



Mind the Culture Gap: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Tourism Destination Websites in Austria and the United Kingdom

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	<p>ABSTRACT</p>
<p>2016 Research Leap/Inovatus Services Ltd. All rights reserved.</p> <p>DOI: 10.18775/jibrm.1849-8558.2015.46.3004 URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.18775/jibrm.1849-8558.2015.46.3004</p>	<p>Websites of destination marketing organisations (DMO’s) are important tools to market tourism destinations to prospective visitors. They provide an abundance of information for tourists and help them plan their visit to the destination or find inspiration for an upcoming vacation. In many cases, website visitors come from other countries and cultures. In order to satisfy the needs of international website visitors, website providers would need to consider diverse cultural backgrounds and different languages when designing, implementing and maintaining a website. The main objective of this master thesis is to analyse the depiction of cultural values on DMO websites in Austria and the United Kingdom. It is then sought to compare them to the perceived cultural values of the respective host country by looking at Hofstede’s and Hall’s cultural frameworks. Moreover, it is aimed to provide a framework for tourism professionals and website developers who oversee and implement the creation of websites for tourism destinations. To establish the foundation of this thesis, an extensive literature review in the field of cross-cultural web design is provided with the aim to support the process of further developing a framework for the analysis of cultural values on the World Wide Web. Drawing on Hofstede’s dimensions and Hall’s high/low context theory this framework seeks to broaden the cross-cultural lens adopted by website providers. The content analysis is going to include 18 DMO websites that represent tourism destinations on three levels: Nations, provinces/countries and cities. The analysis is expected to shed light on website design in Austria and the United Kingdom and increase awareness towards the significance of localized cultural values. It should provide recommendations for professionals who are implementing websites for tourism destinations. Additionally, the study on Austrian and British websites can be of excellent value for tourism managers and destination marketers since both countries welcome many tourists each year.</p>
<p>Keywords: Culture Gap, Cross-Cultural Analysis, Tourism, Marketing organisations, Austria, Great Britain</p>	

1. Introduction

Websites of destination marketing organizations (DMO’s) are important tools to market tourism destinations to prospective visitors. They provide an abundance of information for tourists and help them find inspiration for an upcoming vacation or plan their visit to the destination. DMO website can be regarded as distribution channels for local attractions, accommodation and events (Chung, Lee, Lee, & Koo 2015, p.2). In many cases, website visitors come from other countries and cultures. Tourism and culture go together hand in hand and many people travel to immerse themselves in other cultures and to learn more about them. In order to satisfy the needs of international website visitors, website providers ought to consider diverse cultural backgrounds and different languages when designing, implementing and maintaining a website. In today’s highly globalized world with increased competition, DMO’s can benefit from a culturally customized website in the long term and develop a competitive advantage. This research is aimed at

investigating culture and website design with a special focus on tourism destination websites in Austria and the United Kingdom.

2. Problem Statement

According to the latest statistics published in June 2017 there are 3,885,567,619 internet users around the world (Internet World Stats n.d.). This equals more than half of the world’s population. The internet has shaped today’s society and many aspects of our daily life. It has also revolutionized the tourism industry and people ever so often rely on information from the internet to make travel decisions (Buhalis & O’Connor 2005, p.789). The days when travel agencies and travel magazines were the main sources of information are long over. The internet provides us with information in every decision-making phase; from finding inspiration where to travel next summer to finding a restaurant to have dinner at in the evening. Information is always just a mouse click or a touch away and

constant access to the internet is the norm, even in many third-world countries. In a study commissioned by Google (Ipsos MediaCT 2014) 65% of the leisure travellers state the internet as a source of inspiration.

