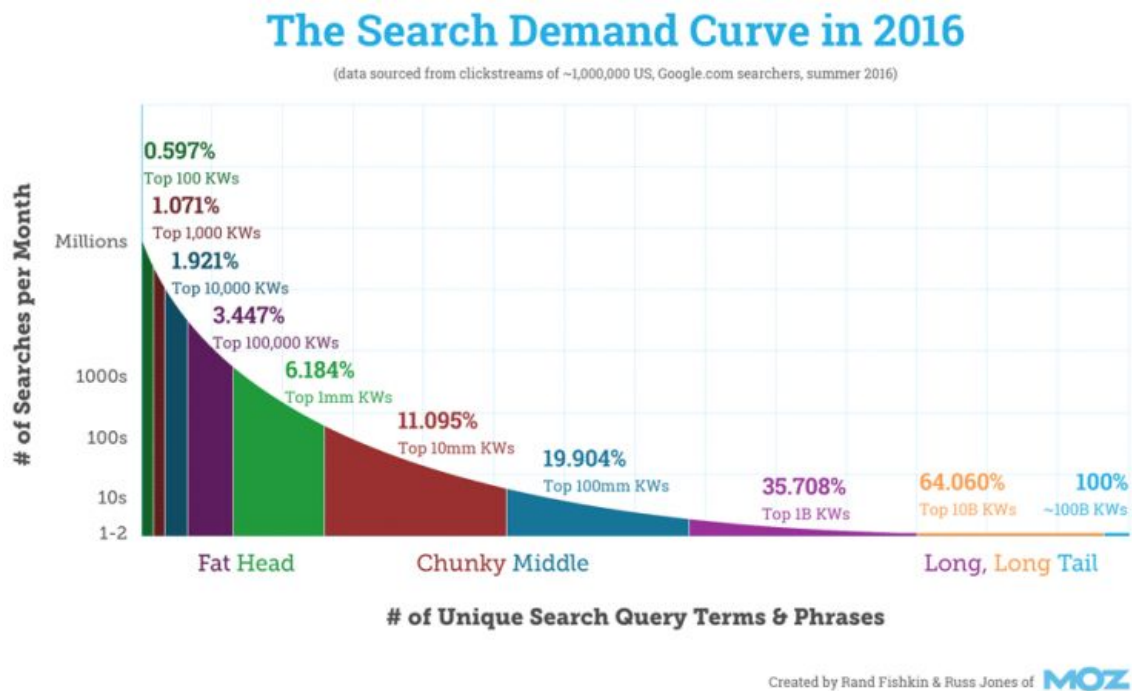
As seen in the picture above, the most popular keywords, called fat head, only represent a fraction of all keywords. Long tail keywords are generally the most valuable ones unless we have a very famous brand that has possibilities to compete for the most competitive ones. They are more specific and usually consist of more words but words count is not the criteria. "President of the United States" query consists of 5 words but returns 516 million results while googling my 2 words name returns only under 60 thousand results. Google's Hummingbird algorithm attempts to determine the intent behind every query, relate the terms and consider synonyms rather than matching up the query with the seemingly closest results (Enge et al., 2015). This means that valuable pages could appear in SERP even if they do not contain the exact keywords from the query. However, it is a good practice to use as many synonyms as possible while not overusing them at the same time[4].

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[4] So called keyword stuffing was one of the black hat techniques but it does not work anymore because Google is able to tell whether the content sounds natural or not with such keyword density.

There are significant fluctuations in average monthly searches for certain keywords, e.g. presidential election, terrorist attack in London, Olympic Games program, Christmas presents tips or winter coats for men. These are called seasonal keywords and generate the most traffic only during a specific time. Pages targeting such keywords should be made well ahead of the anticipated season in order to be indexed in time and have the chance to rank. In case of keywords which cannot be anticipated (terrorist attack in London), the content is demanded and shared on a large scale which search engines notice. Competitors also do not have the time advantage.

Identifying target audience is crucial for any marketing efforts and there is no difference in SEO and its use in keyword research. Segmentation is a useful process but it is too shallow for this purpose, creating so called personas is a good option. According to Enge et al. (2015, p.466), *"personas are fictional characters designed to represent a group of people with similar values relating to the use of a product or service. Personas include information on the potential user's motivation for using something, and the needs that drive it."* Creating multiple personas allow marketers to understand the searchers intent better as well as problems they could be facing and their needs. It helps with new keyword ideas, better personalization and content strategy. Doing real life interviews could be valuable for the process of creating personas.

Picture 9: A persona created for a NGO doing volunteering in developing countries, photo omitted, source: own production

There are lots of ways and options how to do keyword research and it depends on the scale and resources available. The output could be in form of only a few hundreds of keywords but also could contain tens of thousands of keywords for huge websites. The more data available the better starting position for the keyword research. It is possible to use Google tools (Analytics and Search Console) to check which queries people use to visit particular pages of the website but its use is limited for SEO purposes. Another resource is money and that is because there are multiple third-party tools that make SEO easier and more comfortable, often providing data that are difficult to access without buying licenses or subscriptions for these tools.

It is important to utilize as many sources for keyword ideas as possible. Apart from the official search engines' and third-party tools, there are also other ways to brainstorm ideas:
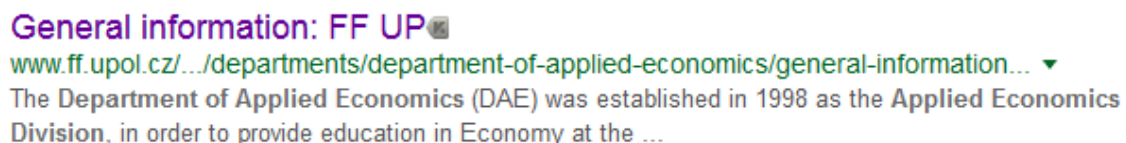
- collocations and search engines' autocomplete (suggestions) tools in the search window, e.g. Google Instant

- Google Trends and tools monitoring trends on the Internet

- forums and discussions to see how the target audience communicates

- various linguistics tools

- check competition

It is necessary to clean, sort out, cluster and tag the data set after accumulating all the keyword ideas because there will be a lot of duplicate, technically the same (e.g. different word order) or irrelevant keywords produced by combining the output from various tools. The final product should be a comprehensive list of keywords which are ideally categorized into topical groups, tagged with a type of query and provide information about average monthly searches and keyword difficulty which is a metric measuring how competitive a certain keyword is in organic results[5]. The final format ultimately depends on the specialist and his approach to the keyword research.

Optimizing Individual Elements

Completed keyword research is a foundation for website's content. Keyword usage includes elements such as titles, headlines, content designed to appeal to searchers in the results (SERP Snippet) to entice clicks (Enge et al., 2015) and the on-page content itself. Individual elements of the content are not worth the same for search engines and it is important to focus on proper keyword placements (Šimko, 2013). For example, title tags are the most important and placing a keyword to the beginning has the most relevance for search engines (Dean, 2016).

General information: FF UP
www.ff.upol.cz/.../departments/department-of-applied-economics/general-information... ▾
The Department of Applied Economics (DAE) was established in 1998 as the Applied Economics Division, in order to provide education in Economy at the ...

Picture 10: SERP snippet, source: own screenshot

The picture above represents a search result for Department of Applied Economics in Olomouc. There are 3 visible elements – title tag, URL and meta description. It is possible to add more elements[6] but this is a standard layout for SERP snippets.

Title tag was already mentioned as the key element. It should have an ideal length, the recommended maximum length is 50-60 characters but it depends on the length in

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[5] Do not confuse with Competition metric provided by the official tools which is only focused on paid search.

[6] See Structured Data in Technical SEO section.

pixels (moz.com, 2017b). It is possible that title tag will be cut off if it is 50 characters long but contains a lot of "m" and "w" characters for example. It should be well optimized because it is the element which searchers click on in order to access the website. It does not appear anywhere on the page after clicking through but it remains as a name in browser's tab. It is also usually displayed in social networks when the content is shared (moz.com, 2017b). It should convey the main message, be unique, utilize the recommended length by placing important keywords and relevant terms in it and ultimately contain a brand name separated from the message with a divider (e.g. vertical bars | or dashes –). If the brand is well known, being an important keyword itself, it could take the advantage and place the brand name at the beginning of the title tag.

The next element is **URL** which should be ideally comprehensible for both search engines and users because these are also shared and it is always better if the user can tell what the content might be about just by looking at it. According to Enge et al. (2015), the ideal URLs should describe the content while placing keywords in it if possible, be short[7], static[8], use hyphens as words divider and omit using upper-case letters.

The last element is so called **meta description**. There are some highlighted words in the picture above and that is because they match the query "department of applied economics olomouc". Even though the word "division", which is highlighted there, was not used, the search engine recognized that it is semantically relevant. This element should describe accurately and succinctly the content and complement the title tag to make searchers click through (Enge et al., 2015). The optimal length is around 155 characters (moz.com, 2017c). This element is not a ranking factor because it is a text which is not visible for users outside the SERP, however, a well optimized meta description can increase click-through rate (CTR). However, according to Enge et al. (2015), if the page is targeting longer-tail traffic, it may be wiser to let the search engine extract the meta description itself because writing it can detract the search relevance that the engines make naturally.

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[7] Minimize the number of subdomains and subdirectories.
[8] Content on the page stays the same and search engines handle them more easily than their dynamic counterparts.

Picture 11: Optimized title tag and meta description, source: own screenshot

This is how an optimized title tag and meta description could look like. URL was not optimized because the content is already very deep in the site structure caused by English version of the original Czech site http://www.kae.upol.cz/. Website versions in different languages, especially Chinese, are an important topic in this thesis.

There are other elements that need to be optimized apart from the ones in SERP snippets. **Heading tags** are used to make texts easier to read by dividing them into logical pieces. As well as in text editors, these have different levels to create headline hierarchy within the text. They provide another opportunity where to place keywords and the highest level tag should be the headline of the page, complementing the title tag. Enge et al. (2015) claim that this headline will be weighted heavier than lower level tags and it should contain the most important keywords from the title tag to reinforce the search term to make the visitor feel like he has arrived on the right page with the content he sought.

Incorporating good looking and relevant pictures into texts improve user experience. Crawlers are looking for 2 elements in **images – filename and alt attribute**. Accurately naming image files and describing them in the HTML alt attribute with proper use of keywords related to the image is a good practice. Such images can rank high in the vertical image search.

High-quality Content

A popular phrase in digital marketing world is: "Content is king." According to Ratcliff's transcript of one SEO Q&A (2016), it was confirmed by Lipattsev, Google's Search Quality Senior Strategist, that content is indeed one of the two most important ranking factors. High-quality, valuable, fresh and unique content is the backbone of SEO efforts and search engines can identify how good the content is. It is possible to write about virtually anything and the topics which are perceived as boring and not attractive might even have much lower competition and are easier to rank for. People have a lot of different problems, questions and interests and again, this is where the keyword analysis is used as a source of

data for further brainstorming of content ideas. Some of the processes would be similar with keyword research such as competition analysis, mentions on the Internet, current trends, target audience analysis etc. Copywriters are people who write content professionally and content marketing is an individual marketing discipline. Apart from many other aspects, a good copywriter must know at least basics of SEO in order to write great content.

Dean's study (2016b) revealed interesting findings related to content:

- It is recommended to publish focused and in-depth content that covers a single topic.
- Longer content tends to rank higher in Google, the average length for first SERP is 1890 words.
- *"Content with at least one image significantly outperformed content without any images. However, we didn't find that adding additional images influenced rankings."*

The study also found that an exact keywords match in the title tag only has small correlation with rankings which is contributed to the shift towards semantic search. It is still important to use keywords throughout the content with synonyms and variations included but it needs to be read naturally. Also, other search engines might not be as developed as Google in the semantic search.

Internal and External Links

Essentially every page should contain links to other pages. Links pointed to other parts of the same website are internal and it helps both the crawler and visitors to navigate through the website. External links are the ones that point out to different domains and should be included in the content if they can provide value to the reader, often to a topically relevant page.

Both types of links are very important and correct usage can boost up rankings. General guideline would be creating an internal linking structure that makes logical sense[9] with appropriate anchor texts[10]. Linking out to relevant and high-quality sites is believed to be a ranking signal too (Dean, 2016c). It has been confirmed by Aharony (2016) even though it was vaguely denied by Google (Schwartz, 2015).

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[9] See Information Architecture in Technical SEO section.
[10] The clickable text distinguished from the rest of a document, more in Link Building in Off-page SEO section.

1.3 TECHNICAL SEO

Having a profound knowledge of all aspects of SEO requires a series of skills that only a few people possess. Web and software development is one of those skills that marketers often lack and it is also the reason why this section is separated from the on-page SEO. A lot of SEO positions nowadays require knowledge of many computer languages and frameworks; there are even vacancies for SEO engineers which are mainly focused on technical SEO (King, 2016). However, basic knowledge of these technical aspects including coding is a must for any SEO specialist as well as an ability to do a data analysis which often requires knowledge of statistical computing in Python or R languages. This section will describe basic technical aspects of SEO.

robots.txt and Meta Robots Tag

Also known as Robots Exclusion Protocol, it is a publicly available text file placed in a root directory of a domain (www.domain.com/robots.txt) and its main function is to tell robots how to crawl the website, especially telling them not to crawl particular directories or pages. However, it is possible that these will be indexed because there might be links pointing to that page which creates an alternative way for the crawlers. It is the first thing robots check when visiting a certain website (robotstxt.org, 2007).

```
User-agent: *
Disallow: /kalendar/
Disallow: /kalendar-akci/
Disallow: /en/calendar-of-events/
Disallow: /uploads/
Crawl-Delay: 30

User-agent: Googlebot
Disallow: /uploads/

User-agent: 008
Disallow: /
```

Picture 12: robots.txt file of Palacký University website, source: own screenshot

This robots.txt file tells all robots not to crawl 4 directories of the website and to wait 30 seconds before crawling another page which prevents overloading the server. Then it tells Google not to crawl a specific directory and lastly prevents a robot marked as 008 not to crawl the website at all.

Robots could also be instructed directly in the HTML code of a certain page. This directive is placed in the <head> section and tells robots whether to index the page or not,

follow the links placed on the page or not[11] or allow both indexing and following the links (directive *"all"* as seen in the picture below) which is a default value.

```
 3   <head>
 4
 5   <meta charset="utf-8">
 6   <!--
 7        This website is powered by TYPO3 - inspiri
 8        TYPO3 is a free open source Content Manager
 9        TYPO3 is copyright 1998-2017 of Kasper Skaa
10        Information and contribution at https://typ
11   -->
12
13
14
15   <title>Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci</title>
16   <meta name="generator" content="TYPO3 CMS">
17   <meta name="language" content="cs">
18   <meta name="robots" content="all">  ⟵———●
```

sitemap.xml

Sitemap is a file which contains all pages which should be indexed. According to Enge et al. (2015, p.263), *"adding a URL to a sitemap file does not guarantee that a URL will be crawled or indexed. However, it can result in the search engine discovering and indexing pages that it otherwise would not."* Smaller websites do not usually need sitemaps as they are usually easily crawlable but the importance of sitemap grows with the size of a website. Recommended placement for the sitemap is again in the root directory and it is a good practice to mention the URL of the sitemap in the robots.txt file in the form of "Sitemap: the URL" (Šimko, 2013).

Information Architecture

Also referred to as website architecture, it relates to the way websites are structured in terms of internal linking and its layout of sections and pages as a whole. Well-designed information architecture (IA) has many advantages for both users and search engines (Enge et al., 2015). IA should be planned before launching a website which is relatable to the way architectures build houses. Website content should be structured into logical and hierarchical layout in order to be intuitive and easy to navigate. It was already mentioned that each keyword or set of keywords the website is targeting should have its own landing page and Šimko (2013) points out that these should be interlinked in a way that is

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[11] Determines if links pass ranking value or not, more in Link Building in Off-page SEO section.

convenient for both users and search engines, requiring a minimum number of clicks to end up on the desired page. This again emphasizes the importance of keyword analysis because it should be used as a foundation of IA in order to find out how to create and lay out landing pages for important keywords.

Enge et al. (2015) claim that minimizing the number of clicks to any given page could be achieved if the website uses so called flat architecture in which websites with less than 10,000 pages should require maximum of 4 clicks to get to any content from the homepage.
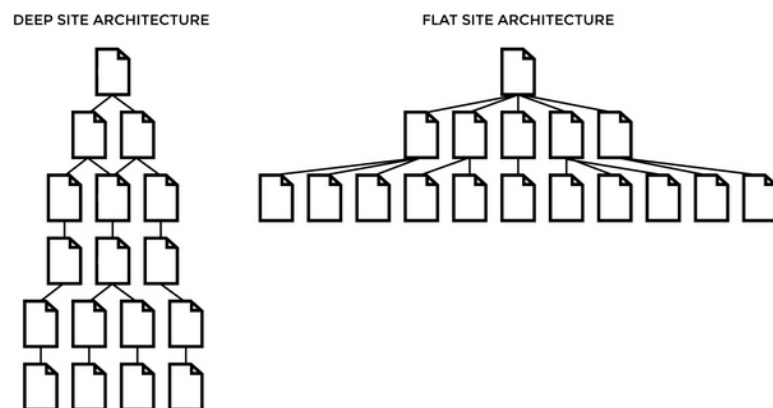
It also helps to have so called breadcrumb navigation implemented on the website. It shows the user where he currently is in the website hierarchy and strengthens the internal linking while naturally using important keywords as the anchor text.

UP - English / FF - English / Departments / General information / Applied Economics

Picture 15: Breadcrumb navigation on Palacký University website which also demonstrates flaws in IA, source: own screenshot

Status Codes

Every visited page returns a certain status code that gives the browser or robots additional information and instructions (Meyers, 2011). The following are important for SEO:

- 200 – There is no problem.
- 301 – Permanent redirect – the original page is permanently moved to a different URL while passing most of the "ranking value" the original page has built. There are several reasons for deleting or moving a webpage, search engines keep historical data making visits to those pages still possible and non-existent page or improperly moved one lead to bad user experience and/or losing the original ranking.

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- 302 – Temporary redirect – keeps the original page, but this approach is not recommended and will not pass as much ranking value as 301 (moz.com, 2017d). It can be used for site maintenance for example.

- 404 – Not found – It is quite usual to encounter this error while browsing the Web so even casual Internet users might have experience with this. The server did not find a matching page. According to Fishkin (2009), it is fine to have 404s unless the page receives important backlinks[12], substantial traffic and/or has an obvious URL that the visitors/links intended to reach. Redirecting, restoring the page or fixing the link pointing to the error page could fix the problem. Also, 404 pages could be customized and used for actually making the user experience more interesting. Moz.com (2017d) suggests creating error 404 pages that contain notification about the error, a search box, easy navigation and a link to the homepage.
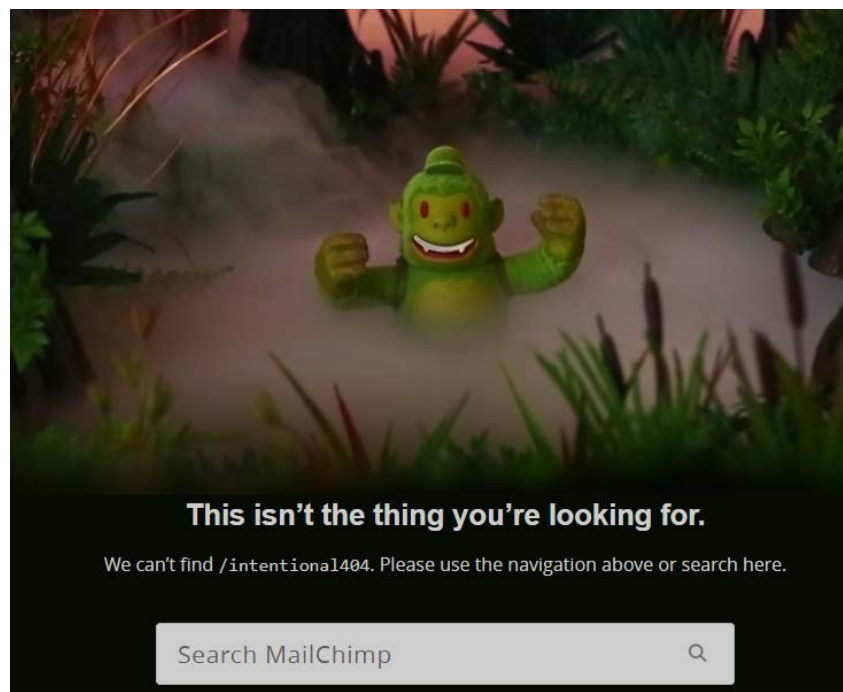
Duplicate Content

There is a lot of duplicate content on the Internet with which search engines need to deal because presenting basically the same pages in SERP would not provide the value searchers are looking for. When there are 2 or more URLs that have the same, or mostly

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[12] Incoming links from external sources, more in Linkbuilding in Off-page SEO section.

identical, content then it is considered as a duplicate. According to Šimko (2013), crawlers try to download pages which are not in the database yet because it would only take up capacity, however, indexing duplicate content within a single website (internal) or various websites (external) still may occur. Creation of such content might have various reasons and lots of them are technical problems. *"Duplicate content can result from many causes, including licensing of content to or from your site, site architecture flaws due to non-SEO-friendly content management systems, or plagiarism."* (Enge et al., 2015, p.321)

According to the same authors, duplicate content has several consequences:

- Wasting crawl budget, which is the number of pages a robot plans to crawl in a particular session within the website. Spending the budget on duplicate content pages results in fewer regular pages being crawled and consequently may cause fewer pages being included in the search engine index.
- Waste of link authority (ranking value) for a duplicate page that could have contributed to the original page.
- Duplicate pages compete against each other and search engines might not favor the preferred version for SERP.

Internal duplicate content could be often created even without the webmaster knowing about it. An interesting example is demonstrated on the following picture.

Picture 17: Internal duplicate content example, source: screenshot from Screaming Frog SEO tool

The 2 URLs in the picture contain the same content and actually neither is indexed by Google even though other pages deeper in the structure are indexed properly. There is a third, external duplicate, used only for the homepage and that is the one being indexed - www.kae.upol.cz/. Index status could be easily checked in Google by using a special search operator:

site:www.ff.upol.cz/menu/struktura-ff/katedry/katedra-aplikovane-ekonomie/

All   Images   News   Shopping   Maps   More   Settings   Tools

About 39 results (0.52 seconds)
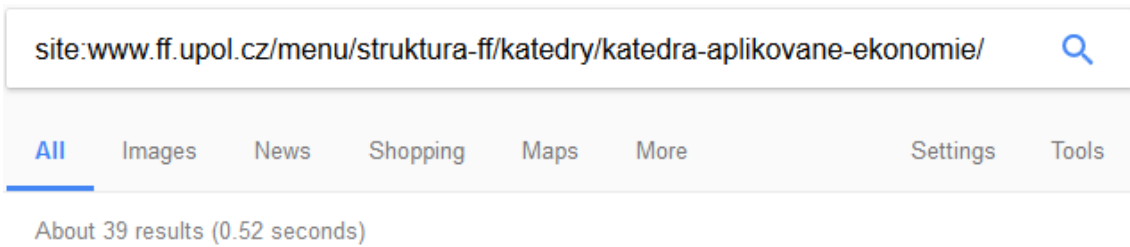
Picture 18: Indexation check in Google, 39 pages are indexed within this and lower level directories, source: own screenshot

A very common internal duplicate case is demonstrated in the following example (Štouračová, 2015):

- http://example.com/

- http://example.com/index.htm

- http://www.example.com/

- http://www.example.com/index.htm

The same author claims that the search engine often chooses a preferred form of the URL which is then displayed in the SERP. However, users might link to the website using different formats which could result as a waste of link authority.