With the rise of travel recommendation websites such as TripAdvisor, Yelp, etc. people get information directly from other travellers who have already been to the destination. These websites almost solely rely on user-generated content. Even though these websites are incredibly popular and can be very helpful, travellers also like to rely on official sources (Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, & Bultjens 2009, p.743). DMO's (Destination management organization) are usually responsible for providing official travel advice for a destination. These organizations are supported by (local) government and their main purpose is to promote the destination to prospective travellers and to provide information on hotels, restaurants, activities and attractions, travel advice etc. Websites of DMO's are very important marketing tools for promoting a destination (Luna-Nevarez & Hyman 2012, p.94). About a third of leisure travellers find inspiration on destination websites (Ipsos MediaCT 2014).

The tourism sector is highly dependent on information from the internet because the product itself is often intangible and not immediately consumed after purchase, therefore consumers put in a lot of research beforehand. Each destination attracts a different type of tourist from different nationalities. There are destinations that welcome mostly domestic tourists whereas other destinations have almost exclusively visitors from abroad. In many cases, website visitors come from other countries and cultures. In the case of the official Austrian tourism website, visitor statistics show that only 18% of website visitors are from Austria ("Austria.info Traffic Statistics" 2017). If most visitors of destination websites are from other cultures, the question arises whether it is effective to design the website in line with the perceived cultural values of the host country or not. Tourism and culture go together hand in hand and many people travel to immerse themselves in other cultures and to learn more about them (McKercher & Cros 2003, p.53-55). The appearance of a DMO website and its appeal to website visitors is crucial for marketing the destination and attracting visitors. Often, websites are designed according to the cultural values of the host country and they do not take into consideration that website visitors have diverse cultural backgrounds and therefore different needs concerning website design (Barber & Badre 1998, p.4). Every so often local agencies are commissioned to design and implement the website, which can lead to an ethnocentric perspective. Ethnocentrism is defined as "seeing one's own group (the in-group) as virtuous and superior, own's own standards of value as universal, and out-groups as contemptible and inferior" (Hammond & Axelrod 2006, p.926). Designers cannot rely on their instinctive knowledge anymore because website users have different cultural backgrounds and therefore different mental models

(Hsieh, Holland, & Young 2009, p.713). Destination marketers who create websites are sometimes not aware of the cultural implications. If a website of a tourism destination is not appealing and does not take cultural differences into consideration potential visitors might choose a different destination. The question arises whether tourism destination marketers grasp the potential of their website with regards to the depiction of cultural values. Tourism is a highly internationalized industry; thus, tourism website usability is closely connected to cross-cultural values (Buhalis & O'Connor 2005, p.790).

Providing different language options is a given nowadays and does not mean that the website caters for diverse cultures, but for speakers of different languages. Just providing different language options does not mean to adapt to different cultures (Sun 2001, p.100). Websites ever so often only provide an English language option to its visitors. This approach needs to be overthought, since only around a quarter of internet users are native English speakers (Internet World Stats n.d.-b). Even though English is regarded as a global language one should not assume that is enough to provide an English language option. In order to design a website that takes cultural values into consideration, one has to incorporate not only language but also colour, idioms, icons, video and audio, titles and text. It has been established that websites are far from being culturally neutral and cultural dimensions such as those developed by Hofstede (2010) and Hall (1976) are represented online. Cultural values in web design are usually conveyed through visual design, navigation design and information design (Cyr 2008, p.48).

3. Research Questions

Since this master thesis is aimed to investigate cultural aspects of tourism destination websites, analysing the two countries Austria and the United Kingdom, the following research questions were developed:

- Which cultural values can be identified on the tourism destination websites?
- Are the identified cultural values in line with the perceived cultural values of Austria/the United Kingdom?
- What are the most common cultural values that need to be considered when creating a tourism destination website?