Another example of internal duplicate content would be usage of parameters in URLs. These are for example often used in e-shops, which have products that differ only in size or color, and are also used for filtering categories. Parameters in URLs begin with a "?" sign and while the URL changes, the content basically stays the same.

External duplicate content could be made intentionally, for example by writing a post for another website and publishing it on own website too. Original content could also be republished without letting the author know, in such case, one solution would be contacting the website owner and another one is copyright infringement report, however, according to Enge et al. (2015), search engines can usually recognize the original content unless the original publisher website has a low authority and the websites publishing stolen content constantly rank better.

These are potential solutions how to solve duplicate content:

- URL canonicalization – Implementing a line of code into the HTML head tells the search engine which version of the duplicate content is preferred.

The 3 pages at the bottom are all referring to the top page with the rel=canonical tag, telling search engines to prefer it.

- 301 redirect – All duplicate pages will be permanently moved to the preferred one. Could be used when the duplicate pages are not needed.
- noindex meta robots tag – Telling the robots not to index the duplicate pages directly so only the preferred page is left for indexing.

Fishkin (2013) emphasizes that this should not discourage people from using pieces of content from others if there can be unique value added to it, for example quoting someone or using someone's video and then express own ideas.

Content Availability

Showing different content or URLs to users and search engines violates Google's Webmaster Guidelines (Google, 2017). This technique is called cloaking and is considered to be a black hat SEO technique.

Google (2017) emphasizes these examples of cloaking:

- *"Serving a page of HTML text to search engines, while showing a page of images or Flash to users."*
- Presenting text usually full of keywords only to search engines, not to human visitors, with intention of boosting the ranking.

Cloaking is not always implemented with bad intentions. A great example would be A/B split testing which is performed for conversion rate optimization[13] on certain landing pages, showing 50% of visitors different landing page than the other half.

Crawlers are not always able to scan pages thoroughly if they contain elements that are difficult to interpret. JavaScript (JS) and CSS languages are often mentioned in SEO world as one of these coding issues (Enge et al., 2015), but they are together with HTML considered as basic building blocks of the Web (W3C, 2014). Basically, CSS does website presentation (design and layout) and JavaScript adds dynamic elements to pages. Development of search engines makes this problem slowly disappear and according to Slegg (2015), there are even requests to enable all CSS and JS files from Googlebots. She also mentions the main reason for that: *"Google needs to be able to render the page completely, including the JavaScript and CSS, to ensure that the page is mobile-friendly and to apply both the mobile-friendly tag in the search results and the associated ranking boost for mobile search results."*

It is suitable to sum up this section with the following quote from Briggs (2016): *"Google can crawl JavaScript broadly, but there are caveats and limitations. Its JavaScript crawling isn't as battle-tested as its HTML crawl. If you rely on Googlebot's JavaScript crawl, you will eventually run into something that doesn't work as intended. This is a risk that must be accepted when venturing into full JavaScript-driven pages."* The same approach should apply when using CSS, Flash or any other elements in the code that could cause problems to crawlers.

Website Speed

Website's loading speed influences user experience a lot, no one wants to wait for a long time for a page to load. Google (2010) already in that year announced that site speed is a ranking factor. The company claims (2015) that loading speed exceeding only 1 second on a mobile network will create a poor user experience and interrupt user's flow of thought. Nevertheless, the most important thing is that the content above the fold is rendered within that time limit in order to appear like the whole page is ready to use, while the rest still might be loading. Google (2015) acknowledges that meeting this one second time budget is

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[13] More about this in SEO: Part of an Integrated Marketing Strategy chapter, User Experience and Conversion Rate Optimization section

a difficult task, therefore they provide a guide of best practices to follow in order to reduce the loading time. Those are mostly very technical things and should be taken care of by developers, not SEO specialists.

There is a great tool called PageSpeed Insights, which is developed by Google and not only checks site's speed but also recommends changes and possible improvements.

Secured Data

"HTTP (HyperText Transfer Protocol) and HTTPS (HyperText Transfer Protocol Secure) are both protocols, or languages, for passing information between web servers and clients. All you need to know is that HTTPS is a secure connection, whereas HTTP is unsecure. With a standard HTTP connection, it is possible for unauthorized parties to observe the conversation between your computing device and the site." (Murray, 2017)

Google announced (2014) that security is a top priority for them, giving websites using HTTPS a slight ranking advantage. This direction towards safer Internet was strengthened two years later by announcing that since 2017 all HTTP websites which collect passwords or credit cards will be marked as non-secure in Google Chrome browser with the intention to mark all HTTP sites as non-secure in the future (Google, 2016).

HTTPS is also known to be faster. Site migration to this faster and more secure protocol comes with several technical issues because all pages must be redirected from the old URLs to the new ones with HTTPS by using 301 redirects, and updating all stored information about the old URLs is necessary.

Structured Data

It is possible to include more data into SERP snippets which could stand out between competitors, these snippets are then referred to as rich. Structured data is pieces of code (metadata) which give search engines better insight into the data they are indexing. *"Semantic search is all about structured data. The entire effort that Google has undertaken involves indexing the unstructured data that is found across the Web and then placing it in structured data format within its index."* (Enge et al., 2015, p.384)

Google, Microsoft, Yahoo and Yandex collaborated on creation of schema.org which is a project focused on structured data and serves as a standard for implementing them, using then rich snippets as a "reward" for webmasters and users. Google consequently presented rich cards in 2016 which are used for mobile devices.
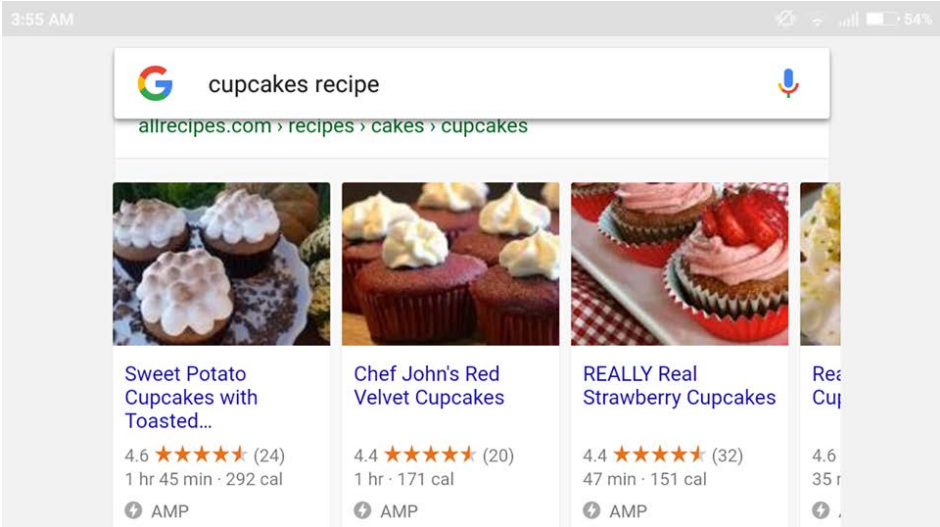
Implementing structured data could increase CTR (Bruemmer, 2011) but there is no assurance that it will be reflected in SERP, Google (2017b) mentions it only makes content eligible to appear in Rich results and/or Knowledge Graph cards. Google and schema.org provide a lot of information how these can be used and for what content.

Picture 20: Rich snippet for "cupcakes recipe" query, source: own screenshot

Picture 21: Rich cards for the same query, source: own screenshot

Optimization for Mobile Devices

Increasing time spent on mobile devices is a trend of recent years which presents new opportunities for marketers. In fact, in May 2015 Google already announced that more of their searches had taken place on mobile devices than on computers in 10 countries including the United States and Japan (Google, 2015b). This trend led Google to announce an important shift in their indexing which was originally based on the desktop version of a website (Phan, 2016). The author, speaking for Google, describes the shift as follows: *"Although our search index will continue to be a single index of websites and apps, our algorithms will eventually primarily use the mobile version of a site's content to rank pages from that site, to understand structured data, and to show snippets from those pages in our results. Of course, while our index will be built from mobile documents, we're going to*

continue to build a great search experience for all users, whether they come from mobile or desktop devices."

According to Štouračová (2015), there are 3 basic methods how to adjust websites for mobile devices:

- Responsive web design – *"Serves all devices with the same code that adjusts for screen size."* (Google, 2015c)
- Dynamic serving – *"Serves different code to each device, but on the same URL."* (Google, 2016b)
- Separate URLs – *"A common setup would be pages on `www.example.com` serving desktop users with corresponding pages served on `m.example.com` for mobile users. […] Separate mobile URLs serve different code to desktop and mobile devices (and perhaps even tablets), and on different URLs."* (Google, 2015d)

All of these methods have their advantages and disadvantages in terms of technical difficulties, budget requirements, options for content management, ranking consequences (especially separate URLs), maintenance and user experience.

1.4 OFF-PAGE SEO

It makes sense that search engines need to evaluate factors webmasters cannot control in order to present unbiased results. The most significant of these independent factors are backlinks – inbound links, which are, together with content, part of the 2 most important ranking factors as mentioned earlier.

Off-page SEO is closely related to branding activities and has to deal with building visibility, authority and reputation which should ultimately lead to acquiring links. The best links come from relevant sources with high domain (and page) authority and their acquisition is one of the main goals of content marketing strategies.

Link Building

An effective link building campaign might be the most challenging part of SEO efforts because their success depends on the behavior of others. Moogan (2014) claims that *"there are many techniques for building links, and while they vary in difficulty, SEOs tend to agree that link building is one of the hardest parts of their jobs. Many SEOs spend the majority of*

their time trying to do it well. For that reason, if you can master the art of building high-quality links, it can truly put you ahead of both other SEOs and your competition." There are a lot of factors that determine value of links (link juice in SEO jargon) including domain and page strength. The most important metrics to evaluate domain and page strength are the following:

- PageRank – Although not very relevant anymore because this metric was publicly removed by Google few years ago and remains a secret nowadays, it still started the whole link economy (Sullivan, 2016b). According to Enge et al. (2015), PageRank is, in the simplest terms, an analogy of a voting system where votes are not made equal. One page linking to another can vote with majority of its PageRank, if it votes (links to) for 2 pages or more pages, the value is split between them. However, it gets quite complicated when the complexity of the Web is taken into account and how websites are interlinked. This obviously led to a lot of black hat SEO techniques how to boost up PageRank artificially. It was represented by a number on a 1-10 logarithmic scale.

- TrustRank – measures how trustworthy a website is, for example government and university websites naturally rank among the best (Šimko, 2013).

- Domain Authority (DA) – Developed by SEO software companies (also called Domain Ranking), it is a metric that predicts how well a website will rank on search engines and is calculated by using lots of other metrics (moz.com, 2017e).

- Page Authority (PA) – Similar to DA but only on a page level. It could be a substitute for PageRank but PA is considered better, one of the reasons being that they use 1-100 logarithmic scale (Pickard, 2010). It is definitely better for SEO specialists because they can get the data after buying the software but it cannot be compared to PageRank anymore since it is not available.

Other link building metrics are then related to the links themselves and include:

- Anchor text – What is written in the clickable text redirecting users to the page the link is pointing to is a significant factor from SEO perspective. It gives search engines and users information about the page being linked to by using keywords. But again, these anchor texts should be written to sound naturally,

not forced, to avoid over-optimizing and keyword stuffing. Also "click here" anchor texts could not be seen as providing any value.

- Position of the link – It makes a difference whether a link is placed within a unique and valuable content or for example in the footer of every page where websites often include "about us", "careers" etc. *"Google is able to work out the position of a link on a page, and from this could choose to value it differently."* (Moogan, 2014)

- Relevance of the linking page – According to Moogan (2014), links should be placed on websites where potential customers might be which is not only a business perspective but it also means that the two linked websites are relevant to each other. Bringing relevant traffic to websites is ultimately one of the main goals of SEO.

- Number of links – due to obvious reasons of exploiting the link economy by acquiring links unnaturally, quality of links should be preferred to quantity. But keeping track of the number of backlinks is definitely a great metric how to evaluate link building campaigns but it should be treated with caution. It is possible to cause problems to other websites by linking a lot of spam to them. Webmasters can disavow backlinks if they feel they might cause harm instead of boost rank.

- Number of linking root domains – Figuratively speaking, a website could create infinite amount of links to other websites so it is possible to receive a huge amount of links just from 1 domain. Moogan (2014) claims that number of linking root domains is a stronger signal than number of links because it reflects true popularity of a website.

Links are set to pass the link juice by default but it is sometimes useful not to let the crawlers follow the link (stripping the link of its potential link juice) because its creation is not under control of webmasters (social media, forums, comments, Wikipedia etc.). This could be easily solved by setting the meta robots tag to "nofollow" but this affects the whole page. However, this attribute could be also added to a specific link which could be used as a link portfolio protection if there is a need to link to irrelevant websites or untrusted content for example. Dean (2016c) argues that even nofollow links could be a ranking factor and it may demonstrate a healthy link profile (natural and unnatural links ratio).

It is important to monitor link profile of websites with which our website is interlinked. According to Bacic (2013), Google is also ranking pages based on similarities between 2 pages which are not interlinked but are linked to on a third website in a correlation with each other. This phenomenon is called co-citation.
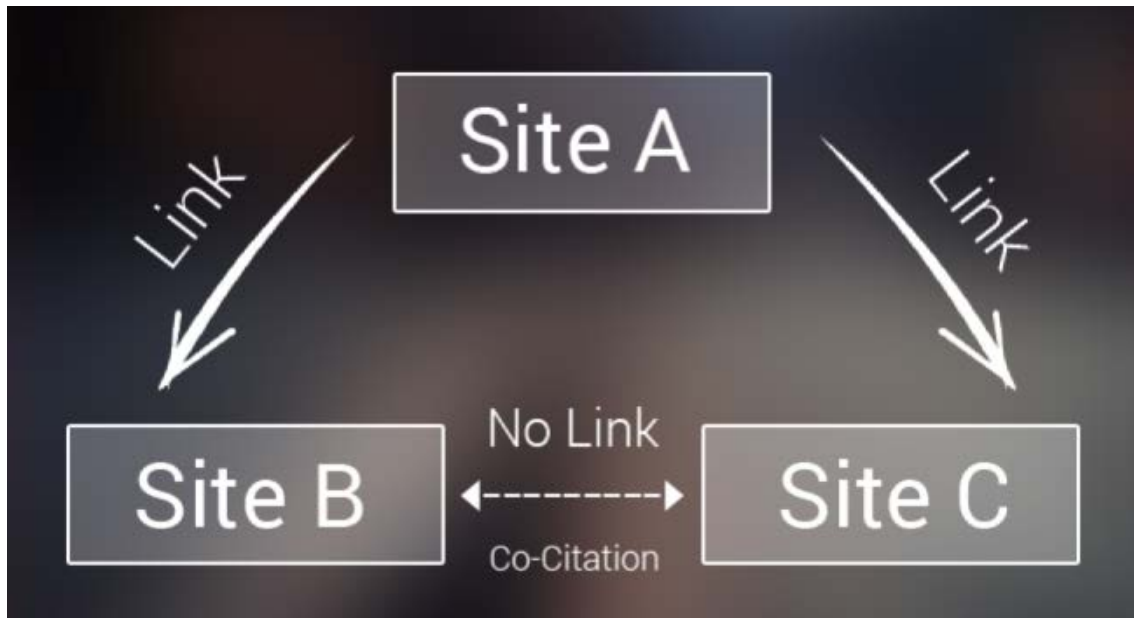
Second, similar term, is co-occurrence, which is *"used to describe the frequency and proximity of keywords appearing on a website as well as the relationship between them."* (Barker, 2015) This is all about semantic relationships. Bacic (2013) claims that being associated with impartial sources has potential to rank better.

There are numerous tactics how to acquire valuable links, however, earning links naturally by posting high-quality, unique and valuable content is the best case scenario. For example, if a crawler finds this thesis which will be publicly available, it will go through all the links listed in Bibliography, make some connections between them and it might benefit the cited sources. It might be more difficult to create the connections because this thesis covers a lot of topics and it would never appear on a single webpage as one piece of content.

The tactics which require additional effort besides writing the content are mostly about building relationships in the industry. This may include reaching out to opinion leaders (influencers), collaborating with others in the business, guest posting[14] and promoting the content by all means and channels that make sense for the given content strategy.

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[14] Creating content for third-party websites.

Social Media

The importance of social media in today's world is indisputable, so is their role in marketing strategies. They are a powerful tool for brand building, engaging with followers and driving relevant traffic from them and those around them. They are also an enormous platform for advertising, providing marketers with the best targeting options as social media collect user data, not just cookies[15]. Social networks are widespread search engines on their own and they complement link building in off-page SEO efforts. In fact, they are also a part of link building as followers click on links to read more about the posted content.

As mentioned in the previous section, this cannot be considered as a real link building because links posted to social media are nofollow. However, historically, there had been hype in the SEO world because answers provided by Google representatives to question whether social signals are considered a ranking factor had not been consistent (Patel, 2014). Several SEO focused companies and specialists published studies that showed social signals as one of the highest correlating factors for websites that perform well in Google. This could be explained by the fact that sites with high social engagement also tend to attract signals which have ranking value and simply being present on social media increases the probability of acquiring links (Traphagen, 2016).

Social media posts have their unique URLs, therefore if it is a public post then search engine robots have access to it. However, it makes sense that indexing all available social media posts would not be beneficial to anyone, which is solved with a selective algorithm that makes Googlebot skip most of the posts (Traphagen, 2016). How does it select posts worth indexing? Again, it is a matter of trust, authority and value which means that influencers have the highest chance of having their posts indexed.

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[15] Cookies are stored in a browser and it is a challenge to integrate the data across different browsers and devices; social media profile is always the same.

2 SEO: PART OF AN INTEGRATED MARKETING STRATEGY

According to Enge et al. (2015), SEO was not always a mainstream digital marketing activity and its importance nowadays can be attributed to various emerging trends. The first would be driving a large volume of highly targeted traffic from people with different search intent that could be used to achieve certain business goals. Another one is that well ranking sites have good visibility which creates an implied endorsement effect and boosts brand awareness. One more important trend is growth in consumers' dependence on the Internet and search engines which businesses cannot ignore in order to satisfy consumers' needs expressed through the conducted searches. SimilarWeb used data aggregated from year 2015 and compared it to early 2016, coming to a conclusion that 28% of all web's traffic on desktops comes from search with year-over-year (YoY) growth of 2%, leaving behind all other sources of traffic except direct traffic[16]. (Tuchinsky, 2016)

SEO would not be efficient without support of other marketing activities. Nowadays, SEO experts need to have knowledge about many other disciplines which will be described in this chapter and explained how they work together with SEO. "*In essence, we need to learn how SEO can integrate itself in a meaningful way with other marketing divisions, or in simpler terms, leverage integrated marketing.*" (Chang, 2013)

2.1 SEE-THINK-DO-CARE BUSINESS FRAMEWORK

There is a deeply rooted marketing model called AIDA which describes the purchase funnel and has been used for decades. However, this model is not well suited for the needs of modern marketing strategies. AIDA, standing for Awareness, Interest, Desire and Action, describes the customer journey from being aware of a certain brand or a product to the final stage of buying it. However, think about people with all kinds of hobbies and interests browsing the Internet these days with no intent of buying anything. On top of it, a lot of people interact with the brand even after buying the product and such an old model cannot cope with these two facts. Therefore, Avinash Kaushik, one of the biggest digital marketing influencers, came up with a framework called See-Think-Do-Care (STDC), which is consumer

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[16] Typing a website URL into a browser or clicking on a bookmark in the narrowest sense, but it is very vague in terms of data tracking in Google Analytics because it tags the site visit as direct if it cannot determine another referrer. More in SEO Goals and Performance Tracking chapter of this thesis.

centric and deals with the pre-acquisition and post-action problems. Kaushik (2013) came up with the alternative model in order to solve problems such as not enough customer centricity, not seeing enough marketing opportunities and irrational measurement strategies of success.

According to Kaushik (2015), this framework only cares about audience intent which is expressed through their digital behavior and provides an opportunity for engagement with the audience. STDC framework, including its integration of marketing strategies, is well described in the following picture:
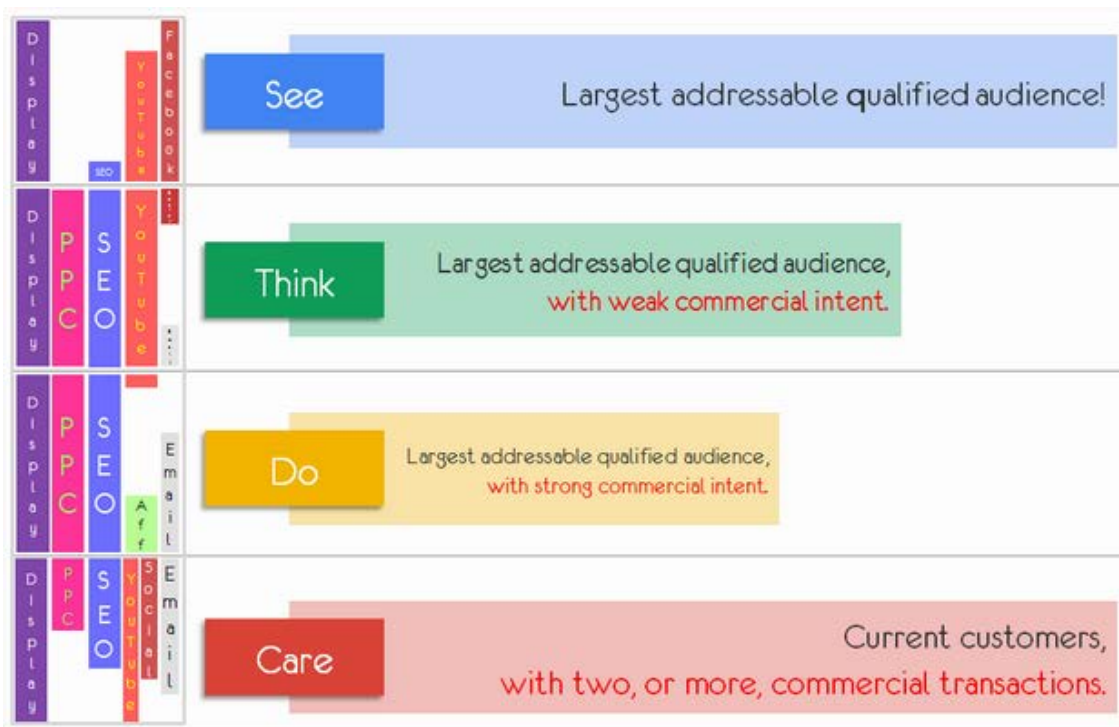
Many digital marketing channels overlap each other at the same time during the STDC process. The ones that influence SEO or vice versa will be discussed further but it is necessary to clarify a few things from the picture in the first place. In the term "largest addressable qualified audience", Kaushik (2015b) emphasizes the word "qualified" which gathers an audience that share intent expressed through their behavior. People watching videos on Youtube or browsing Facebook usually have no commercial intent but those who click on paid ads in search engines often do. Another thing that might surprise someone is the current customer defined as someone who made two or more commercial transactions.

According to Kaushik (2013), so many things could go wrong with the customer after the first purchase that only those who come back to buy again could be considered as a customer.

On the contrary, Kabátová (2017) argues that this framework has problems too, such as:

- it does not say which stage to start with and which channels to use
- it does not provide a solution for integration with marketing strategy and communication goals of a company
- it does not take the product into account

Others (Šilhan, 2014) suggest combining the marketing models together to get the best of them, for example using AIDA in particular stages of STDC. However, STDC framework is good enough to demonstrate the relationship between SEO and other marketing channels and processes.

2.2 PAY-PER-CLICK ADVERTISING

SEO had been a part of so called Search Engine Marketing (SEM) focused on the organic, non-paid, search. SEM eventually became a synonym to paid search (Sullivan, 2010), consisting of the originally other part of SEM, the self-explanatory pay-per-click (PPC) focused on paid ads which could be displayed in SERP for search queries consisting of targeted keywords, which are usually formed into ad groups. While there are many forms of PPC, search engine advertising is a common one with many ads in SERP especially for queries in the Think and Do phase. It is a way of buying website visits to the contrary of earning those visits organically through SEO efforts.

Search engines have their own advertising tools and services with Google AdWords in the front. It is used for setting up and launching paid campaigns in Google's network and the money from advertisers is the main source of revenue (Alphabet, 2017). Because of this, PPC has an advantage in having better official support and easier access to information and data than SEO. Data from both PPC and SEO could be used to benefit each other, but it also could be a double-edge sword if used or interpreted wrongly.

The foundation for implementing any SEO or PPC strategy is a keyword research. However, doing the research needs different approaches for both strategies. Keyword planner tools are useful for keyword research but they provide data which are relevant for

PPC. There are various keyword tools for SEO too, such as Keyword Explorer by Moz or SEMrush, but these are paid services.

| Keyword (by relevance)	Avg. monthly searches ?	Competition ?	Suggested bid ?
baidu seo	100 – 1K	Medium	Kč101.66
china seo	100 – 1K	Medium	Kč86.73
seo in china	10 – 100	Medium	Kč123.95
seo hosting	1K – 10K	High	Kč111.50
chinese seo	10 – 100	High	Kč360.16

Picture 24: AdWords' Keyword Planner interface, source: own screenshot

As seen in the picture, there are 3 metrics that are shown in the Keyword Planner. Only the data about average monthly searches are valuable for SEO, however not in such form, because the intervals are too wide and far from being accurate. Competition could be confused with keyword difficulty, which is another metric used in SEO to guess how hard it would be to rank better for the particular keyword in organic search, but in here it only measures how competitive a keyword is among advertisers who target it. The list of suggested keywords to target would differ for SEO and PPC campaigns because PPC is heavily focused on transactional and navigational keywords, whereas the scope of SEO is wider and the keywords are chosen on the basis of different metrics.

PPC campaigns could be launched and later evaluated quickly which is something that can be used in favor of SEO where it takes much more time to see and measure changes. According to Crenshaw (2014), PPC is great for getting real time information how keywords perform and because paid traffic is more narrow and focused than organic traffic, it is also easier to analyze. Such information of well converting keywords could be then used for SEO and social media efforts. On the other hand, if there are already enough data from SEO, it could also be very well used for PPC campaigns by filtering keywords with the most commercial intent that already receive the most clicks and impressions (Patel, 2016).

Being on the first SERP certainly increases CTR and overall number of visitors but ranking quickly this high in organic search is difficult. PPC ads are shown on the first SERP

and are an easier way of jumping to the coveted spot immediately which always brings brand exposure even if the ad is not clicked on (FirstClick Digital, 2016). It is also possible to rank for certain queries in both paid and organic listings which enhances brand awareness even more and it could save money in the PPC budget as SEO has 20 times more traffic opportunities than PPC as shown in the following picture:
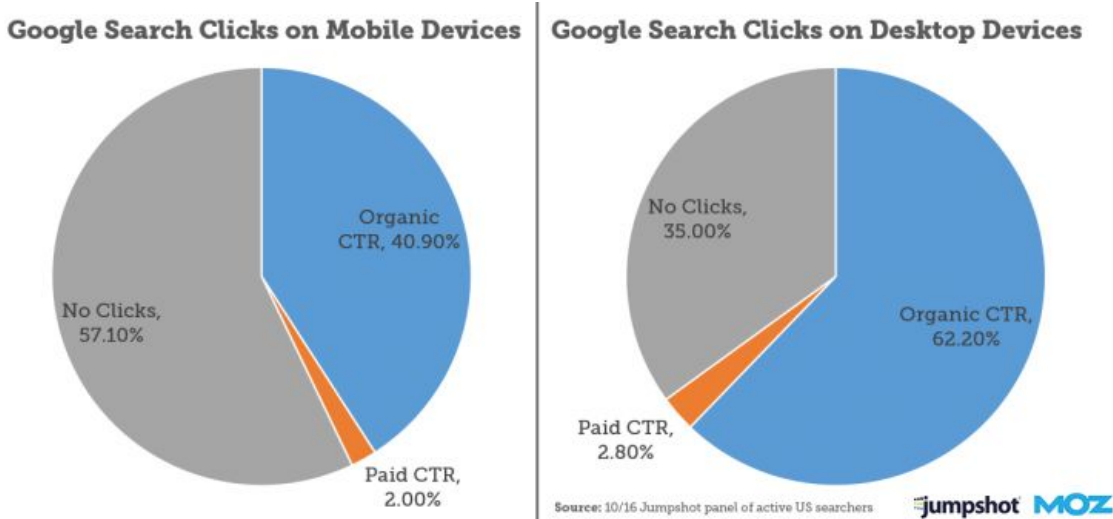
Picture 25: Google clicks device comparison, source:
https://d1avok0lzls2w.cloudfront.net/uploads/blog/58c470938102b4.32373573.jpg

However, such data could be misleading and it is necessary to mention that there are twice as many clicks on paid search listings than organic clicks for keywords with high commercial intent (Kim, 2017). Both studies were conducted in the United States.

2.3   USER EXPERIENCE AND CONVERSION RATE OPTIMIZATION

The role of SEO certainly does not end with a visit to the website through search engines. According to a study conducted in 2014, 64% of website visits are attributed to organic search (Safran, 2014), that is a lot of potential customers visiting a certain landing page. It is usually only the beginning of the user journey which should ideally end up with some kind of conversion. This is where User Experience (UX) and Conversion Rate Optimization (CRO) take place to properly integrate with SEO. *"In the miraculous meeting point of SEO, CRO, and UX, a foundation of trust and authority is built and a relationship begins to progress down the conversion funnel."* (Tolub, 2016)

Machine learning and the improvements in technology allow Google to determine how well was user intent understood and if the user was satisfied with the search results or not. Simply, what is good for the user is also good for the search engine and Google has

always focused on delivering the best user experience (Freeman, 2017). If there is a website ranking well for certain keywords but it does not meet users' needs, it will negatively influence the rankings and prevent the website from reaching its full potential. Such landing pages with poor UX often have high bounce rates.

Bad UX could be even caused by integrating other marketing channels improperly, for example display ads which are also showed in the STDC framework. These display ads could be seen on websites which are part of a display ad network and offer space for such ads, often in a form of visual banners across the Internet. Display ads must be placed strategically in reasonable amount not to interfere with the UX. This is another example why there must be close cooperation within all marketing efforts. According to Heitzman (2017), the most common ad issues on websites affecting SEO are:

- Too many ads above the fold which means the user has to scroll down through ads displayed on the default visible part of the page to see the actual content
- Forced ad placements with no value for the user
- Auto-play video and audio ads which users find annoying
- Deceiving ad styling which mislead the user to click on it without providing any value
- Excessive pagination to increase ad views which makes the user to click through several pages of one piece of content in order to maximize the visibility of ads displaying on each page

While the focus of UX is on the whole complex process of user interactions on the website, CRO is focused on optimizing elements which influence the process of converting a website visitor into a customer. Conversion optimization requires a profound knowledge of every aspect of marketing and also the ability to understand the business, its customers and analyze the entire online experience instead of only certain parts of the funnel (Wolf, 2017). It is a series of changes on a website making customer acquisition more efficient. Proper changes of texts, graphics or placement of elements on a website are able to increase the profitability and efficiency of the website which means spending less money on customer acquisition and a bigger chance of a repeated purchase. This is what marketing managers should consider when allocating a marketing budget because it is usual that companies spend lots of money for PPC but if someone clicks on an ad does not mean it will end up in a

purchase. Therefore it is recommended to first make the website better before luring potential customers (Ilinčev, 2016). The same obviously applies for SEO which also requires a part of the marketing budget. *"The interdependence and interconnectedness is the foundation of success."* (Tolub, 2016)

2.4 OTHER MARKETING CHANNELS

It is now clear that SEO must be a part of an integrated marketing strategy. Other related fields such as social media, web analytics and development and content marketing already were or will be discussed and this chapter was devoted to making an insight of how all these channels and fields work together.

"SEO involves a deep understanding of and integration with nearly all web-related disciplines, from website development and user experience (UX) design to site analytics and tracking. Engaging in SEO efforts is ultimately a process of mobilizing all aspects of your organization to come together to determine target audiences, develop messaging, identify content resources and develop robust content development strategies, build out a user-focused yet search-friendly technology platform, and leverage the business model for external engagement and link acquisition." (Enge at al., 2015, p.899)

3 INTERNATIONAL SEO

Companies face a lot of challenges when expanding abroad and SEO is not an exception if they want to engage with local people, businesses and even local search engines where applicable. There are no general guidelines that would make international SEO strategies perform well everywhere in the world, each country needs a special approach in order to make the website local for both users and search engines.

Kůra (2015) describes international SEO as *"the process of setting up your website and promoting it in the international environment (typically several markets at once) in order to gain visibility in different search engines or different country versions of the same search engine."*

According to Kotler and Keller (2007), companies must know how to adjust their products and services to local conditions and how to communicate in a different cultural environment when entering a foreign market. Besides different culture, they must also cope with different languages, legal and political systems and currencies which may fluctuate. All of this is more or less relevant to international SEO which will be revealed in this chapter and then chapters dedicated to China.

3.1 LANGUAGE TARGETING

It is sometimes enough for the business to only target a different language instead of targeting a whole new country. For example, co-working centers usually have their websites in English regardless of their geographic location. Their service takes place within the country but attracts freelancers and other related people all around the world. Also, there are many countries with more than one official language.

hreflang Attribute

This tells Google which language is used on a specific page and according to McMichael (2016), these attributes *"are intended to ensure the correct localized page is shown in the correct localized version of Google."* Enge et al. (2015) recommend to use only one of the three following placements of the attribute - <head> section of the HTML on a page, server header section of a page (used for non-HTML files such as PDFs) or a sitemap. The usage will be explained using the first mentioned placement in the HTML code.

```
1  <!DOCTYPE html>
2  <html lang="en-US" prefix="og: http://ogp.me/ns# fb: http://ogp.me/ns/fb#">
3  <head>
4    <meta http-equiv="Content-Type" content="text/html; charset=UTF-8" />
5    <meta charset="UTF-8" />
6    <link rel="canonical" href="http://www.aleydasolis.com/en/international-seo-tools/" />
7    <link rel="alternate" href="http://www.aleydasolis.com/en/international-seo-tools/" hreflang="en" />
8  <link rel="alternate" href="http://www.aleydasolis.com/herramientas-seo-internacional/" hreflang="es" />
9
```

Picture 26: hreflang usage on a website of renowned international SEO expert

This particular page in English (en) has its version in Spanish (es). Note the canonical tag which is self-referential and McMichael (2016) claims that it is a standard SEO best practice regardless of hreflang tag. HTML of the Spanish version has to contain exactly the same hreflang group with the appropriate URLs, in this case only English and Spanish, with the Spanish version canonicalized. There is no need to worry about duplicate content issues as long as each version targets different groups of users based on their language and location.

"The value of the hreflang attribute identifies the language (in ISO 639-1 format) and optionally the region (in ISO 3166-1 Alpha 2 format) of an alternate URL." (Google, 2017c) It is important to implement the correct input values which could be sometimes confusing if the region value is included. On top of that, Chinese uses simplified and traditional characters, which is a script variation value that could be added to the hreflang attribute.

3.2 GEO-TARGETING

It was already mentioned that Google returns different results for users based on their geographic location (Picture 6). Language targeting is not enough to be perceived by search engines as a relevant local source and it needs to be combined with country targeting. This could be set up in Google Search Console account for a particular website without already a country-specific domain and is especially useful for local businesses within a country with a widespread official language. Another, more sophisticated, option will be discussed in this section.

Region Value in the hreflang Attribute

Continuing with the previous example and taking in account only Spanish and English, it could target a lot of countries where people speak Spanish and/or English. However, the webmaster only targets people speaking English and Spanish regardless of their location. If she, for example, wanted to serve Mexicans and Australians on separate URLs while

providing the generic content to all the other speakers of the languages, the HTML code section of the generic English page could look like this:

```
<link rel="canonical" href="http://www.aleydasolis.com/en/international-seo-tools/" />
<link rel="alternate" href="http://www.aleydasolis.com/en/international-seo-tools/" hreflang="en" />
<link rel="alternate" href="http://www.aleydasolis.com/en-au/international-seo-tools/" hreflang="en-au" />
<link rel="alternate" href="http://www.aleydasolis.com/herramientas-seo-internacional/" hreflang="es" />
<link rel="alternate" href="http://www.aleydasolis.com/es-mx/herramientas-seo-internacional/" hreflang="es-mx" />
```

The default language is set as Spanish because its generic version is one level higher in the site hierarchy than the rest using subdirectories for language variations.

Moz.com (2017f) emphasizes that hreflang is not a directive but only a signal and search engines may choose to ignore it. They also claim that only Google and Yandex currently use the hreflang attribute, Bing and Baidu for example use "content-language" meta tags, which is a different line of code in the <head> section using the same ISO formats as the hreflang attribute.

URL Structures

Creating ideal site architecture for international websites is a challenging task. According to Solis (2013), each language or country should be featured through their own structure in order to get them all crawled, indexed and ranked. She also advises webmasters against using cookies or scripts for language variations within one URL as both search engines and users may have problems with it. It is also possible to add a language parameter to the URL but the best practice of not using parameters where not necessary still applies.

URL structure issues for international SEO revolve around deciding which structure to employ in order to target a specific country and/or language in the most efficient way. Google (2017d) published their own summary of pros and cons for each structure:

URL structure	Example	Pros	Cons
Country-specific	example.ie	• Clear geotargeting • Server location irrelevant • Easy separation of sites	• Expensive (can have limited availability) • Requires more infrastructure • Strict ccTLD requirements (sometimes)
Subdomains with gTLDS	de.example.com	• Easy to set up • Can use Search Console geotargeting • Allows different server locations • Easy separation of sites	• Users might not recognize geotargeting from the URL alone (is "de" the language or country?)
Subdirectories with gTLDs	example.com/de/	• Easy to set up • Can use Search Console geotargeting • Low maintenance (same host)	• Users might not recognize geotargeting from the URL alone • Single server location • Separation of sites harder
URL parameters	site.com?loc=de	• Not recommended.	• URL-based segmentation difficult • Users might not recognize geotargeting from the URL alone • Geotargeting in Search Console is not possible

There are 2 types of domains related to international SEO and mentioned in the table above:

- ccTLD – country code Top Level Domain – It is important to mention that a website choosing this option has to build up all the authority and links from the beginning as it is completely separated from the original site.

- gTLD – generic Top Level Domain – The most common one is .com, it does not specify any country and the internationalized website could be built on it by using subdomains or subdirectories. It could be used instead of ccTLD to build a separated version of the website for specific countries (standard practice in China) or also as a global website without any geo-targeting.

McMichaels (2016) adds that subdomains with gTLDs create difficulties in building up DA and argues that this combination is the least advantageous of the 3 recommended options because they lack geo-targeting of ccTLDs as well as a consolidated backlink profile

of subdirectories[17]. However, her picture demonstrates that everything depends on the circumstances, because there is no "better" structure in general:

3.3 LOCAL SIGNALS

Moz.com (2017g) lists international SEO signals that could be called local:

- Hosting a website locally – Enge et al. (2015) think it is more related to content delivery speed rather than being more local. McMichaels (2016) argues that a good Content Delivery Network (CDN) is enough for most markets (emphasizing China as an exception) because the local server signals are not as important as they used to be.
- External/inbound links to/from local content – This clearly sends search engines signals that a website is relevant within the local ecosystem.
- NAP info (Enge et al., 2015) – standing for Name, Address and Phone, it is an important local SEO element which should be ideally displayed on every page

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[17] Subdirectories benefit from the root domain to some extent, more than subdomains do.

in a crawlable and consistent format (usually in a footer) to reinforce the localness factor. It could be also used with the schema.org markup.

- Verifying an address with Google Maps (Enge et al., 2015)
- Ranking in local search engines

3.4 CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

Translating content is not an easy task and should be left to native speakers because knowing the culture is essential. Well-translated and culturally adjusted content could be a competitive advantage. Kotler and Keller (2007) claim that cultural factors are the most influential among other factors affecting consumer behavior – social and personal factors. International marketers must have an excellent understanding of culture in the target markets and avoid cultural ethnocentricity – believing that everything in one's own culture is right and correct (Mowen and Minor, 1998).

Content has to be presented in a certain way and that is when UX adjustments come into play. McMichaels (2016) demonstrates the importance of localization in terms of UX, site design and holistic business strategy on an example of eBay's fail to succeed in China with western UX principles. The author also thinks that *"the key to success internationally is localizing your online presence while at the same time having a unified global brand."*

4 SEO GOALS AND PERFORMANCE TRACKING

Every website is created with a purpose which is from business perspective achieving its goals. SEO efforts should help achieving them with a well-defined strategy which means that SEO and business goals are in alignment. It is necessary to set quantifiable goals and measure process in order to find out how effective and efficient the SEO efforts are. There are many web analytics and data-mining tools available that could be used to track Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and other metrics which are essential for measuring progress of individual goals. The most common tool is Google Analytics which is available for every website that implements a special tracking code. Combined with Google Search Console (former Webmaster Tools), it creates a solid foundation for any SEO specialist.

4.1 GOALS

According to Solis (2012), setting "*goals that target the site's business needs and take into consideration the market and site behavior, characteristics, restrictions, available resources and time*" is necessary in order to develop an effective SEO strategy with a high return on investment. She suggests using an extended version of SMART criteria that are commonly used in project management for judging objectives and her version adds –ER to make it SMARTER *"(acronym for Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-based, Ethical, Recorded)- guidelines that will help us not only to set goals but to identify and manage the best strategies to achieve them."*

Selling a certain number of products sounds like an ultimate goal but it is often preceded by other smaller goals, hence there are so called macro-conversions and micro-conversions. Performance and progress are then gauged with KPIs and metrics. Grigg (2016) claims that *"all KPIs are metrics, but not all metrics are KPIs"*, therefore the most important metrics that are closely aligned with the business objectives become KPIs. Such hierarchy helps to avoid misleading data and metrics.

Enge et al. (2015) mention these goals which are quite general and should be narrowed down:

- Generating sales

- Obtaining leads – e-mail addresses, phone numbers and other information about potential customers

- Generating ad revenue – could specify the type of ads

- Getting people to read specific articles

- Obtaining donations

- Developing an audience

It is only an example and there could be much more diverse and specified goals such as making more visitors finish watching a video until the end or receive more product/service feedbacks.

Naturally, gauging only organic search traffic is necessary in order to get the most accurate data. However, every piece of data should be evaluated with caution and it is necessary to understand what each metric means and how does the tool measure it if possible.

4.2 MULTI-CHANNEL ATTRIBUTION MODELING PROBLEM

The first huge issue appears earlier than we even see the detailed organic search data. Kaushik (2013b) claims it is high likely a website faces an attribution problem that is caused by a significant number of buyers who have used more than 1 path to make the conversion. In other words, it is usual that people come back and forth to a website through different channels until they buy something. And the problem is how to figure out which channel(s) should take credit for that conversion. Google (2017e) describes an attribution model as *"the rule, or set of rules, that determines how credit for sales and conversions is assigned to touchpoints in conversion paths."*

Choosing one of the many attribution models is a very challenging task with an ideal outcome of the least skewed data set.

Default Channel Grouping	Acquisition		
	Sessions ? ↓	% New Sessions ?	New Users ?
	78,067 % of Total: 100.00% (78,067)	75.59% Avg for View: 75.52% (0.09%)	59,012 % of Total: 100.09% (58,957)
1. Organic Search	37,278 (47.75%)	79.25%	29,544 (50.06%)
2. Direct	13,707 (17.56%)	74.06%	10,152 (17.20%)
3. Social	13,501 (17.29%)	91.88%	12,405 (21.02%)
4. Referral	10,196 (13.06%)	49.45%	5,042 (8.54%)
5. Affiliates	1,559 (2.00%)	74.60%	1,163 (1.97%)
6. Paid Search	1,375 (1.76%)	46.40%	638 (1.08%)
7. Display	447 (0.57%)	14.99%	67 (0.11%)
8. (Other)	4 (0.01%)	25.00%	1 (0.00%)

Picture 29: Default channel grouping in Google Analytics, source: screenshot from a demo account

Path Length in Interactions ?	Conversions ?	Conversion Value ?	Percentage of total ■ Conversions ■ Conversion Value
1	10,536	$184,216.06	57.17% 45.64%
2	3,904	$97,890.73	21.18% 24.25%
3	1,762	$45,413.56	9.56% 11.25%
4	872	$30,147.39	4.73% 7.47%
5	430	$12,264.36	2.33% 3.04%
6	294	$10,744.96	1.60% 2.66%
7	180	$4,435.70	0.98% 1.10%
8	115	$6,056.84	0.62% 1.50%
9	55	$1,025.77	0.30% 0.25%
10	47	$713.42	0.26% 0.18%
11	29	$341.00	0.16% 0.08%
12+	205	$10,392.67	1.11% 2.57%

Picture 30: Path length demonstration, source: screenshot from Google's demo account

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UTM Parameters

These are special tags added to URLs that are used for a specific marketing campaign. Therefore links to a product should differ in UTM parameters if the product is part of a multi-channel campaign. These tags carry information about the specific campaign which is then used in Google Analytics for tracking. It is essential to use these parameters to collect more accurate data about multi-channel distribution which is already not very reliable due to attribution problems.