4. Website Design and Culture

Barber und Badre were among the first researchers to investigate cultural values online. They created the term "Culturability", which "emphasize[s] the importance of the relationship between culture and usability in WWW design" (Barber & Badre 1998, p.2). Their aim was to investigate the presence or absence of cultural markers (web design elements). Barber & Badre (1998, p.2) and later on Cyr, Head, & Larios (2010) made readers also aware of the colour appeal in different cultures. One colour can convey a positive meaning in one

country and a completely negative meaning in another country. At the beginning of the 21st century Gould, Zakaria & Yusof (2000, p.162) argued that a great amount of literature on intercultural communication exists and that this knowledge is still to be applied to web design. Since then numerous studies in this subject area have been conducted. Marcus and Gould (Marcus & Gould 2000) were amongst the first researchers to interlink Hofstede's findings with interface design and conducted a study about how cultural values affect user interface design. Luna, Peracchio, & de Juan (2002, p. 399) argued that cultural congruity needs to be acknowledged when designing a website. Cultural congruity describes the congruity of a website with the culture of a user. Luna et al. (2002, p. 399) differentiate between content congruity and structural congruity. Many researchers in this field made use of Hofstede's dimensions (2001) and Hall's (1976) high/low context theory to investigate cultural values on the web. Calabrese, Capece, Di Pillo, & Martino (2014, p.185) confirmed in their study that there is strong evidence that web site design has to be sensitive to cultural differences. Furthermore, the authors contradict the notion that one website is enough to cater for countries where the same language is spoken. Website usability "includes consistency and the ease of getting the Web site [sic] to do what the user intends it to do" (Palmer 2002, p.153). Firstly, usability guidelines need to be adhered to when designing a website. Secondly, cultural aspects need to be considered. Rimondi (2015, p.103) advocates that culture-centred design is a branch of user-centred design. This entails that there is a balance between usability and aesthetics of websites.

4.1 Website Localization and Standardisation

Many authors have raised the issue of localization vs. standardization on the web (Singh, Furrer, & Ostinelli 2004, p.69; Singh & Pereira 2005, p.5). Localization describes the adaptation of websites to fit into a local market whereas standardization is about unitizing websites on a global scale. Localization is not merely the translation into different languages but also the provision of specific time and date formats, units of measurements, addresses and phone numbers, website layout, icons and symbols and colours (Singh, Furrer, & Ostinelli 2004, p.81). Singh, Toy and Wright (2009, p.282) define website localization as "the process of customizing a Web site [sic] for a specific cultural group so that it seems natural or 'local' to members of that particular culture". The most crucial factors that need to be considered in localized web design are languages, cultures, customs, colour preferences, currencies and time zones. Singh and Pereira (2005, p.10) propose that there are five types of web site globalization: Standardized websites, semi-localized websites, localized websites, highly localized websites, culturally customized websites. As far as localization is concerned, the localization process consists of two levels. Firstly, the surface level consists of adjusting the language, punctuation, dates and time zone, weights and measurements, currency etc. Secondly, the cultural

level that entails the aesthetic appeal, colours, images, communication patterns etc. (Sun 2001, p.95-96). In 2004, Singh, Furrer and Ostinelli (2004, p.71-76) analysed how cultural congruence affects perception of website effectiveness and they ascertained that websites that were culturally adapted scored higher in terms of purchase intention, attitude towards the website and navigational ease.

5. Cultural Frameworks

5.1 Geert Hofstede

In his study, Hofstede (Hofstede et al. 2010) examined IBM employees in 53 countries from 1978 to 1983. He defined patterns of differences and similarities among the study participants through statistical analysis. From this data he derived the nowadays well known five dimensions of culture. It is still known to be one of the most extensive studies in this field and many scholars have based their research on Hofstede's dimensions. The five dimensions are described in the following paragraphs. Collectivism vs. Individualism. This dimension defines whether a society places importance on the interests of the group or the interests of the individual. Collectivist societies rely on the power of the group, especially on the extended family. They express loyalty to their group throughout their lifetime. Individualist societies see the interests of the individual person as most important. Hofstede points out that there are far more collectivist societies than individualist societies. In individualist societies every grown-up person is expected to be independent and does usually not rely on (extended) family (Hofstede et al. 2010, p.90-91).