> ?utm_source=Facebook&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=skoleni&utm_content=SEO

These are UTM parameters of the first sponsored link encountered after logging into Facebook. It sends a signal about a path through Facebook's CPC (cost per click) ad for a campaign called "skoleni" (training or course in Czech) which is about SEO (however, the last "utm_content" parameter is most likely misused in this case, it should be used for A/B testing, not to describe content, and is not even required as the 3 before).

4.3   METRICS

Some commonly used metrics for SEO will be described in this section but the options are extensive and the metrics being tracked should adhere to the principles mentioned in this chapter. An interesting approach is to sort these metrics by their measure type as suggested by Allen (2016). The types are Volume, Quality, Value and Cost – VQVC.

Index Status

This metric represents the number of indexed pages. Regardless of page quality and value, if there are errors in indexing then no other metrics could be increased. Comparing the number of actual pages and indexed pages is definitely an important metric to follow.

Landing Pages for Targeted Keywords

Which landing pages are performing well and which worse? Is there a room for improvement? Are there keywords that attract more traffic than the planned ones?

Bounce Rate (BR)

Bounce is considered as exactly one page visited on a website. *"Bounce rate is single-page sessions divided by all sessions, or the percentage of all sessions on your site in which*

users viewed only a single page and triggered only a single request to the Analytics server." (Google, 2017f)

This metric can demonstrate that critical thinking is required when analyzing data. High bounce rate does not necessarily mean the landing page is badly optimized. To prove the point, searchers looking for contact information are not interested in navigating further the site.

Summary of weighted bounce rate for individual landing pages could be used to identify 404s or a misunderstanding of searcher's intent, showing up for queries that are not related to the landing page.

Click-through Rate (CTR)

Measures the performance of SERP elements, low CTR may require title tags and meta descriptions audit.

Search Engine Referrals

Moz.com (2014) recommends tracking this metric to find out whether the website is performing well for all search engines by comparing the data with search engine market share. It could also help diagnose the issue if rankings suddenly drop in one or in all search engines. Lastly, specialists could experiment with individual elements and track its effects in individual search engines to better understand their algorithms.

Conversion Rate (CR)

Check how well search traffic is converting. This also needs to be approached critically, because higher CR might mean more relevant traffic but lower CR with much more visitors could be making more money in the end.

5   UNDERSTANDING CHINA – MARKETING PERSPECTIVE

This is the breaking point where the thesis only starts focusing on China[18] and marketing in China related to SEO because the universal scope of SEO, which is an important reference material for this, was already described.

First, it is necessary to look at Chinese SEO from a wider perspective and describe marketing aspects that should be taken into account not only for a successful SEO strategy execution.

China is such a unique market that even companies from other East Asian countries make huge marketing mistakes. China Daily (2003) reports that Toyota's ads for 2 types of cars were disrespectful to the Chinese and insulted many of them because Toyota used traditional Chinese stone-carved lions with an inappropriate slogan in the ad which evoked Marco Polo Bridge Incident that is considered as an official start of the second Sino-Japanese war in 1937.

It is undisputable that China is a global superpower nowadays that offers plethora of opportunities in the world's biggest market, at least in terms of population. The country is incredibly diverse from many perspectives, it has 33 first-level administrative divisions (including Special Administrative Zones of Hong Kong and Macau), 56 official ethnic groups with majority of Han Chinese making up more than 90% of the population (Xinhua, 2011), and many dialects of Chinese which are often mutually unintelligible and far from Mandarin. These factors are forming subcultures which provide more specific identification and socialization of its members and influence their consumer behavior according to Kotler and Keller (2007). Mowen and Minor (1998) add that understanding culture is the focal point of selling products abroad and recognizing differences between own and foreign cultures helps to avoid costly mistakes.

According to Paull and Goh (2013), who interviewed many Chief Marketing Officers (CMO) of global brands operating in China, the key factors of building a winning brand in China are humility, an open mind, a keen ear for listening to customers and most importantly leaving preconceptions at the door. Wang (2008, p.127) adds that *"since there is no universal human condition to speak of, brand strategies practiced in different locales are*

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[18] People's Republic of China to be exact and avoid misunderstandings.

necessarily diverse. Marketing teaches us two important lessons: no two markets are identical, nor is national culture a homogeneous entity."

While there are many aspects that could be discussed, this chapter only focuses on those that have impact on online marketing.

5.1   MARKETING CULTURE IN CHINA

Marketing is relatively a new discipline in China and looking back in time helps to understand the development of marketing and Chinese society. People's Republic of China was established in 1949 after the Communist Party with Mao Zedong in the lead forced Guomindang – the Chinese Nationalist Party, to retreat from mainland China to Taiwan.

"With the exception of Chairman Mao himself, brands did not exist in China from 1949 till 1978, nor did the notion of mass consumerism. Between 1978 and 1990, at the dawning of the reform era, the market was dominated exclusively by state-owned trademarks (known in Chinese as paizi). It was not until the late 1990s that terms like "pinpai" ("brand") and pinpai zhanlue ("brand strategies") came into currency and gave the old expression mingpai ("name brands") a new twist that resonates closely with the Western notion of branding." (Wang, 2008, p.25-26)

Wang (2008) emphasized that overlooking the historical development and not taking into account deep roots of socialism in contemporary China will cause difficulties in achieving success in Chinese market. She also adds (2008, p.2) that the *"rampant consumer culture in China today is a mockery of the Communist revolution"* but marketers need to take into account interpretations of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" which is the ideology of China adopted after Mao's death. This ideological flexibility must be considered and Wang (2008, p.1-2) claims that corporate branding of some big enterprises like Lenovo or Haier *"relies heavily on the disciplining power of corporatized Mao-speak and the Chairman's famed ideology of the "permanent revolution.""* Arguments whether China is more communist or capitalist are not very valuable for practical use which stems from the modern history. Deng Xiaoping was a Chinese leader of the post-Mao era and thanks to his pragmatic approach, opening up to the world in late 70s and setting up Special Economic Zones in important cities along the coast in early 80s, China became the superpower it is today with the undergoing socio-economic transformation.

Paull and Goh (2013) depict these historical changes with a generation clash within a family. Chinese parents who remember the Cultural Revolution must be experiencing mixed feelings when they watch their children and grandchildren reaping all the benefits of a capitalist society with socialist characteristics while they were condemned even for a smallest sign of capitalism back then. The authors also claim that Western societies have been adopting brands since the early 1900s but most overseas brands have little to no brand equity in China. Therefore foreign marketers in China take a step back and build a new hierarchy of values relevant to the culture and consumers.

According to the same authors, the advertising business was thriving in China before Mao seized control and banned all advertising until his death. Such a long period without any commercial messages has had a profound effect on the industry, which lacks the mentors, the cultural icons, and symbols which were prominent in the US, e.g. the Marlboro Man. The authors, who had worked in Chinese marketing for many years, still claimed that it had been challenging to find Chinese marketers who truly understood the process of advertising by the time of writing the book in 2013.

"The Chinese use of more traditional marketing and sales approaches emphasizes the importance of a well-designed marketing strategy: clear positioning toward a well-defined target audience, and meeting the specific demands of this target audience. This is important for any company, but it can still form a source of competitive advantage in the less customer-driven Chinese market." (Kostelijk and Alsem, 2015, p.66)

Chinese equivalent for marketing is 营销 (yingxiao) or 行销 (xingxiao, used more in Taiwan) and both of these words originally meant "to sell". Etymologically, this demonstrates a very narrow perception of marketing in the beginnings. However, with so many Chinese with foreign experience, there must be quite a lot of qualified Chinese marketers nowadays who are able to combine both Chinese and Western way of thinking.

5.2 CHINESE INTERNET

It is no surprise that China has the highest number of Internet users in the world. Up to December 2016, China had 731 million of them with a little less than 53.2% of Internet penetration which is steadily growing (CNNIC, 2017). It is quite common to see older people, who look like they still live in the traditional style, taking care of their farms or little

restaurants, suddenly pulling out their smartphone to do something like a QR code scan payment. Astounding contrasts could be seen on every corner in this country.

This section provides an overview of what is important when doing business activities on the Chinese Internet.

ICP License

There are many government policies and barriers to entry in China which must appear in every PESTEL, SWOT, Porter's Five Force and all the other kinds of market and business analyses. Chinese Internet is regulated by the government which makes sense given China's political system. Having a website hosted in China requires obtaining an ICP license (ICP 备案 – ICP bei'an) and vice versa, ICP license cannot be provided to websites hosted outside of China, including Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan (Maruma, 2014).

According to Schaefer (2015), there are 2 kinds of the ICP license, a standard one and a special, commercial one, for e-commerce businesses. The commercial one requires that majority of the business applying must be owned by Chinese and even the standard one requires a lot of paperwork and legal procedures to go through. The license is always visible at the footer of the China-hosted website.

把百度设为主页　　关于百度　　About Baidu　　百度推广
©2017 Baidu 使用百度前必读 意见反馈 京ICP证030173号　　京公网安备11000002000001号

Picture 31: Footer of baidu.com, source: own screenshot

The reason why should companies bother obtaining the license, and not having the website hosted in Hong Kong for example, is straightforward. Kůra (2015b) claims that websites hosted in Mainland China have a better chance to rank in Baidu and it is arbitrary whether the domain is ccTLD (.cn) or gTLD (.com), both are equally fine.

Censorship

Media censorship is associated with nondemocratic regimes and China, given its population, definitely needs to make a lot of effort in order to control what kind of content is being distributed. Sensitive issues have the potential to go viral really quickly with so many Chinese online these days. According to Paull and Goh (2013), the Internet censorship already began in 2000 when the party enacted a law requiring companies to monitor and censor user content.

Naturally, the regime also needs to prevent its people from getting access to sensitive topics published outside of China, or more generally, isolate Chinese from the unwanted influences of the world around. That is the reason for building so called Great Firewall of China which simply makes undesirable websites and applications inaccessible. From my own experience, when I arrived to China in 2014, I was able to connect to Instagram and Gmail at first but the access was disabled within a few months. There is a huge number of blocked websites in China, including social media, search engines, newspapers, porn, gambling sites and the list goes on. This creates a unique ecosystem with Chinese versions of Western social media and even more. Furthermore, it puts pressure on people and businesses that need to be connected with the world but it could be quite easily solved, using a VPN[19] is a popular choice. Interesting fact is that for example Google Analytics is allowed in China despite other Google services being blocked (Repnikova and Libert, 2015). This means 2 things – it is clearly useful for marketers in China to use this tool in combination with similar Chinese tools, and Google collects a lot of data about Chinese netizens[20] which could be leveraged in case of return to the Chinese market.

There is approximately 15% of published content in China that is getting censored or even leads to worse consequences such as detention or even imprisonment (Cheung, 2015). To put it briefly, Cheung (2015) recommends that it is best to avoid content that could spur private actions on a major public issue, incentivize people to hit the streets and accusing specific members of the party of corruption. She also mentions that criticizing the government by people who cannot be considered as influencers is usually not a big issue and censors do not care about it. From the perspective of Chinese modern history where even the smallest suspicions could have led to severe punishments, it would be wise to avoid any sensitive content.

Businesses, which use CDN[21], should also evaluate whether there is a danger of having the whole network blocked because this already happened in the past (greatfire.org, 2014). Nevertheless, it is recommended to use a CDN with good support in China because it has speed, stability, security and crawlability benefits (Lesser, 2017d).

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[19] Virtual Private Network, connected user is perceived as if he was at the location where the network is set (outside of China in this case).
[20] An Internet user
[21] Used for content delivery, especially for users far from the hosting server and consequently slower loading. CDN data centers are all around the world where it caches, temporarily stores, the content which is then provided to the "nearby" users.

There is even a consequence for SEO which is related to the nature of Chinese language. Chinese is a tonal language and one character is generally represented by one syllable. Because most Chinese words contain 1-3 syllables, it is quite common to have many words that are pronounced the same[22] even though they contain different characters. This means that there are many puns in Chinese and they play a vital role in Chinese culture. Probably the most common example is "number four" (四) and „to die" (死), both represented by the same syllable but with different tones. Sensitive content could be therefore rewritten using different characters with very similar pronunciation. It should be something marketers need to consider when doing keyword research and writing content as it could be used for wider targeting and more interesting copy, but it might also happen that some page ranks for a completely irrelevant topic (even vulgar or sensitive) just because some keywords have various connotations.

E-commerce

According to CNNIC (2017), by December 2016, China had almost 467 million online shoppers, which meant a 12.9% increase since the end of 2015, making the online shopping market an important growth industry. China is truly dominating the world's e-commerce statistics because more than astounding 40% of global e-commerce spend came from China in 2015 (Frederick, 2016). While domestic media in Western countries go crazy about Black Friday, Cyber Monday and other days dedicated to huge sales, all of these are quite small compared to Chinese equivalents in terms of online spends. The biggest online shopping day in the world is Chinese Single's Day held on 11/11. Chinese online shoppers spent $17.8 billion during the last one in 2016 (Davidson, 2016), while US shoppers spent "only" $3.34 billion online during Black Friday in the same year (Adobe, 2016). Is this what socialism with Chinese characteristics is about?

"China's booming ecommerce market can be attributed in part to the proliferation of the dominant domestic marketplaces such as Alibaba, Tmall and JD.com, which took advantage of the country's undeveloped traditional retail infrastructure. eMarketer forecasting director Monica Peart commented, "Alibaba, Tmall and JD.com positioned themselves well to capitalize on growing consumer demand by creating their own payment

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[22] They are usually distinguished by the tones and context but it is also quite common that 2 or more words with completely different meaning are pronounced exactly the same including the tones.

systems (e.g., Alibaba's Alipay) and logistical services (e.g., JD.com operates a self-owned logistics network)." (eMarketer, 2016)

According to ISC (2016), 6 of the top Chinese Internet companies are either owners of e-commerce platforms or search engines. All these information reinforce the statement of Paull and Goh (2013) that Chinese e-commerce, which is still an uncharted territory for international brands, has the potential to bypass traditional retailing. Such domination of e-commerce platforms creates a challenge for anyone entering the market because they have to think about leveraging e-commerce as an integrated marketing channel. *"Especially with third-party platforms, companies must find ways to use their profiles to promote brand value and differentiate their brand from competitors."* (Paull and Goh, 2013, p.239)

Kostelijk and Alsem (2015) advise European dealers on Chinese e-commerce platforms to put emphasis on the visualization of products, include sales record of the products as an important feature, have a trustworthy and quantifiable feedback section and have customer service, which is adjusted to Chinese and available as long as possible.

5.3 CHINESE CONSUMERS

Marketing tends to the needs of society and there is no better way to recognize those needs than understanding potential customers. According to Lee (2015), it was not that important when Chinese economy was still emerging in the 90s and money could have been made just by knowing the right people and having a foreign brand. The opportunities back then seemed to be endless but as the market has grown and matured, penetrating the Chinese market requires a throughout knowledge of the cultural impact on consumer psychology.

Paull and Goh (2013) came to a conclusion that while there are countless challenges marketers in China face, the most important thing is whether a brand is culturally relevant or not. It is depicted with a problem Nestle was confronted with when they tried to mobilize Chinese to drink Nescafe when there was no coffee drinking culture and tea drinking habit was not strong either. They started with a question how they can make Nescafe a casual and pleasurable experience for individuals at any time of the day and ended up offering an increased variety of pleasurable products for casual consumption that Chinese can enjoy at any time of the day.

Chinese Internet Users Statistics

All information[23] in this section are taken from the newest statistical report (January 2017) with a sample of 60 000 Chinese across the whole country created by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) which is an official governmental administrative agency responsible for Internet affairs. For better illustration, the data is supported with graphs that were created by China Internet Watch (2017) which copy the graphs in the original report but are translated into English, thus being more convenient for this English written thesis.

The number of total Internet users and online shoppers in China was already mentioned and it is useful to get deeper into the statistics, beginning with a recapitulation and adding progress over time.
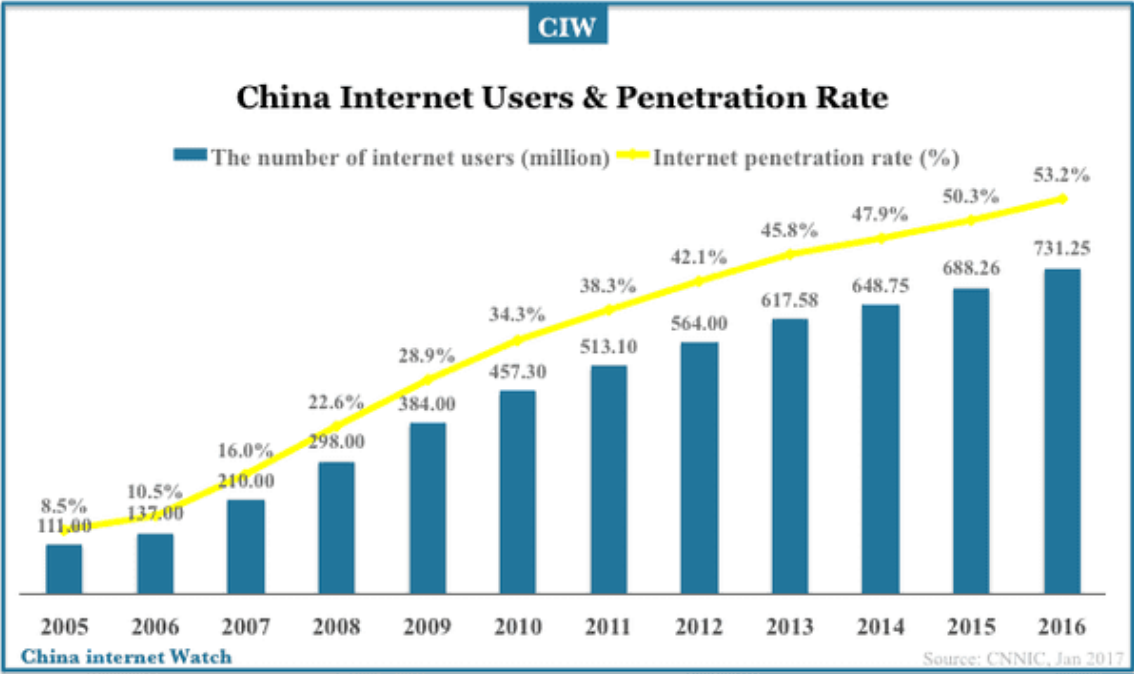
Picture 32: China Internet Users and Penetration Rate, source: https://d3h4ic4mid7cwj.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/china-internet-users-2017-01.png

This graph clearly shows the potential to keep growing. 72.6% of the Internet users come from urban areas which is a 1% YoY increase. Possible reasons for this might be easier Internet access and better developed surroundings causing the ratio of urban to rural areas grow faster, and also urbanization tendencies with an expected higher chance of migration for people who already use the Internet. New users access the Internet with a mobile phone in 80.7%.

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[23] Except the last graph about income.
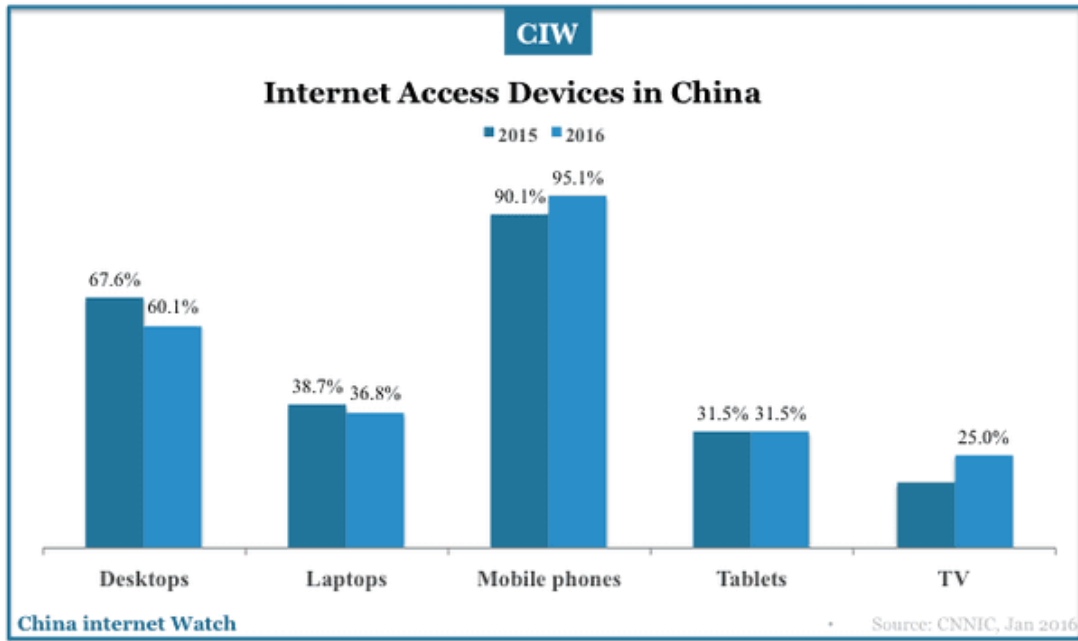
The domination of mobile phones in China is already overwhelming. This means that a cross-device marketing strategy with emphasis put on mobile devices is a must.

Picture 35: Top Categories of Internet Applications by Total Users in China, source:
https://d3h4ic4mid7cwj.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/categories-of-internet-apps-by-users-china-2016.png

There are more than 600 million users who use search engines.

The remaining statistics are concerned with netizens segmentation:

- male : female ratio – 52.4% : 47.6%

- age structure – 73.7% of netizens are between 10 and 39 years old, the biggest group is 20-29 with 30.3%

- education – 15.9% primary school and lower, 37.3% junior high school, 26.2% senior high school, 9.1% junior college, 11.5% bachelor degree and higher

- occupation – the largest group are students with 25%, followed by self-employed with 22.7% and company staff with 11.9%

- income groups – led by users who earn 3,001-5,000 yuan per month with 23.2%, followed by 2,001-3,000 yuan/m with 17.7% and people who earn less than 500 yuan/m with 13.8%, the highest income group earning more than 8,000 yuan/m is represented only by 6.9% of users

The data about income groups could be misleading, it is most likely skewed by including youth with small or no income at all but it is not explained in the official document. Following picture puts the information into context of the income situation in China.
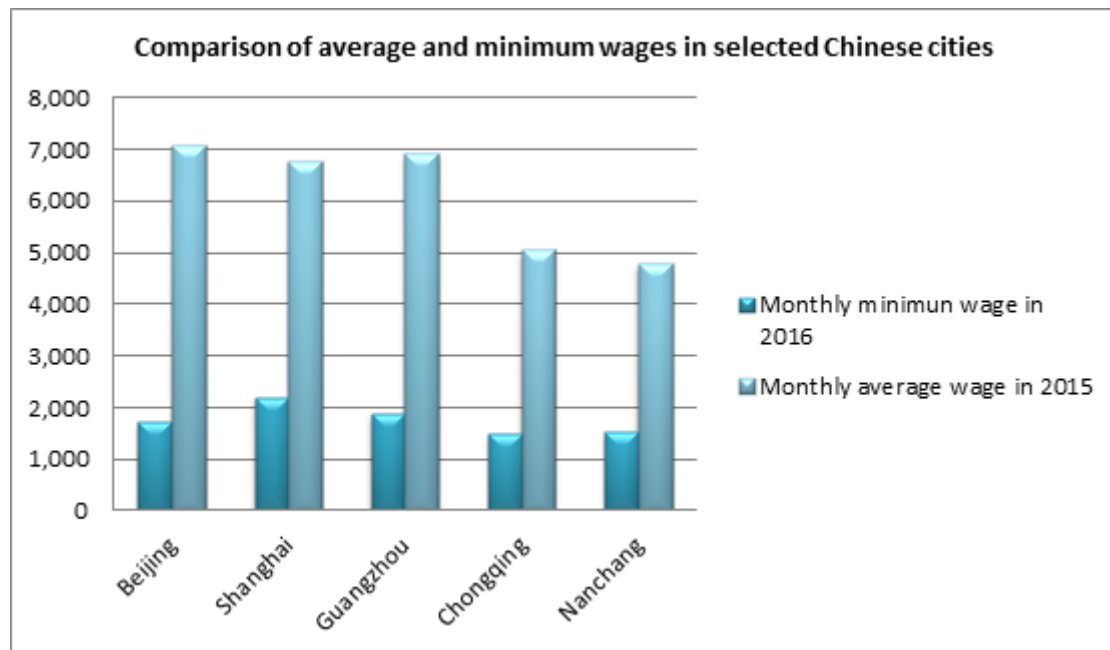
Market Segmentation

This section will explain the importance of proper market segmentation in China because the options how to segment such a huge and diverse market are almost limitless. This knowledge is applicable for keyword research, content strategy planning, creating personas and also other marketing activities.

It is wise to deem the provincial-level administrative divisions as unique territories. McDonald's for example launched a TV commercial campaign that had 5 different versions, one being national and other 4 for Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, which are all first-tier cities with more than 10 million inhabitants. The reason was that the target groups in each city did not share the same values and their perception of the same ad would differ (Paull and Goh, 2013). The fact that Shenzhen and Guangzhou are both in the same province called Guangdong and yet McDonalds chose different campaigns for both cities is very interesting. It may be caused by the fact that Shenzhen was the first opened Special Economic Zone and is located right at the China-Hong Kong border, therefore experiencing bigger foreign exposure. The only reason authors mention is that a lot of young man are very entrepreneurial in Shenzhen but they provide no information about Guangzhou whatsoever.

Also, according to Ding (2017), cities that are not first tier (Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou) could manifest higher consumer ethnocentric beliefs which means that people thinking this way prefer domestic products and it would be more difficult

for foreign products to penetrate the market. Nevertheless, consumer ethnocentrism is relatively low in China and its impact varies between categories and product availability.

One-child policy introduced in 1979 lasted until recent years and while it incorporated many exceptions to have more kids, it still had an enormous impact on the structure of the Chinese society. The biggest one is aging society. According to Chen (2017), people over 60 will account for 20% of the Chinese population within 10 years and are becoming too promising for marketers to overlook. The second consequence is a generation of spoiled children that get all the attention and resources but are expected to be a prodigy in return. Chinese middle class and higher class families often make tremendous efforts to have their kids admitted to the best universities, which requires savings withdrawal and those students are under a lot of pressure.

Along with the strong economic growth in China comes the growth of the middle class which is related to the socio-economic transformation. *"Continued strong growth in the size and diversity of China's middle class will create new market opportunities for both domestic and international companies. Yet strategies that succeeded in the past, given the wide distribution of standardized products for mass consumers, must be adjusted in a new environment with millions of Chinese trading up and becoming more picky in their tastes. A detailed understanding of what consumers are doing, how their preferences are evolving, and the underlying reasons for their behavior will be needed."* (Barton et al., 2013)

It ultimately depends on the product or service how to segment the market. It could vary from targeting 20-39 males of Muslim ethnic groups living in first-tier cities to all female luxury-seekers in the Heilongjiang province for example. Considering the generational segmentation should be of great importance because of the changing ideological environment each generation went through. There are obviously more bases for market segmentation but those aforementioned could be considered as a deviation from the standard approach.

Although market segmentation is an effective marketing process, it should not be forgotten that China is still one country with common denominators throughout provinces. Haiyang Wang, CMO of Mondelez in China, shares that there are probably more similarities than differences in consumer behavior and these could be also discovered through a very good understanding of the consumers (Paull and Goh, 2013).

Cultural Values

China is a very hierarchical society and one of the ways how to stand out and possibly get to the higher society status is through buying luxury items that are seen in public (Lee, 2015). It stems from Confucianism which is related to high power distance and collectivism, 2 of Hofstede's cultural dimensions that will be explained in this section along with the remaining dimensions.

Hofstede's cultural dimensions framework is used to make connections between a culture of a specific country and values of its citizens. Hofstede (n.d.) came up with 6 cultural dimensions and they describe China as a country with:

- High Power Distance – Hofstede (n.d.) defines Power Distance *"as the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally."* This strongly relates to the hierarchical society and there are several stories of failure from international businesses that sent a relatively young manager to deal with senior Chinese partners who perceived this as a sign of disrespect.

- Highly collectivistic culture – It is common between East Asian countries to have a group-thinking mindset instead of individualism. Rex Wong of AB InBev describes that their campaigns reflect collectivism which values hard work, taking up challenges and celebrating victories as a team. In the West it is more about an individual hero but there is no hero in China, only the group (Paull and Goh, 2013). This cultural value could be also reflected in product and service reviews because Chinese value opinion of others. I have been warned many times by Chinese friends to critically evaluate these while shopping online because there are lots of fake reviews that may appear trustworthy to other Chinese, and thus having a big influence on their purchases.

- Masculine society – Chinese are success oriented and driven. For example, it is a well-known fact that both Chinese and Korean students face extremely difficult and stressful examinations before entering universities and they are more hard-working than their Western counterparts in general.

- Low Uncertainty Avoidance – Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic approach and the ambiguity of Chinese language was already mentioned and this is an example

of this cultural dimension. *"Western societies believe in logic—where something is either 'A' or not 'A'—so dealing with logical inconsistencies causes great discomfort. East Asians are able to accept that something could be both 'A' and not 'A' at the same time. The yin and yang is the classic symbol of opposites coexisting."* (Lee, 2015)

- High Long Term Orientation – This dimension is related to the previous one, the higher the score, the more pragmatic the society is. *"People believe that truth depends very much on situation, context and time. They show an ability to adapt traditions easily to changed conditions, a strong propensity to save and invest, thriftiness, and perseverance in achieving results."* (Hofstede, n.d.)

- Restrained society – Characterized by tendencies to cynicism and pessimism, such societies feel restrained by social norms and control gratifications of their desires.

Apart from Hofstede's cultural dimensions, it is also important to mention 2 cultural concepts that are deeply rooted in Chinese culture:

- Guanxi (关系) – This concept is usually left without translation but the English equivalent would be connections, relations or network. It is used to reference those kinds of human connections that both parties know are beneficial for each other. It is essential to spend time with Chinese business partners even on a personal level to build mutual trust. The right guanxi could lead to many opportunities because it is also build on reciprocal favors which are related to another concept called "debt of gratitude" (人情债, renqingzhai).

- Face (面子 mianzi) – Chinese are terrified by failures in public which makes them "lose face" (丢脸, diulian). Keeping face (personal or brand image) is critical for Chinese as it is also related to building guanxi. Positioning a brand to the extent of reinforcing one's "face" might be considered as one of the ultimate branding goals in China. *"Chinese greatly value "face"—a quality associated with dignity, honor, and pride—and will pay more to save face. For example, when purchasing gifts for important friends and family during Chinese New Year, consumers generally buy gifts that are of the appropriate value for the receiver and pay particular attention to product packaging.*

Consumers that cannot afford a higher-quality gift will buy the product with the nicest packaging within their price range. In addition, consumers will pay more for gifts with fancier packaging, even if the product is of equal quality to a less expensive item." (Nelson, 2011)

Consumer Behavior

While it is possible to draw conclusions from all what has been already said about China and consumer behavior, there are still many aspects that have not been mentioned so far and will be outlined in this section. *"In a country as vast and diverse as China, striking the right balance between tailored solutions reflecting local relevance and a scalable strategy to achieve operational efficiency can be daunting."* (Paull and Goh, 2013, p.88)

One of the biggest challenges for any company doing business in China is relatively low brand loyalty. According to Paull and Goh (2013), Chinese consumers have been overloaded with product choices over the past few decades and they trade up to better brands and upgrading their lifestyle, making them brand aware but not brand loyal. The contrast between a market with very limited or no choices and the market it is today is enormous. *"Chinese consumers are engaging in the 'try-out' phase before establishing brand preferences."* (Paull and Goh, 2013, p.69) The authors (2013, p.70) add *that "only when a brand offers a tangible or aspirational value-adding benefit which can be folded into the daily mix of their lives will consumers be willing to commit to a brand."*

Zipser et al. (2016) agree with the trend of trading up from mass products to premium products, however, they emphasize that brand loyalty has been increasing because *"a rising proportion of Chinese consumers focus on a few brands, and some are becoming loyal to single brands. The number of consumers willing to switch to a brand outside their "short list" dropped sharply. In apparel, for instance, the number of consumers willing to consider a brand they hadn't before dropped from about 40 percent in 2012 to just below 30 percent in 2015."* Tracking customer lifetime value (CLV) is an important metric closely related to brand loyalty and it is a valid reason for spending more money on customer acquisition than the customer spends during the first (second, third, …) transaction if there is potential for a strong brand loyalty and therefore repeated purchases.

Zipser et al. (2016) conclude their findings that Chinese consumers are not squandering money as they used to in the past as the focus is shifting towards premium products and living a more balanced, healthy, and family-centric life.

Chinese consumer habits are constantly evolving and changing. The problems Nescafe experienced in China would not be the same today as there is already a coffee drinking market. Shining example is the success of Starbucks in China which is, in fact, caused by the brand itself, not by their products. Starbucks could be seen almost anywhere in the bigger cities and Chinese choose it, besides other things, as a relatively cheap place for building guanxi because it has nice international atmosphere, which is ideal for these meetings. Apart from that, regular coffee shops are also common in China these days.

There have been many food and product safety scandals in China, some of them were even covered by international media. Among the most famous ones is a counterfeit baby formula resulting in thousands of babies being hospitalized and some even died. This scandal led to Chinese consumers avoiding domestic powdered milk and buying it abroad instead. According to Wong (2013), the demand overseas was so large that some countries ran out of supplies and had to set up limits per purchase, which eventually led to black market activities. This was mentioned in order to draw an analogy between counterfeited goods that can be dangerous or even life-threatening and the trend of willingness to pay for quality and safety. Therefore, emphasizing safety and health benefits in a product description as a unique selling proposition (USP) is a good idea.

China is known to be the country of counterfeits (山寨, shanzhai). Almost anything successful in the market is copied sooner or later and this gives an advantage for foreign brands. However, according to Nelson (2011), *"to increase their products' appeal, many Chinese companies register an office in the United States or Europe and brand their products as "foreign." This has made it increasingly difficult for consumers to discern domestic from foreign brands, and they thus turn to famous and leading brands instead. Foreign companies should devote resources to ensure Chinese consumers know their products' true origin."* Due to this environment, it is more likely to find duplicate content that has been stolen and even brands with a name very similar to the original because of the nature of Chinese language.

Lastly, and most importantly for SEO, Chinese Internet users show different search behavior than people in the West. According to Qu (2016), there are areas where it is more difficult to access desktops and people exclusively use mobile phones. Also, *"unlike Western*

users who tend to browse only the top three items found through keyword searches, Chinese users have shown that they prefer to browse all of the search results from the first couple of pages on offer rather than going directly to specific sites. This habit is linked to users' hunger for information, particularly about branded goods and aspirational lifestyles." Lastly, he adds that *"because Chinese users like to browse all the search results on the first couple of pages, and because they look on organic search results as very trustworthy and less commercial, SEO is an effective way to build company authority in a cost effective way."* Users of Baidu spent 55 seconds on average until they find what they were looking for, which is almost double the time users spend in Google. This behavior might be also caused by the fact that SERPs of Chinese search engines are quite messy compared to Google, users are not sure where to click, if it is a PPC ad or an organic search result. The difference between search behaviors of Google and Baidu users is clearly visible on the following heatmap which shows areas where users click the most (chinaz.com, 2013).

Picture 37: Baidu and Google SERP heatmap comparison, source: http://images.lusongsong.com/upload/719-2.jpg

6 METHODOLOGY

Following parts of this thesis will be dedicated to specifics of SEO in China and then SEO analyses of selected foreign brands on Chinese market will be conducted. This whole process will be interlinked with the general practices and foundations that were described in the previous parts. An appendix containing a short interview with International SEO Specialist Martin Kůra is attached at the end of this paper for some practical insights and findings when dealing with Chinese SEO.

6.1 LIMITATIONS

Complete SEO audit and strategy plan is a complex process that requires lots of resources. Firstly, without cooperation with the businesses themselves and access to their data, it is impossible to do a comprehensive analysis. As it was mentioned before, SEO strategy should be in accordance with overall business strategy, which is an unknown variable. It should always take competitors into account too. Furthermore, SEO strategies should be based on data and the options are limited without access to analytics and webmaster tools which contain important internal data.

Secondly, as a person who is not Chinese, it is not possible to conduct a keyword research that would fit the linguistic requirements. Chinese is such a diverse and rich language which contains many synonyms with nuances so insignificant that there might be only one English word for numerous Chinese equivalents. Therefore, keyword research and copywriting should be always done by native specialists. Also, not knowing business goals creates a barrier for the research, e.g. creating personas would be a guessing game. There is also a cultural barrier which makes evaluating content and UX difficult for foreigners. This will be at least discussed in the following chapter to give readers some insight into the cultural differences with applications in marketing and SEO.

Lastly, tools that will be used for the analysis are only free or trial versions, hence they usually have limited functions and cannot be used to their full extent.

6.2 SCOPE OF THE ANALYSIS

Keywords usage and UX will be only discussed to only a certain degree due to the aforementioned reasons. At first, a well-known brand will be rather superficially analyzed to point out SEO mistakes that even bigger brands let happen. The second analysis will be more comprehensive starting with off-page presence of the brand which will be followed by a technical SEO audit. Lastly, remaining on-page factors will be discussed. After the analyses are done, a list of recommendations will be made to sum up the findings.

6.3 TOOLS USED

Several SEO and developer tools will be used for the analyses and as mentioned, there are limitations for free/trial versions. Furthermore, it is said that many Western tools do not work properly with websites hosted in China and do not support Chinese search engines which narrows down the options. The following is a list of the used tools with short descriptions and limitations of free/trial versions:

- Screaming Frog SEO Spider – A website crawler which provides information about many aspects of technical and on-page SEO. Free version comes with a limit of maximum of 500 pages crawl budget per website and disables a lot of custom settings.
- Xenu Link Sleuth – A link crawling tool that is highly focused on technical aspects. Free unlimited version.
- Dragon Metrics – A software platforms that has many comprehensive SEO functions and is also focused on foreign search engines including Baidu, 360 and Sogou. A lot of functions are powered by Moz which is one of the most respected SEO companies in the world. 30 days free trial comes with limited options in terms of quantity (crawl budget, keywords tracking, backlinks tracking etc.).
- SEO Quake – Free plugin for browsers providing lots of basic metrics.
- PageSpeed Insights – Speed optimization recommendation tool by Google.
- ce.cloud.360.cn – Website speed and loading time test throughout individual provinces along with other options provided by Qihoo 360.

6.4 SELECTED WEBSITES

Chinese e-commerce ecosystem and government regulations make it difficult for brands to thrive on their own. It is much easier for small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) to find a Chinese partner for promoting their businesses or to sell products on e-commerce platforms which may eliminate SEO from their integrated marketing strategy in favor of the presence outside their official websites. It is a problem to find a foreign-owned SME that does not rely on these partnerships, therefore some recommendations to leverage SEO will be made for these brands in general.

Given the situation in China, English teaching market was chosen for the analyses. There are many language training centers with foreign origins in China and the demand for at least English courses is enormous. First brand is supposed to be well-known and the second one is picked from the second and latter SERP pages for aforementioned reasons.

The chosen brands are:

- Wall Street English – 华尔街英语 - http://wsi.com.cn/
- TPR ENGLISH - www.tprenglish.com

7 SEO IN CHINA

The fundamental principles of search engines and SEO are the same all around the world. Of course, each search engine is different to some extent and so should be the SEO approach. It is especially important to stick to the Chinese "rules" and have a truly local presence. Therefore, this chapter will describe the specifics of doing SEO in China.

7.1 SEARCH ENGINES

China has the most unique search engine market in the world. However, market share statistics differ and change in the course of time in both English and Chinese reports, thus the data provided should be viewed with respect to this fact. All the following data is taken from statcounter.com in a time period between March 2016 and March 2017:
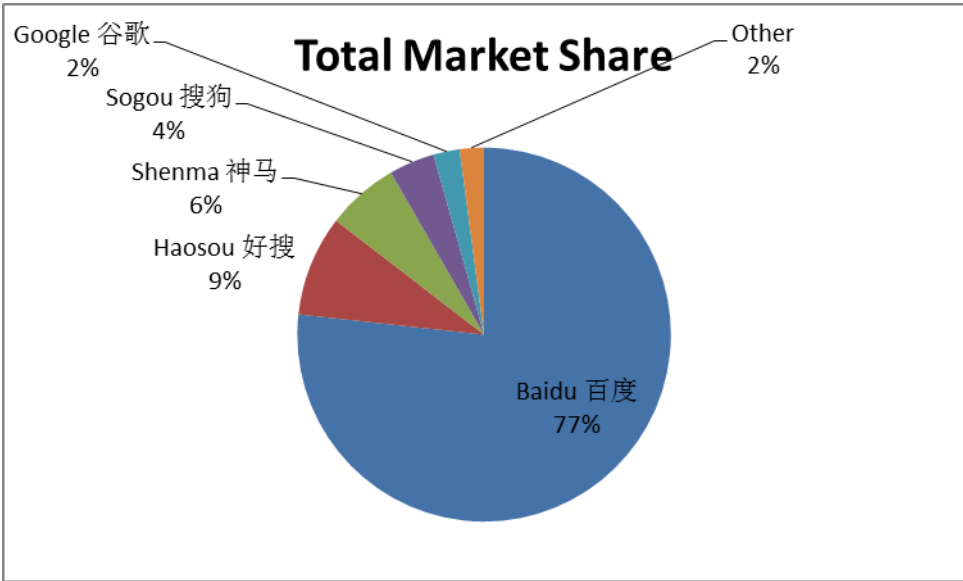
**Picture 38: Total Chinese Search Engine Market Share, source: own graph, data:
http://gs.statcounter.com/search-engine-market-share/all/china**
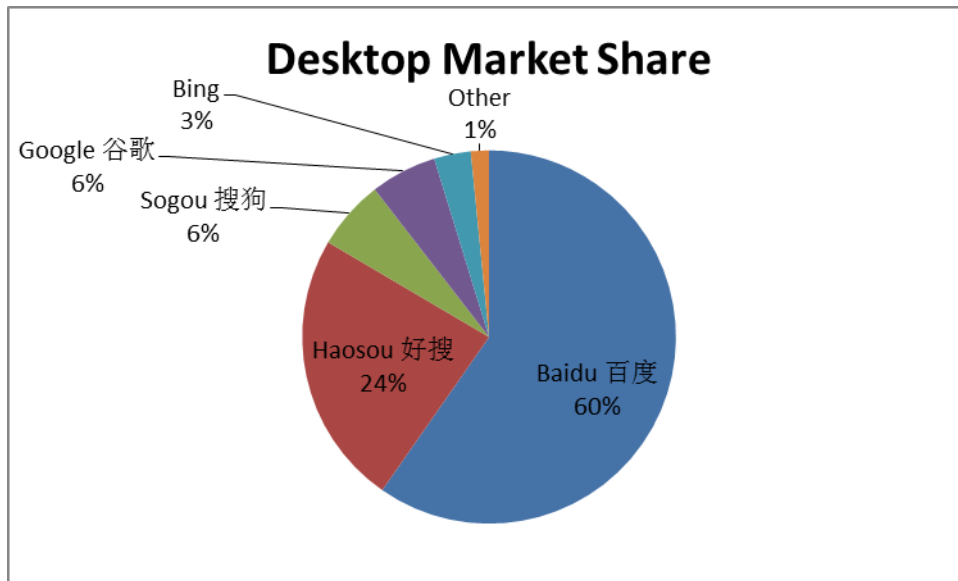
Picture 39: Desktop Chinese Search Engine Market Share, source: own graph, data:
http://gs.statcounter.com/search-engine-market-share/all/china
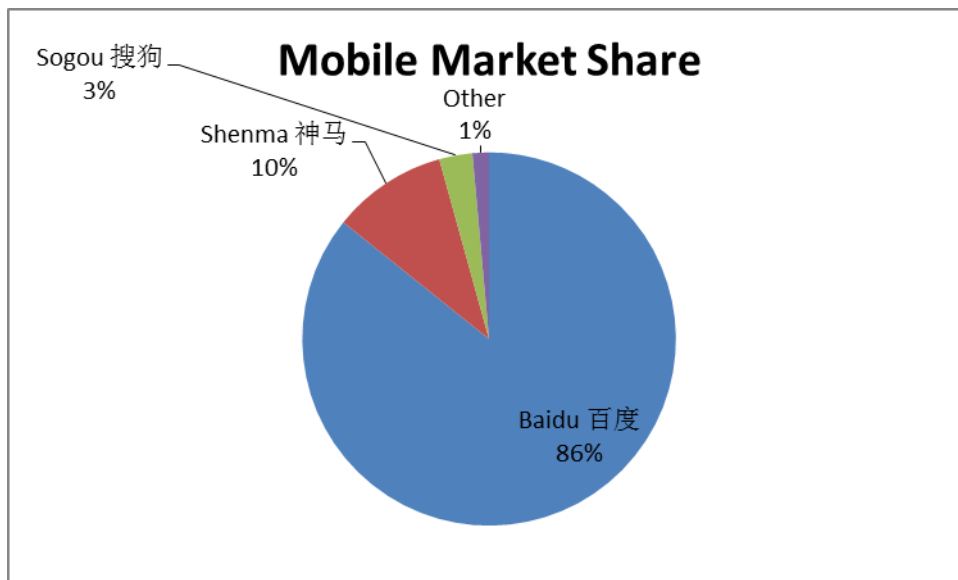
Picture 40: Mobile Chinese Search Engine Market Share, source: own graph, data:
http://gs.statcounter.com/search-engine-market-share/all/china

As seen in the graphs, there are clearly significant differences in the mobile and desktop usage of search engines. The vast majority of posts concerning Chinese SEO are about Baidu and it is supposed that optimization for the other search engines does not require different approach even though there is a higher chance for successful implementation of black hat techniques for the less developed search engines (Lesser, 2013). Working with all the respective webmaster tools is taken for granted in order to control the technical aspects and marketers should be aware of the SERP layout and its options which

will be described in this section. Therefore, if not stated otherwise, all the specifics for Chinese SEO will be related to Baidu.

Baidu

Already mentioned a few times in this thesis, it is the dominant Chinese search engine. As expected, it is the best performer for parsing and interpreting Chinese in the world and it prefers websites in Simplified Chinese which are the reasons for its supremacy in China (Lesser, 2017).

Baidu offers a lot of vertical search options which are very prominent in the SERP and include news, pictures, maps, library, document sharing platform, encyclopedia (Baike – Chinese take on Wikipedia), forums, questions platform (similar to Quora), guidebooks and much more, depending on the query. Participation in suitable verticals is a very efficient SEO technique for China as it opens new opportunities to be visible. According to Lesser (2017), *"for 99% of sites, the biggest organic competitor will be Baidu. That's because for almost all search queries, you can see at least one Baidu property ranking in the top 5 positions. This by itself make SEO on Baidu very different than in Google."*
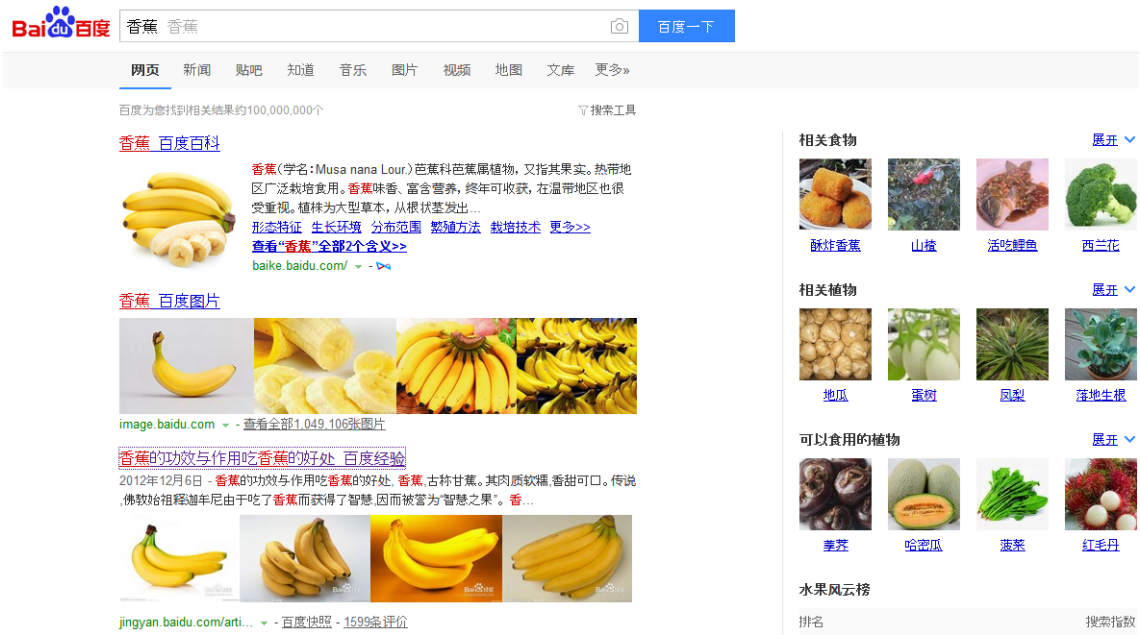
Picture 41: Vertical search results in Baidu's SERP for "banana" query, source: own screenshot

All of the 3 top ranking results for "banana" query are different Baidu verticals – Baike, images and "jingyan"[24] Baidu uses a lot of images and also has its own structured data

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[24] It means experience, this vertical contains posts about all kinds of hobbies, interests, tips and tricks.

system with plans to adopt and support schema.org this year (Ma, 2017).

宫保鸡丁的做法,宫保鸡丁怎么做好吃,宫保鸡丁的家常做法 ... 好豆网

食物相克: 花生不宜与黄瓜、螃蟹同食,否则易导致腹泻,花生也不可与香瓜同食。向你推荐: 鸡脯肉的做法 花生米的做法 点赞 5734 收藏到专辑 相关...

www.haodou.com/recipe/... ▾ - 百度快照 - 60%好评

宫保鸡丁的做法【组图】

jingyan.baidu.com ▾ - 🎏

鸡丁的做法大全 鸡丁的家常做法 鸡丁怎么做好吃【心食谱】

宫保鸡丁,宫爆鸡丁,酱爆鸡丁,[健康厨房10分钟出年菜]彩椒鸡丁 (小心上瘾),山药鸡丁蔬果沙拉『诺钙C发泡锭』,梅醋芝麻鸡丁【谷盛鲜梅健康醋】,辣炒鸡丁义大利面...

www.xinshipu.com/zuofa... ▾ - 百度快照 - 82条评价

Picture 42: Structured data demonstration in Baidu for "gongbao chicken recipe" query, source: own screenshot

The main difference between Baidu and Google SERP are the following (Lesser, 2017):

- There is only Simplified Chinese version.

- Clicking on a result opens up a new tab.

- A lot of images and rich snippets are involved.

- Baidu uses a subdomain for mobile search (m.baidu.com).

- In case a website is not mobile-friendly, Baidu can use its algorithm to transcode it. This should not be used as it has no SEO benefits which will be discussed further.

- It is harder to distinguish paid ads from organic results, there is also a domain credibility system which is generally available only for paid search customers

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and while it has influence on CTR, it is not clear whether it is a ranking factor or not.

"While Baidu still follows Google in many ways, this may not be the case for much longer. With the development of machine learning being integrated into search engine algorithms, each will develop independently. As machine learning picks up on local user behavior and search intent, cultural and behavioral differences of Chinese users will diverge Baidu even further from Google." (Lesser, 2017)

360 Search (Haosou)

There has been some name changes of this search engine in the recent years. Originally 360 搜索 (sousuo – search) changed its name to 好搜搜索 (Haosou sousuo – well searchable) in 2015 to go back to the original name just a year later for branding and usability reasons (chinaz.com, 2016).

Its popularity on desktop devices was gained very quickly because the company behind it, Qihoo 360, initially achieved success with their antivirus followed by a browser which means that they already had a strong user base. When Google resigned from its activities in China, they quickly changed the built-in Google search engine for their own (Lesser, 2013).

Similarly to Baidu, the SERP contains a lot of pictures and rich snippets and there is some kind of credibility system too. There are also several vertical searches but nothing unique except vertical search for medical advices.

What makes Baidu, 360search and Sogou interesting and for SEO specialist annoying at the same time is their SERP layout for transactional and some navigational queries.

Official website of Apple is ranking well below the fold for "iphone 7" query. Nevertheless, Chinese users browse more results which might compensate for this fact.

Sogou

The company behind this search engine also developed a website browser and the most actively used pinyin[25] input method editor. What makes this search engine unique is its WeChat vertical search. WeChat is the most popular social media channel in China and will be discussed further in off-page section of this chapter.

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[25] Phonetic transcription of Chinese characters which is also used in this thesis.

Picture 45: WeChat posts and account of CzechTourism in Sogou's vertical search, source: own screenshot

Usability is questionable since Sogou does not have very high traffic and WeChat is mainly mobile application but it is definitely a nice and unique feature.

Shenma

According to the official Shenma website (n.d.), it is a unique mobile-only search engine with focus on applications, e-commerce platforms, books and some other verticals that was developed by the biggest e-commerce platform Alibaba in collaboration with the creator of most popular mobile browser in China UCWeb and also engineers from other big players in the software world. This means that they already had huge amount of data before launching the search engine and there is no wonder it got quite popular, because the user experience is great.

Picture 46: Top result in Shenma for iPhone 7 query pointing to official Apple product website, source: own screenshot

Picture 47: High-speed train from Beijing to Shanghai query in Shenma, source: own screenshot

Because of its creators, it is highly integrated with Alibaba's services, therefore especially those who do business on its platforms should be aware of this search engine and

make sure everything is technically right in the webmaster tools. Apart from tips how to work with the tool, there is not much information in either English or Chinese about real optimizing for Shenma.

7.2 CHINESE USER-CENTERED DESIGN

The fact that everything looks more cluttered and chaotic in China is even visible from the SERP layout screenshots. Browsing the Chinese Internet could be surprising and shocking for Western users because Chinese websites often look like a complete opposite of what they are used to. And vice versa, the same could be applied to Chinese users on Western-style websites.

Simplicity, clarity and minimalism are highly appreciated in the West and even though it may sound exaggerated, Chinese approach to web design would be described by Westerners as messy and content-heavy. Founder of Yihaodian, Chinese online grocery store, and former CEO of Alibaba were interviewed by CNN (2013) and they admit that there were attempts to simplify and clean the websites but their customers did not like it because they prefer very crowded pages with lots of links. It is compared with an offline shopping experience in China which is also busy, chaotic, containing lots of promotions and there is chatting between customers and merchants. This is also the reason why the vast majority of Chinese e-commerce platforms has embedded instant messengers.

Picture 48: Homepage top level navigation of Ctrip, source: own screenshot

As seen in the picture above, the information architecture of this successful travel service provider appears very flat just by looking at the homepage navigation. The homepage itself is crammed with pictures, texts and links. Chinese want to see as much as possible on the homepage. Western approach is to quickly navigate the user further down the website in order not to get lost and confused.

Demonstrated on an extreme example, there is a car leasing company in Britain owned by a Chinese entrepreneur. The website is http://www.lingscars.com/ and it appears almost as a joke with all the flashy elements, music, weird graphics and numerous different

font types and sizes. Yet, Collinson (2017) claims that the owner of this website became the biggest individual seller of cars in Britain.

Picture 49: lingscars.com distinctive UX, source: own screenshot

Ilinčev (2016b) points out that while it may drive away most visitors on the page, it perfectly targets the niche market of Asians living in Britain. His findings include perfect and fast customer service which corresponds to the needs of chatting.

This completely different approach to UX demonstrates the need for open mind when doing business in China. Given the fact that many brands choose new domains for China and they have to build their website and its authority from scratch, it is also a good opportunity to adapt the user interface and experience to what Chinese are used to instead of copying the Western model.

7.3   SOCIAL MEDIA

Again, there is a unique ecosystem of social media in China because the Western ones are generally blocked. Chinese social media should not be treated as Western copies because they are not the same and, in fact, China might become a country that will be able to set global social media trends.

General practice for social media and content marketing in terms of SEO stays the same. The challenge lies in culturally adapted valuable content and being able to leverage all

opportunities Chinese social media offer. There are not just a few of them, Chinese Internet is quite fragmented and brands should focus on being consistent across all the platforms (Paull and Goh, 2013). Using influencers is also a popular practice there and considering the number of key opinion leaders in China, marketers should be very careful when choosing the right one.

WeChat

Made by Tencent, a company with history of successful software (QQ instant messenger and Qzone social network for example), it is the most popular application with just under 80% penetration among netizens (CNNIC, 2017).

Chinese are addicted to QR codes and one of the main reasons for this is WeChat. Firstly, it is possible and frequently used to add other users or people/brands to follow by scanning their QR codes. On top of it, WeChat has many integrated functions and allows users to do things within one application that usually require 10 or more individual applications in the West. One of the most useful functions is WeChat Wallet which is linked to user's bank account allowing him to use his phone for payments that are realized in the application itself or by scanning QR codes (vendor scans the phone or mobile scans the vendor). It is possible to go out without a wallet and pay by using mobile only. Using QR codes for businesses is therefore very important for users' convenience.

With the exception of Sogou, search engines do not index WeChat due to the fact of being a mobile application. Therefore, WeChat cannot be considered as an efficient tool for SEO strategies but rather as an important medium in integrated marketing strategy for China. Furthermore, it is difficult to track the influence of WeChat on SEO because analytics tools attribute visits from instant messaging mobile apps as direct traffic and we cannot expect users to share URLs with UTM parameters.

Sino Weibo

A mix between Facebook and Twitter, it is also widely used in China and unlike WeChat, it works well on both desktop and mobile[26], which means that search engines can index the posts. The options for SEO go even further. According to Lesser (2017b), the content could be displayed as a rich snippet in Baidu when users search for the brand or

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[26] WeChat could be also used on desktop but requires QR scan by mobile first and has limited functions.

offerings, therefore it is considered to be the most important social media platform for SEO in China.

"Weibo is likely the most efficient channel for influencers marketing in China. Even the advertising platform itself offers capabilities to connect influencers with advertisers." (Lesser, 2017b)

Weibo incorporates a similar method of user verification as Baidu, also marked with a "V" sign, allowing the verified users to have a customized page and access to data (Lloyd-Williams, 2015). Apart from that, there are badges like VIP accounts and user levels.

Unlike Twitter, Weibo allows posts up to 2000 characters with the limit of 140 in the user feed with the option to unfold the rest (QQ Tech, 2016).

Picture 50: Profile of randomly chosen influencer on Weibo, source: own screenshot

7.4   LINK BUILDING

The concept of link building remains the same but there are of course some differences because link evaluating algorithms work differently. This section provides an overview how Baidu's algorithms differ from Google in determining link quality and generally links perception.

Because processes behind ranking algorithms are unknown and professionals have to work their way around it to figure out options, general best practices for link building will always work well.

Baidu (2015) announced that it is shutting down its link disavow tool because they upgraded their algorithm to recognize low quality and black hat links, thus there is no need for webmasters to disallow any links if the bad ones cannot influence their ranking. The upgraded algorithm currently only considers a very narrow range of high-quality links and they encourage webmasters to abandon link building activities at all. It was definitely a big change for link building approach in China because before that there was a general assumption that Baidu favored quantity over quality (Lloyd-Williams, 2015) which made the link building ecosystem very unnatural.

Lesser (2017c) is skeptical about the algorithm being so sophisticated and claims that it cannot eliminate link building from SEO strategies. Other search engines should not be forgotten so even if it is not as effective for Baidu, it still definitely plays a huge role for other search engines.

It is a general rule that links from websites with high authority are the best and because of the Baidu's algorithm update, it is even much more important in China. Another Baidu specific is considering non-hyperlinked URLs as ordinary links which only do not contain anchor text (Lloyd-Williams, 2015).

7.5   TECHNICAL AND ON-PAGE SEO

A few aspects related to this section were already mentioned, such as ICP license, hosting, CDNs, UX and IA and there are of course other specifics of Chinese search engines, which will conclude this chapter.

Geographical and Language Targeting

Baidu targets and prefers Simplified Chinese and many businesses create a separate domain for Chinese market which makes the targeting easier because search engines can tell it is only for Chinese if it is hosted in China and the website is completely in Chinese.

Baidu's webmaster tools do not allow geo-target specification and it is recommended to submit each country version separately. Only TLDs and subdomains can be submitted which is a disadvantage for subfolders (Kůra, 2015c). In order not to confuse crawlers, it is

recommended not to use ccTLDs of other countries with Chinese version in subfolder/subdomain. Content for Chinese should be the default website setting on .cn or .com domains where it is then possible to include other languages, but these should be inferior to the Chinese version.

There are situations where more language mutations are required. Baidu does not support hreflang tags but just as Bing, it does check "content-language" meta tags (Kůra, 2015c). It is important not to forget to specify the script which should always be SImplified Chinese for China (zh-Hans).

HTTPS

Baidu (2015b) released an official statement that their crawler can index HTTPS websites without any problem and it will prefer HTTPS sites to HTTP sites due to increased safety. Webmasters also do not need to worry about rankings drop if they use 301 redirects for the protocol migration. However, Baidu admits that there might be some indexation speed problems if a website is running on HTTPS from the beginning and suggests using webmaster tools to manually submit to pages and monitor the index.

Lesser (2017d) suggests that *"Baidu's support of HTTPS is still not mature enough for webmasters to make the switch, as the risks still outweigh the potential benefits."* Nevertheless, for launching a new website nowadays, HTTPS would be recommended from the beginning given the current trends. An exception might be applicable for websites which do not collect any user data.

Options for SEO friendly hosting in China

Mobile Optimization

Baidu is not behind in mobile support and development, they are actually very sophisticated given the mobile dominance in China and can keep up with Google. As one of the biggest trends is loading speed, Google came up with Accelerated Mobile Pages, which are getting rid of any redundant code for mobile usage and got quite popular among content publishers, and Baidu followed up with their own Mobile Instant Pages. Not only the projects are basically the same, even their websites are alike - https://www.ampproject.org/ for Google and https://www.mipengine.org/ for Baidu.

It was already mentioned that Baidu is able to transcode a page if it is not optimized for mobile devices. Lesser (2017e) strongly advises against using this feature for many reasons such as being on Baidu's domain the whole time after transcoding it without any possibility to directly navigate further the original website.

Lesser (2017e) suggests using responsive design configuration over the other two (dynamic serving and separate URLs) in general and also with focus on China even though it always depends on the website and resources available. Webmasters should always follow the official guidelines for each configuration.

Sitemaps for Baidu

Baidu has developed a device tagging system for sitemaps which tells the crawler what kind of mobile configuration is used on the website. Tagging desktop devices is not necessary. The following picture shows sitemap tagging for separate URLs, responsive design and dynamic serving in this order:

```xml
<?xml version="1.0" encoding="UTF-8" ?>
<urlset xmlns="http://www.sitemaps.org/schemas/sitemap/0.9"
xmlns:mobile="http://www.baidu.com/schemas/sitemap-mobile/1/">
<url>
<loc>http://m.example.com/index.html</loc>
<mobile:mobile type="mobile"/>
<lastmod>2009-12-14</lastmod>
<changefreq>daily</changefreq>
<priority>0.8</priority>
</url>
<url>
<loc>http://www.example.com/index.html</loc>
<lastmod>2009-12-14</lastmod>
<changefreq>daily</changefreq>
<priority>0.8</priority>
</url>
<url>
<loc>http://www.example.com/autoadapt.html</loc>
<mobile:mobile type="pc,mobile"/>
<lastmod>2009-12-14</lastmod>
<changefreq>daily</changefreq>
<priority>0.8</priority>
</url>
<url>
<loc>http://www.example.com/htmladapt.html</loc>
<mobile:mobile type="htmladapt"/>
<lastmod>2009-12-14</lastmod>
<changefreq>daily</changefreq>
<priority>0.8</priority>
</url>
</urlset>
```

Picture 52: Sitemap device tagging for Baidu, source: screenshot from http://zhanzhang.baidu.com/college/courseinfo?id=267&page=2#h2_article_title4

Baidu (2015c) endorses usage of sitemaps which support etags in order to crawl the sitemaps more often. Lesser (2017d) describes etags as a part of HTTP protocol that inform about changes on a certain page since last visit. Enabling these tags makes pages load more conveniently if they have not changed since the last visit, saving resources on both visitor's and server's side.

Lesser (2017d) also informs that there are 2 unique alternative methods to have pages crawled faster by Baidu which is prevention against unauthorized duplicate content:

- Real-time Active Push – it needs to be customized and programmed by developers but it allows the page to be indexed instantly
- Auto Push – a simple piece of JS code in the <head> section that submits the page to Baidu after it is triggered by a visit

SERP Snippet and Other On-Page Elements

Best practices stay the same which could be summarized as writing unique, valuable and keywords-targeted titles, headings, descriptions and copy. Chinese characters make it more difficult because they are bigger than Latin alphabet and therefore take up more space. On the other hand, if it is taken to the extreme, a sentence or a proverb of 4 characters may need an incomparably longer English sentence for a proper translation. Furthermore, there are no spaces between words and punctuation is also very scarce compared to other languages. In terms of pixel length, Chinese generally contains more meaning than other languages within the same length, which is a great opportunity. The elements which differ for China are:

- Page titles – Chinese usually use underscore _ separator which is not even visible in the SERPs because all Chinese search engines automatically underscore the whole page title covering the separators. Dashes and other symbols are also used but they are visible in the SERP. While desktop SERP can contain around 25 Chinese characters without being cut off, Lesser (2017e) recommends using under 17 characters for mobile SERP. Coming up with different snippet elements for both versions could become quite strenuous, therefore sticking up to the 17 characters rule for page titles when possible is recommended.

- Meta description – Lesser (2017e) recommends length of 60 characters for mobile versions. Doing a quick research on meta description length in desktop before cut off revealed a number around 75 Chinese characters.

- URL – Chinese characters are not ASCII[27] characters which causes encoding problems, nevertheless, there are some big brands that use these in URLs like Wikipedia even though it is not recommended. One method is to use pinyin to rewrite the characters into Latin alphabet which is still quite understandable for search engines and some users. The other one is to use English translations and this method seems to be a trend among many big Chinese brands:

    o http://alibabagroup.com/cn/about/history

    o http://www.tencent.com/zh-cn/culture.html#culture_env

    o http://www.baidu.com/search/jubao.html - Baidu even combines both English and pinyin.

    o http://www.news.cn/energy/hb.htm - here they use English for top level subdirectories and then pinyin abbreviations, in this case 环保 (huan bao for "hb"), shortened form of 环境保护(huanjing baohu – environmental protection).

Other elements include:

- Meta keywords tag – long time forgotten for Google and other Western search engines due to black hat activities of keyword stuffing. This still seems to be a small ranking factor for Baidu (Lesser, 2017). It is not visible to users and this tag includes relevant keywords the page is targeting which should tell the crawler what the page is about. Abuse of this tag in the earlier days is obvious.

- Alt attribute and picture file names – Alt attribute should be written in Chinese but file names in English or by using pinyin because it appears in the URL.

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[27] character encoding standard

8 SEO OPPORTUNITIES FOR FOREIGN SME IN CHINA

There is always a way how to integrate SEO into a marketing strategy for business growth. Brands naturally want to be seen and then perceived in the best way possible. Even though the market may be very competitive and it seems that it is unlikely to drive any significant organic traffic, the answer how to improve performance is a good website optimization, building relationships with the community and other businesses in the market, and lastly content marketing.

SEO is a slow and persistent process with results sometimes visible only after many months of implementation. It takes a long time to improve rankings for competitive keywords. Good keyword research provides a foundation for almost unlimited opportunities. The key is to start targeting long-tail keywords through valuable and unique content.

It is better to demonstrate this on an example. There is an inbound travel company that targets mainly Chinese tourists for river cruises around Europe and they sell these trips to big Chinese travel agencies to resell it further to the end customers. They also do many other activities such as tailored itineraries, honeymoon trips, wedding journeys with photos etc. While ranking for "holiday in Europe", "buy a European trip" or "Danube river cruises" keywords is very competitive and unlikely to rank for well from the beginning, there are many more long-tail opportunities such as:

- wedding photo shooting in Prague

- what places to see on Danube river?

- how do river cruises work?

- the most romantic (substitute with many more adjectives) places in Europe

- luxurious European river cruises references

- what facilities are on board of luxurious ships?

- experience the culture of Central Europe

All of these keywords are made up and some of them may have close to zero average monthly searches or may be more competitive than they seem, this was created to give an overview of the long-tail opportunities.

Writing great content supported by proper keyword research and promoting it on all suitable platforms definitely reaps benefits (traffic and backlinks in terms of SEO). Of course,

it costs resources and investing into Chinese partners, third-party platforms or other marketing channels might be better for some businesses. However, the benefits of having a high authority domain, engaged social media channels and great brand awareness are invaluable.

If there is already a good brand presence on the Chinese Internet through the third-parties, it could be leveraged into drawing the traffic to the original website. Satisfied partners will likely link to the website which could be a significant boost if the partner is a big brand, and satisfied customers might be transferred from brand's page on a platform to other channels.

9   WALL STREET ENGLISH ANALYSIS

Wall Street English (WSE) is a well-known global brand that is one of the biggest competitors in the market of English teaching. They operate in 28 countries and their presence in China is significant with more than 60 centers throughout the country. They have quite a few other domains beside this, some of them with different focus (e-learning, student's web) but also others that seem very similar to this website which is ranking the best for English training queries. This disintegration definitely harms some pages because of keyword cannibalization and backlinks disunity.

9.1   ONLINE PRESENCE

Chinese search engines are only able to process limited number of characters which is easily exceeded when using search operators. The first step was to find out how many brand mentions are indexed within search engines. Google was used for this because it was able to accommodate all the search operators that were necessary to prevent the brand websites from appearing in SERP. Apart from that, Chinese search engines do not show the number of returned results for this kind of search.

"华尔街英语" -site:wsi.com.cn -site:wselearning.com -site:wsi.tantuw.com -site:

All   Maps   Images   News   Videos   More   Settings   Tools

About 373,000 results (0.62 seconds)
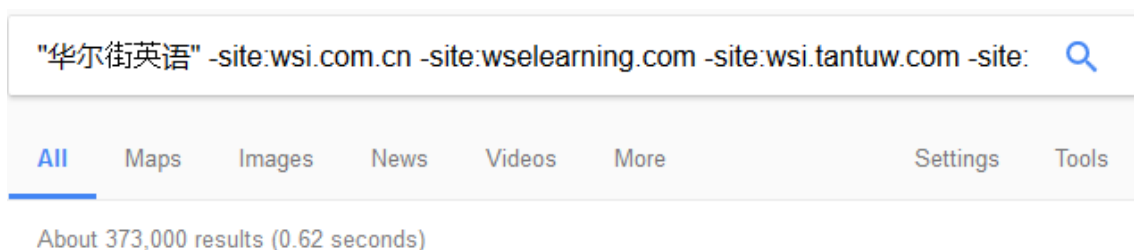
Picture 53: Number of indexed pages for branded query excluding websites of the brand itself

There are over 2 million pages indexed within Google for "Wall Street English" query in Chinese which confirms that it is a very popular brand for Chinese.

Next step is to check their presence on selected Baidu's vertical searches. The first one is Baidu Tieba which is an online community creating forums, in this case "bars" around keywords. Each forum contains discussions on related topics. WSE has a very active and engaged "bar" with their posts published many times a week. The whole "bar" has 125 000 followers and almost 200 000 threads.

Picture 54: WSE Tieba page, source: own screenshot

Picture 55: Tieba posts by WSE itself, source: own screenshot

Next platform is zhidao.baidu.com, a Q&A community platform, and it seems that the most frequent question is regarding their high tuition and fees. There are no official answers and also no landing page for this frequent question. This is a perfect opportunity to create a landing page targeting this keyword and defend the price with well written arguments. Other questions are about finding out the cost or trying to get some references about the quality of teaching. Neither of these has dedicated landing pages.

Similar platform zhihu.com, that is not part of Baidu, contains more or less the same kind of questions.

Moving on to social media, their Weibo account has almost 170 000 followers and they try to post often and engage with the users, however, most of the posts have very low engagement. The most active recent post is about St. Patrick's Day and it got over 200 likes and 800 comments.

WSE's WeChat is very interactive and engaging, the first thing I received after following them was an invitation to some kind of game. Their feed lacks a regular schedule, they often cram many posts into one day like 2 times a month. Nevertheless, it still seems to resonate well with the followers because the posts are educative and often funny at the same time.
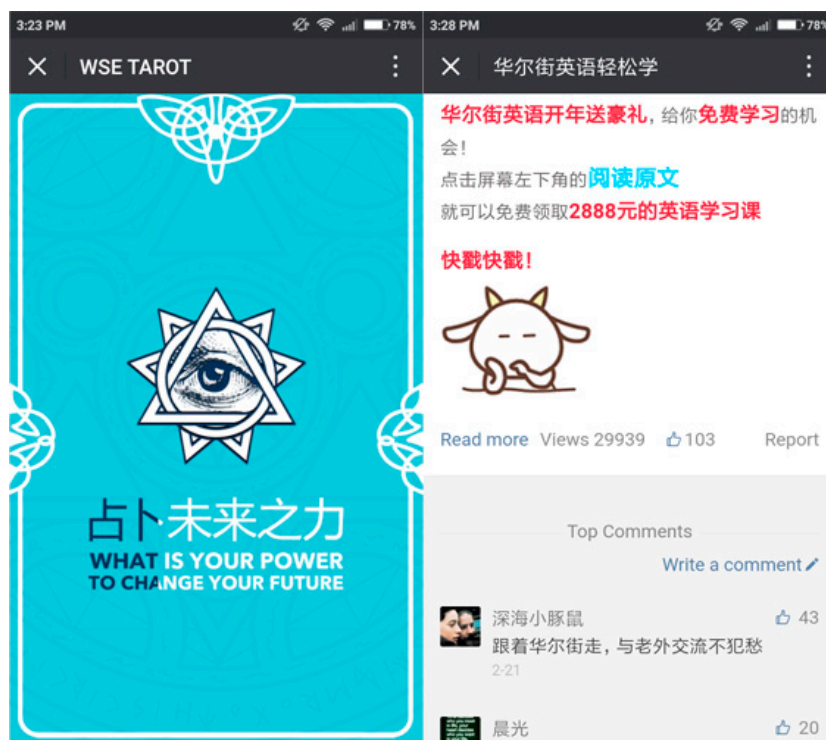
Picture 56: WeChat account of WSE, a game on the left and post on the right, source: own screenshot
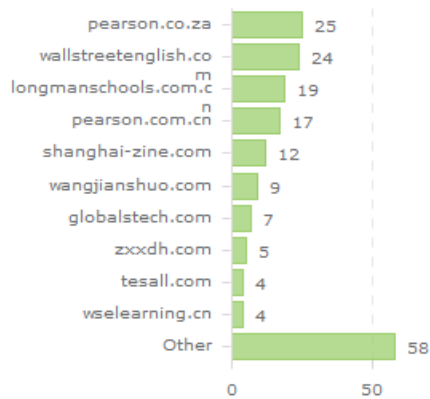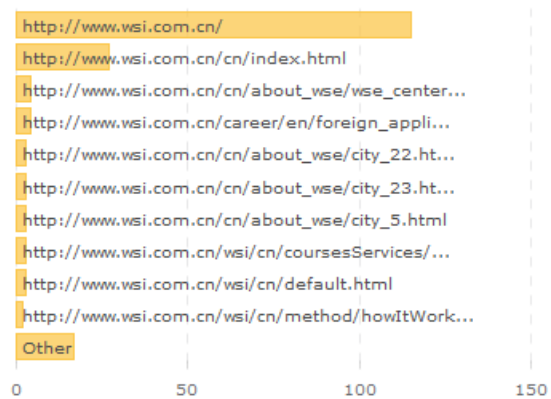
Picture 57: WSE's backlink situation, source: screenshot from Dragon Metrics

Linking domains seem to be involved in friendly link exchanges (WSE is a subsidiary of Pearson) and vast majority of them are targeting the homepage. The first URL is redirected to the second one so at least the link juice is not split. It is clear that WSE's link portfolio is not very diverse and naturally acquired and on top of that, only homepage is targeted most of the time. It is an indicator that the website most likely does not have valuable content that would attract links.

9.2   SEO ISSUES

Lack of Good Landing Pages

	URLs	Ranking Keywords	Traffic Index	Traffic Index as %
☑	http://www.wsi.com.cn/	35	6,397	89.30%
☑	http://www.wsi.com.cn/career/cn/index.aspx	4	232	3.24%
☑	http://hmm.wsi.com.cn/	4	138	1.93%
☑	http://wsi.com.cn/cn/courses/multimethod.html	5	127	1.77%
☑	http://www.wsi.com.cn/channelwse/	2	78	1.09%
☑	http://wsi.com.cn/cn/courses/payment_methods.html	2	62	0.87%

Picture 58: The most visited landing pages on WSE, source: screenshot from Dragon Metrics

Picture 59: WSE's homepage not meeting search intent for "how much does WSE cost" query, source: own screenshot

As it was already mentioned, WSE does not return suitable landing pages for many queries, those that are the most frequent on Zhidao and Zhihu were tried. Picture 58 shows that nearly 90% of all organic Baidu traffic ends up on the homepage. This is a huge drawback because searchers do not find what they need and people end up on the homepage most of the time. It would be interesting to see homepage bounce rate data but this is unfortunately internal information.

Duplicate Content

Picture 60: Duplicate URLs report, source: screenshot from Screaming Frog

Within the limited crawl budget of 500 pages, total of 80 of duplicate URLs were found. None of them are canonicalised or redirected. Furthermore, there are many duplicates of page titles, meta descriptions and meta keywords, headings are not even used most of the time.

Sitemap

There is only HTML sitemap which is serving normal users, not robots. Robots need XML sitemap but WSE does not have one. It is not a big issue but if the site has HTML sitemap, which is not placed in the root directory and its name is site_map, it should have the XML version too. Without it, it cannot specify the mobile version for Baidu's crawler.

Index Problem in Sogou

Only 127 pages are included in Sogou's index, Baidu and 360 both have many times more pages in their index.

Language Targeting

There are no meta language tags and the URL structure could have been planned better. There is Chinese and English version of the website and both are in their respective subdirectories. It would be better to have the Chinese version as default at http://wsi.com.cn with the English version in a subdirectory - http://wsi.com.cn/en/. Even though the domain .com.cn looks suspicious, quite a lot of companies have it too and it should not be a problem. The website is hosted in China and it has great speed performance in most provinces.

Mobile Version

The website is not at all optimized for mobile devices which might be even bigger disadvantage than lack of landing pages in China. UX on mobile is simply disastrous.

Dynamic Elements

The website has many dynamic elements which are difficult to crawl, especially when Baidu and other Chinese search engines are not as sophisticated in this as Google. There are many keywords embedded in these as well as in pictures which would have been able to rank if they were in text.

Content Marketing

WSE's blog is not promoted in cooperation with other channels. There are different posts on the blog, Weibo and WeChat. Also, the blog category page does not look good and objectively does not entice visitors to click further.

当前位置：精彩活动 > 中心活动

2017/4/13 【华尔街英语疯玩派对】上海全年就这天不担心戴绿帽子

2017/3/17 华尔街英语杭州携手银泰情人节巧克力DIY——送给心爱的TA

2017/2/28 【华尔街英语疯玩派对】 情人节"新招"，不秀恩爱秀英语

2017/2/9 【华尔街英语疯玩派对】寻鸡舞龙？我可能过了一个假年……

2016/12/2 感恩节"火鸡"集体出动，你们城会玩！

2016/11/4 【华尔街英语疯玩派对】万圣节搞怪装扮，手纸木乃伊实力辣眼！

2016/11/4 华尔街英语Teachers' Day向老师们致敬

2016/10/31 【华尔街英语疯玩派对】男争女斗PK赛！00后小学员秀英文成全场亮点

2016/10/21 【华尔街英语疯玩派对】放开你手里的那个Kimbap，让我来！

Picture 63: WSE's blog category page

On the other hand, some posts seem to be well written and entertaining. For example, "【华尔街英语疯玩派对】上海全年就这天不担心戴绿帽子" (【Crazy Party at WSE】Shanghai Does Not Need to Worry about Wearing Green Hats Today) is a great cultural joke because "wearing a green hat" is an expression used when a woman is cheating on her partner. This blog post was dedicated to St. Patrick's celebrations.

9.3 CONCLUSION

WSE is a strong and successful brand with great social media and Internet presence. However, their marketing strategy is clearly focused on everything else than SEO because there is a big potential for improvement.

10 TPR ENGLISH ANALYSIS

TPR English is a brand that is only present in Guangdong province with the most prominent area being Zhuhai. They have been in China for 25 years already so it should be a well-established brand. TPR stands for Total Physical Response which is a unique teaching method that incorporates physical movement into language learning. They also focus on "situation English".

10.1 OFF-PAGE OVERVIEW
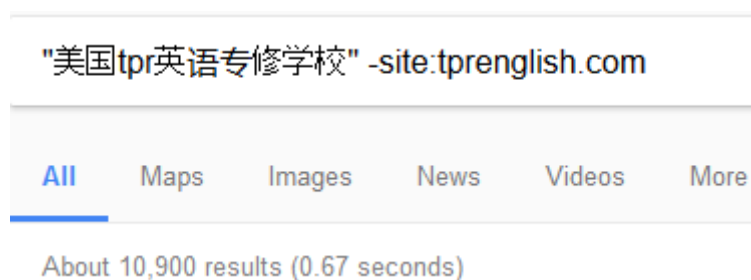
It is worth noting that there is a website with swapped word order that looks completely spammy.

That could be used for monitoring inbound links to the competitor's website because it is possible that someone who wants to link to the original website, accidentally changes the word order and links to the competitor instead. Also trying to "steal" some links from the competitor by writing to trustworthy websites which might be linking to it (unlikely but possible) might be a good idea. Convincing websites to improve their link portfolio by linking to related higher-quality landing pages (ours) instead of the worse ones (original external link) is one of many link building techniques.

Tieba, Zhidao and Zhihu Presence

There is no brand presence on Tieba except an inactive bar, which is not even clear if it belongs to the company, few posts in "English lectures" and "English in Zhuhai" bars from 2013. Even though the second bar would drive the most relevant traffic, it does not have lots of followers. Recommendation would be to follow threads about English teaching methods, try to engage in bigger bars such as "Zhuhai" or rehabilitate the brand's own bar.

Presence on Zhidao and Zhihu is also poor, there are some links to their website but the posts are very old and usually do not offer any value, e.g. only a link to the website if someone asks what is the best English teaching center in Zhuhai.

Picture 66: Bad advertising and answer to question which Zhuhai English school for reasonable price to attend on Zhidao, source: own screenshot

Of course, it does not necessarily mean that the answer was written by someone within the company. However, by monitoring posts like this, they can provide value by adding information why someone should choose them. There is a better example on "baobao" vertical within Baidu which contains questions about babies and small kids. The following topic is about recommendations for English courses focused on small kids. The answer contains a lot of redundant information about history of the TPR method and all locations of their centers. Also, the first paragraph only contains keywords, not actual sentences. 2 or 3 compelling sentences why someone's kids should attend this school would be better, nevertheless, it is still chosen as the best answer within the thread.

珠海TPR幼儿英语培训好么？主要有哪些课程？听说HDD（学多地）和superkids 也是TPR的是么？

珠海有哪些幼儿英语培训，和青少儿英语培训?

jowen623　2013-02-27 11:13

满意回答

珠海英语培训 青少儿英语培训 青少儿口语 成人英语培训　初中英语高考英语口语培训 首选珠海TPR英语培训学校 21年办学教育经验http://www.tprenglish.com/ShowDetail.aspx?Channel=1&Column=87

1992年，TPR ENGLISH将"TPR语言学习法"带入中国，在珠海成立首家语言培训学校--美国TPR英语专修学校。TPR教学法也称作"纯体验式语言学习法"于二十世纪七十年代由美国著名实验心理学家詹姆斯博士发明。它模仿学习母语时，大脑对外界声音与画面产生联想从而实现记忆的自然身体反应，更容易被学员接受。
TPR英语学校率先致力于网络化办学，现已覆盖香洲、吉大、拱北、夏湾、新香洲和柠溪等珠海主城区的办学点，实现更加便捷、有效的服务理念。 同时我们将这一先进的办学理念和独特的教学模式辐射到中山、东莞等珠三角城市，传承中西文化，让更多的人从中受益。

百度知道用户　2013-02-28 14:22

⚠ 宝宝知道提示您:回答为网友贡献，仅供参考。

Picture 67: Answer on baobao vertical promoting TPR English, source: own screenshot

Weibo

Picture 68: Weibo presence of TPR English, source: own screenshot

Their Weibo account is inactive for almost 3 years and never really had a lot of engagement as it is visible from the screenshot.

WeChat

It is quite possibly their only active online marketing channel. What is worse, regardless of their inactivity on the other channels, it is not connected to them. I had to look

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up their account on WeChat instead of scanning their QR code on the official website or other channels.

Their account does not look like one with high engagement, a few hundred views with 1-2% of views/likes ratio on average. It is at least updated few times per month and the content is sometimes even interactive and visual as seen in the screenshot below on the left. I did not find any external links which could possibly connect the WeChat account with other channels.

Picture 69: WeChat presence of TPR English, source: own screenshot

Link Building

They clearly did not make any effort doing link building and most of the few inbound links they have appear to be natural.

Domain Authority	Total links	New links	Lost links
🌐 12 [⊙ 0]	🔗 9 [⊙ 9]	✔ 9	✂ 0

Linking domains	Avg Domain Authority	Linking URLs	Avg Page Authority
📁 6 [⊙ 0]	📁 40 [⊙ 0]	📄 8 [⊙ 0]	📄 16 [⊙ 0]
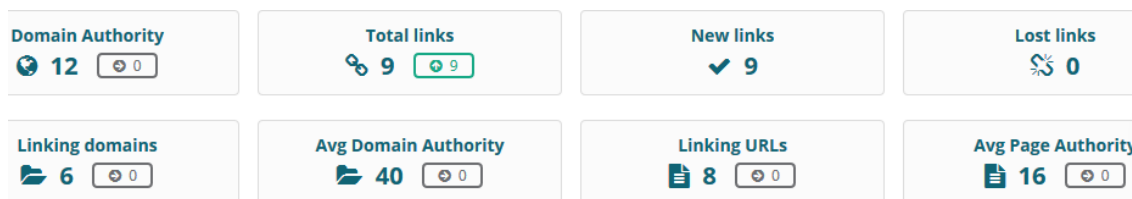
Picture 70: Inbound links profile of TPR English, source: screenshot from Dragon Metrics

Some of the links are broken which is an opportunity to contact the linking domain and restore the link from different URL.

Title and URL	Health	Page Authority	Domain Authority	Anchor Text	Target URL	Dofollow
www.cnn.com/2013/07/16/health/a... ⤢ The man with no memory: Navy v... ⊗	✔	47	97	In an essay he wrote for the site	http://www.tprenglish.co...	✔
www.baidu.com.se/?q=%c2%b0c+%... ⤢ LANMP一键安装包,集lamp,lnmp,ln... ⊗	✖	30	65			
www.eslbase.com/schools/china ⤢ English language schools in China ... ⊗	✔	19	38	www.tprenglish.com	http://www.tprenglish.co...	✖
85851.com/city/zh/ ⤢ 珠海网址导航 - 85851.com实用生活... ⊗	✔	16	23	[No Anchor Text]	http://www.tprenglish.co...	✔
dmhr.net/ ⤢ ⊗	✖	12	12			

Picture 71: Detail of inbound links to TPR English, source: screenshot from Dragon Metrics

There is an interesting anomaly because the website and a particular landing page received a "dofollow" link from CNN as seen in the first row of Picture 71. TPR English had a teacher who woke up in a hospital in the US, did not remember anything about him and spoke only Swedish. The landing page they linked to is a blog post from the teacher and one of a few evidences the journalists collected about his identity. Regardless of its ethical point of view, it is something that could have been made "interesting" for the Chinese audience. Of course, such sensitive topics should be handled with caution and capitalizing on someone's misfortune is definitely not right.

The easiest thing TPR English can do is listing their business on all possible trustworthy business lists of English schools in China. Content marketing is the difficult way.

10.2 TECHNICAL SEO AUDIT

Robots and sitemap files

The website does not have any robots.txt file and contains a sitemap in txt format which can only contain URLs of the website without any more specifications for the crawler which is available in the standard xml format. Just having a sitemap is a good reason to create robots.txt file to guide the crawler there.

Index Status

Numbers of indexed/crawled pages quite differ:

- Baidu – 549 pages indexed

- 360sousuo – 567 pages indexed

- Sogou – 491 pages indexed

- Google – 688 pages indexed

- Xenu – 688 text pages crawled

- Dragon Metrics – 589 primary URLs crawled (crawled pages minus duplicates)

Google and Xenu numbers are exactly the same so this may mean that Google indexed all text pages within the website. There are a lot of pictures on the website as shown by Xenu:

MIME type	count	% count
text/html	687 URLs	66.70%
text/css	1 URLs	0.10%
image/jpeg	336 URLs	32.62%
image/png	1 URLs	0.10%
image/gif	5 URLs	0.49%
Total	1030 URLs	100.00%

Picture 72: Internal URLs distribution of TPR English, source: screenshot from Xenu

All these numbers demonstrate how different and/or effective crawlers are. Of course, indexing all pages within the website is usually not a good idea because there might be content that is not valuable or created for others and could harm the overall authority of the website. It is interesting that Google indexed more pages than any Chinese search engine even though the website is hosted in China and has ICP license.

Going through index options in webmaster tools of each search engine is highly recommended in order to have this fixed or adjusted. Sitemap also helps especially for websites that are not well-structured.

Information Architecture

Bad site architecture and internal linking is a common issue for not having pages indexed. In this particular case, this website is quite deep even for Western standards, let alone Chinese standards.
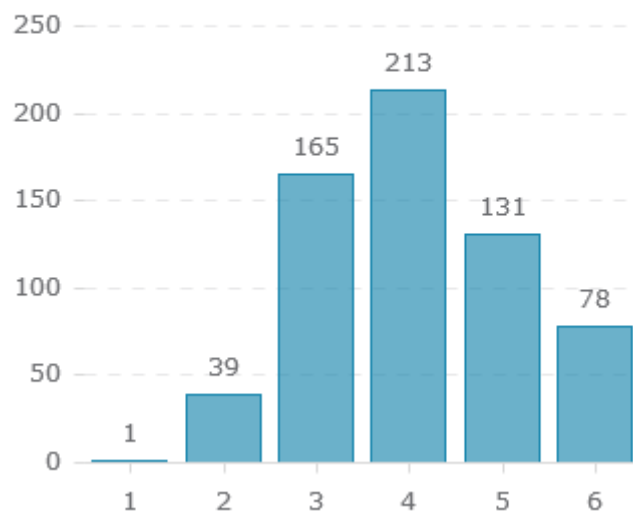
This picture needs more clarification. In terms of site depth, there are only pictures and some content not for users at the deepest levels. Basically all content for users is available within 3 "to-the-depth" clicks. The problem appears when it comes to the last level category pagination.

Picture 74: Pagination problem on TPR English, source: own screenshot

There are pieces of content that only have 1 internal link pointing to them. They are not even accessible from the breadcrumb navigation category page, which should be preceding them, because the category page only allows scrolling through 20 pages. The only way to access the content is through the main category page which allows infinite scrolling and thus adding clicks which are considered by the crawlers as going deeper but are technically on the same level, thus making it flatter. This pagination is then adding parameters to the URLs which is another problem to deal with.
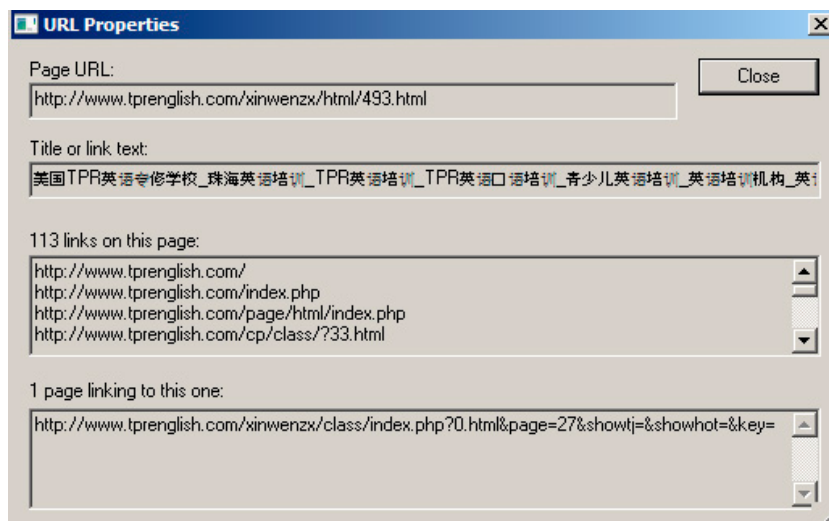
Picture 75: 113 external links to only 1 linking page ratio on TPR English, source: own screenshot from Xenu

Duplicate Pages

Parameters are the most common cause for duplicate pages on this website.
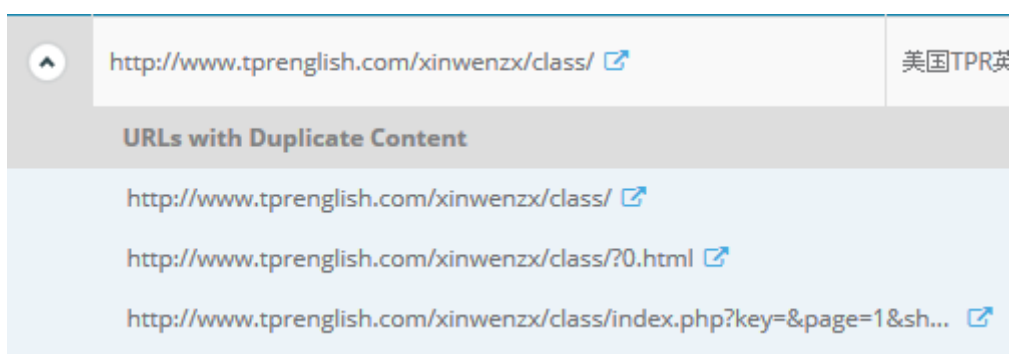
Picture 76: Duplicate content example, source: screenshot from Dragon Metrics

The most harmful for the website is the presence of non-canonicalized and non-redirected 2 versions of the homepage (http://www.tprenglish.com/ and http://www.tprenglish.com/index.php) which is the focal point of this website.

Speed
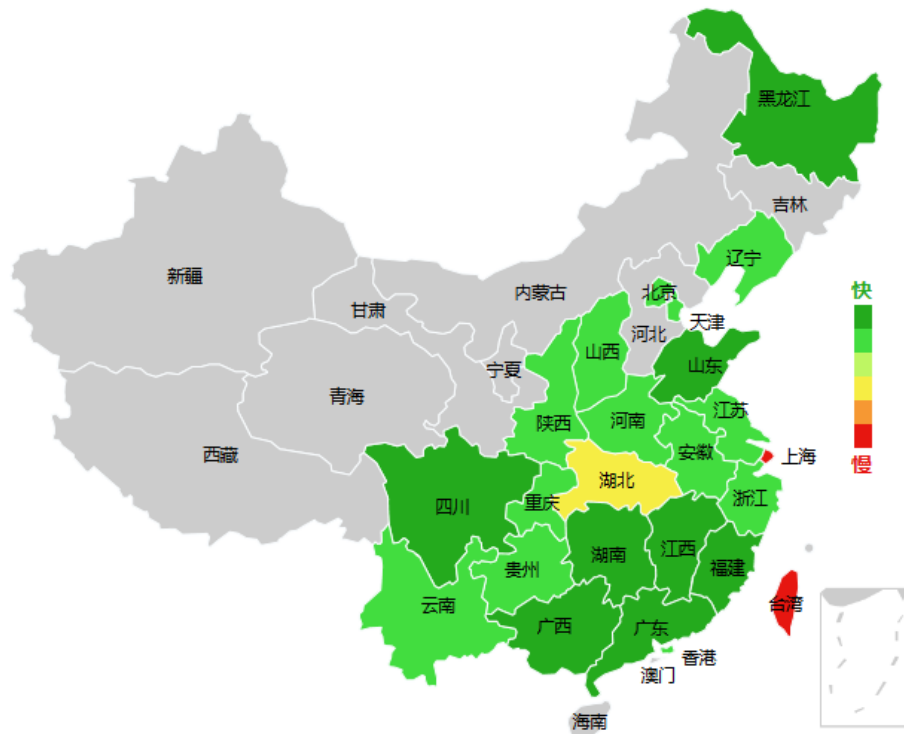
TPR English only has subsidiaries in Guangdong which is the southernmost green province next to Hong Kong and Macau. Zhuhai is located next to borders with Macau. Website speed and loading time should be fine according to this test.

PageSpeed Insights by Google offer some recommendations how to speed up the website, most prominently using cache[28], optimizing pictures and the structure of code.

Mobile Optimization

Again, very poor user experience, the website is only resized for the device with all the desktop content left. It is necessary to constantly magnify the screen.

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[28] Simply put, it is a temporary storage in a web browser.

10.3 OTHER ON-PAGE SEO FACTORS
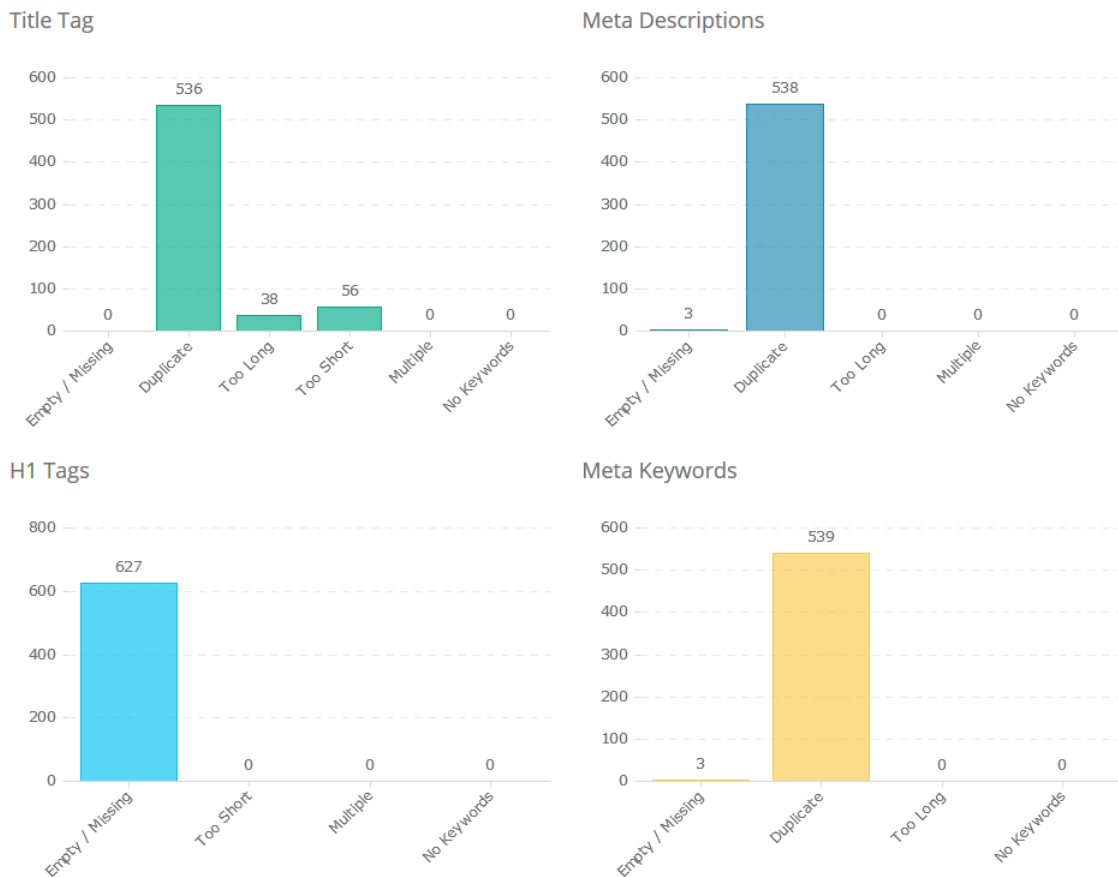
Picture 78: On-page elements statistics, source: screenshot from Dragon Metrics

The picture above describes the whole situation completely. Meta description is usually not a big issue because if search engines feel that it does not suit the result, they extract the most suitable passage from the content as a new meta description. Meta keywords are questionable but it would not hurt to diversify and use them properly if there is a chance to improve the rankings.

Not using heading tags is also an issue for users as they serve as a text separator. The biggest issue in here are duplicate page titles which are very spammy and stuffed with keywords.

URL structures are closely related to the IA which was mentioned before and it consequently does not look good either. They use combination of English, pinyin, some abbreviations and numbers (e.g. for blog posts). Language variations are surprisingly well-done in terms of IA, just the meta language tags are missing. Chinese version is default and under .com, English version is in its subdirectory.

Alt attributes are left blank and picture file names are only numbers.

美国TPR英语专修学校 珠海英语培训 TPR英语培训 TPR英语口语培训 ...

哥哥薛文、弟弟薛军,为南海舰队军旅版画家薛翊汉之子,兄弟俩皆毕业
于广州美院油画系。在搞艺术之外,兄弟俩运营有TPR英语培训学校、"
学多D"教育超市、牛津街以及...
www.tprenglish.com/xin... ▾ - 百度快照 - 评价

TPR ENGLISH

查看此网页的中文翻译, 请点击 翻译此页
In 1992, the American TPR English School was the first English language school in the city o
f Zhuhai, Guangdong Province. Since then, it has become the...
www.tprenglish.com/eng... ▾ - 百度快照 - 评价

美国TPR英语专修学校 珠海英语培训 TPR英语学校 英语口语培训 青...

坦洲分校位于坦洲镇世纪银星广场商业B区四楼,环境优雅舒适,是美国TPR英语专修学校的分校
之一。经过半年的努力,坦洲分校终于在2009年6月开业,在共同推广TPR品牌的同时...
www.tprenglish.com/zhu... ▾ - 百度快照 - 评价

Picture 79: Duplicate page titles stuffed with keywords, source: own screenshot

Keywords

Keyword			Rank ▲	Change ⌄	URL
珠海英语培训	🟠	🖥	1	⊕ 50	www.tprenglish.com/
美国tpr英语专修学校	🟠	🖥	1	⊕ 50	www.tprenglish.com/
美国tpr英语专修学校	🐾	🖥	1	⊕ 50	www.tprenglish.com/
美国tpr英语专修学校	Ⓢ	🖥	1	⊕ 50	www.tprenglish.com/
tpr	🟠	🖥	2	⊕ 49	www.tprenglish.com/
美国tpr英语专修学校	🐾	▢	2	⊕ 49	www.tprenglish.com/
珠海英语培训	🐾	🖥	5	⊕ 46	www.tprenglish.com/
tpr	🐾	🖥	7	⊕ 44	www.tprenglish.com/
珠海英语培训	🐾	▢	8	⊕ 43	www.tprenglish.com/
珠海英语培训	Ⓢ	🖥	8	⊕ 43	www.tprenglish.com/
tpr	Ⓢ	🖥	21	⊕ 30	www.tprenglish.com/

Picture 80: Keyword rankings of TPR English, source: screenshot from Dragon Metrics

The picture above shows rankings for the main keywords which are included in the meta keywords.

From left to the right, their English equivalent would be "American English school specialized in TPR, English training (courses), English training in Zhuhai, TPR". They are ranking quite well except for the most "fat head" keyword for unspecified English courses. There are rankings from all 3 main search engines, Baidu is then also divided into desktop and mobile search.

It is ranking quite well considering the state of affairs. Average searches for English courses in Zhuhai are only in hundreds per month but this keyword is definitely the most perspective conversion-wise. No one is searching for the whole branded keyword and "tpr" is too broad and informational, it does not even have to be related to language learning.

Keyword	Monthly Search Volume	Paid Competition
英语培训	45,720	19%
英语培训机构	9,060	16%
英语口语培训	7,800	16%
英语培训学校	3,780	17%
珠海英语培训机构	1,800	7
深圳英语培训	1,350	9%
珠海英语培训	1,170	7

English courses in Zhuhai are at the bottom of the picture, the broadest term "English training" is at the top. Between these are "English training institutions, English speaking courses, English training schools, English training institutions in Zhuhai and English training in Shenzhen."

Seasonal fluctuations are expected in this industry and this should also be taken into account when planning content strategy. Baidu's version of Google Trends does not work

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without registration, therefore global search behavior on Google is presented for the keyword "English courses":
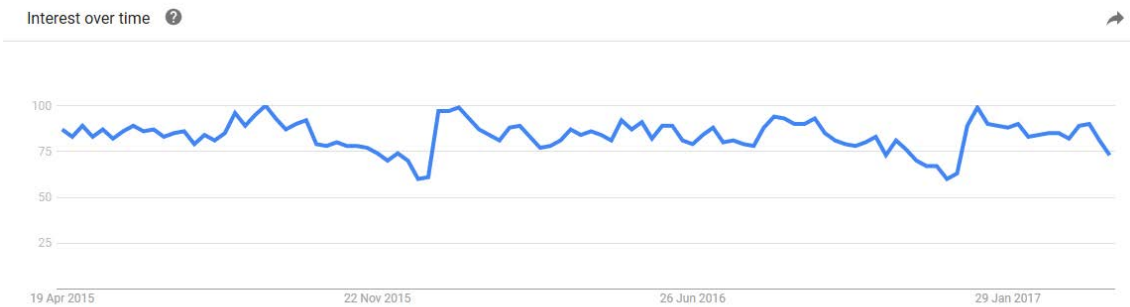
The biggest upswing always takes place during the first week of the New Year as English courses might be in New Year's resolution for many people. The other upswings are during the last week of August and first week of September, probably caused by students that want to improve their English with a new approaching school year (or their parents look it up for them).

10.4 CONCLUSION

It is clear that there were no attempts to do SEO on this website whatsoever. The only active online marketing channel is currently WeChat and it is certainly not enough. The website is ranking quite well for some main keywords and there are many SEO opportunities to improve its performance, ranging from easy ones to implement to those difficult and time consuming.

11 LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Even though it would be the best to arrange this list according to the importance of every item, it would be highly subjective and it is necessary to keep in mind that there are only a few things that are certain in SEO.

- **Carefully allocate marketing budget and integrate the strategy** – Importance, effectiveness and efficiency of every channel should be evaluated, sometimes SEO is not as important as other channels. Nevertheless, it could be highly effective if website developers and/or marketers have at least some basic SEO knowledge. Integrated marketing strategy is a must when using more channels.

- **Act locally** – Be open-minded and respect the culture and people. Never copy even the best performing global strategy. Approve websites with seemingly crazy site architecture and UX.

- **Have a content strategy** – Effective content marketing is an essential part of successful SEO strategies. Hire a native specialist for keyword research and content writing (unless non-native style is part of the strategy).

- **Guanxi** – Its importance in business could be applied to SEO too because it definitely helps in link building and content strategy (guest posts on own website for example).

- **Mobile optimization** – In general, have a better mobile version than desktop, it is more useful. Both well-optimized versions are ideal but if there is a decision where to invest more, mobile is the way.

- **Go for first SERP, not first position** – It is more difficult to rank within top 3 results in China because of search engines' universal search with high penetration of own products.

- **SEO is not only about full-text** – Users are also searching in vertical search engines, social media and e-commerce platforms, adjust to it.

- **Proper language and geo-targeting** – Always think of China's size, population, diversity and barriers to entry.

12 CONCLUSION

SEO can be sometimes neglected because marketing budgets are not unlimited and there might be more profitable budget allocations. This paper proved the importance of SEO as a part of an integrated marketing strategy regardless of the market location.

From the two variables, search engines are the less different one. People and their cultures play the second vital role in the process of seeking information on the Internet. The thesis described and explained all aspects of SEO which covers many technical, marketing and psychological topics. Reader not only should be able to compare Google with Baidu and know about many other search engines but also compare own culture and surrounding marketing ecosystem with the situation in China. It provides all essential information which is needed for optimizing a website in the West and in China.

The findings and list of recommendations are valuable to anyone who wants to take a piece of the Chinese online market. Even though Chinese consumers have gone through some big changes during the last decades, the behavioral changes are still much slower than development of technologies. Most of the human aspects mentioned in this thesis will stay more or less the same for a long time, search engines and technology will keep on rapidly changing. Therefore some statements might not be applicable anymore within a matter of months.

It is fascinating to imagine that we might be soon getting information in ways that were inconceivable a few years ago. Voice search is already getting very popular in some countries, the importance and usability of virtual reality is increasing and still more things around us are connected to the Internet. The amount of data generated is exponentially growing, software based on machine learning is beating the best chess and poker players and search engine providers are among the chosen ones who keep up with the latest technological trends and handle the big data. Machine learning and artificial intelligence may cause a different direction which Google and Baidu are going to follow. Ultimately, it depends on the user input and their search behavior.

13 摘要

本论文详细描述百度搜索引擎优化与谷歌 SEO 的区别，其中亦包括与营销领域相关的观点。为了将调查结果付诸实践，已针对进入中国市场中的外国品牌网站，进行了 SEO 分析。

研究结果证明外国中小型企业忽略在整合营销策略过程中 SEO 的地位。西方与中国的营销环境完全不同，特别是文化层面。因此本论文不但提供了西方与中国网站优化的具体说明，同时也涵盖了影响 SEO 及其有关领域的用户行为层面。从国际 SEO 方面的相异处来看，心理因素相当于或大于技术性问题的重要性。

本论文对欲优化中国网站的营销者具有使用价值，反之亦然，从中国到西方的市场也能应用。然而，对所有对数字营销与国际营销感兴趣的人皆值得一读。

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15 LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AI – Artificial Intelligence

AIDA – Awareness, Interest, Desire, Action

ASCII - American Standard Code for Information Interchange

BR – Bounce Rate

ccTLD – country code Top Level Domain

CDN – Content Delivery Network

CLV – Customer Lifetime Value

CMO – Chief Marketing Officer

CNNIC – China Internet Network Information Center

CPC – Cost-per-click

CR – Conversion Rate

CRO – Conversion Rate Optimization

CSS – Cascading Style Sheets

CTR – Click-through Rate

DA – Domain Authority

gTLD – generic Top Level Domain

HTML – HyperText Markup Language

HTTP – HyperText Transfer Protocol

HTTPS – HyperText Transfer Protocol Secure

IA – Information Architecture

ICP – Internet Content Provider

ISO - International Organization for Standardization

JS – JavaScript

KPI – Key Performance Indicator

NAP – Name, Address and Phone

PA – Page Authority

PDF – Portable Document Format

PESTEL – Political, Economic, Social, Environmental and Legal

PPC – Pay-per-click

Q&A – Questions and Answers

QR code – Quick Response code

SEM – Search Engine Marketing

SEO – Search Engine Optimization

SERP – Search Engine Results Page

SMARTER – Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-based, Ethical, Recorded

SME – Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

STDC – See-Think-Do-Care

SWOT – Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats

TPR – Total Physical Response

URL – Uniform Resource Locator

USP – Unique Selling Proposition

UTM – Urchin Tracking Module

UX – User Experience

VPN – Virtual Private Network

VQVC – Volume, Quality, Value, Cost

WSE – Wall Street English

YoY – Year over Year

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Appendix 1: Tips from International SEO Specialist Martin Kůra

18 APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Tips from International SEO Specialist Martin Kůra

Q1) What are the most common mistakes foreign companies make from a Chinese SEO perspective?

From the SEO point of view, I think the biggest mistakes are:
1. Creating a Chinese language version and placing it on their global website. Companies often spend a great deal of assets on translation, but the results never come. I think all marketing efforts should be exclusively market-based, except for targeting Chinese speakers in Malaysia, Hong Kong, U.S. etc.
2. Targeting the Chinese market in English. Baidu favors websites in Mandarin Chinese and there are very few examples of websites in English that have been indexed by Baidu. Also, English language proficiency in China is very low.

Q2) Are there any low hanging fruit opportunities that are often neglected?

A relatively easy way to enter the Chinese market is by creating an app connected with the service the company provides, and promoting it via iTunes Store.
This is often easier than building authority for a standalone website in Mandarin, partly because of censorship and Baidu's restrictions.

Q3) Do international SME selling their products through Chinese third-parties need SEO?

It very much depends on the company and the line of business they are in. In my experience, I have seen especially software companies trying to do SEO in China in order not to be dependent on third-party re-sellers.