The United States of America are perceived as the most individual society in the world. In this culture, it is believed that the individual can achieve anything it wants on its own. Latin American countries, on the contrary, place importance on the group and they rely on others to help them in business as well as in private life. Relationships are nurtured and looked after.

Table 1: Collectivism and Individualism (Hofstede Insights 2018)

Austria	United Kingdom	Relevance
55	89	The higher the score, the more individualistic the society. The United Kingdom is amongst the highest of the individualist scores. The scores show, that Austria is significantly more collectivist than United Kingdom.

Uncertainty Avoidance. Uncertainty is part of our daily lives but depending on the cultural background we come from we deal with it differently. This dimension can be defined as "the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations" (Hofstede et al. 2010,

p.191). Uncertainty-avoiding people look for structure and predictability, in order to anticipate what is going to happen in the future. If they face an ambiguous situation it results in high stress and anxiety (Hofstede et al. 2010, p.208).

Table 2: Uncertainty Avoidance (Hofstede Insights 2018)

Austria	United Kingdom	Relevance
70	35	The higher the score, the more uncomfortable societies are in ambiguous or unknown situations. United Kingdom is much more comfortable with uncertainty than Austria.

Short-Term Orientation vs. Long-Term Orientation. This dimension is about time and the relationship with the past, the present and the future. According to Hofstede long-term orientation can be defined as “the fostering of virtues oriented towards future rewards – in particular, perseverance and thrift” (Hofstede et al. 2010, p.239). Short-Term oriented cultures, on the other hand, are inclined to the “fostering of virtues related to the past and present – in particular, respect for tradition, preservation of ‘face’, and fulfilling social obligations” (Hofstede et al. 2010, p.239).

Table 3: Short-Term and Long-Team Orientation (Hofstede Insights 2018)

Austria	United Kingdom	Relevance
60	51	Both, Austria and United Kingdom have intermediate scores. As far as the United Kingdom is concerned, a preference cannot be determined. Austria displays a slight preference for long-term orientation.

High Power Distance vs. Low Power Distance. This dimension describes how easily people accept inequalities in their society. There are inequalities in every society and some people have more power than others. This power can be due to status, wealth, education, achievements etc. (Hofstede et al. 2010, p.54). In countries with low power distance such as Austria there is a low dependence of subordinates on bosses whereas in countries with high power distance the dependence of subordinates on bosses is rather high. Hofstede defines Power Distance as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede et al. 2010, p.61).

Table 4: Power Distance (Hofstede Insights 2018)

Austria	United Kingdom	Relevance
11	35	The lower the score for Power Distance, the bigger the urge of the society to minimize inequalities amongst the people. Austria has one of the lowest scores in Power Distance and United Kingdom also scores rather low. Both countries therefore have a strong sense of equality amongst its people.

Masculinity vs. Femininity. This dimension is about social roles. Hofstede describes a masculine society as a society where “emotional gender roles are clearly distinct: men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success, whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life”. On the opposite side of the spectrum are feminine societies that Hofstede describes as societies where “emotional gender roles overlap: both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life” (Hofstede et al. 2010, p.140). Feminine societies place importance on relationships and quality of life and boys and girls are perceived to be treated equally. In masculine societies achievement and ambition are important, especially for men. Women and girls can be tender and are allowed to show feelings, whereas men and boys are required to be tough (Hofstede et al. 2010, p.155).

Table 5: Masculinity and Femininity (Hofstede Insights 2018)

Austria	United Kingdom	Relevance
79	66	The higher the score, the more masculine a society is. Austria as well as the United Kingdom demonstrate a preference towards masculinity. This means that the society is rather driven by competition, achievement and success than by quality of life and caring for other members of the society.

Even though Hofstede is the pioneer of cross-cultural research there has been criticism of the use of his cultural typology, especially the methodology of his IBM study and the context of his work. Without dismissing these critiques, it has to be noted that Hofstede’s dimensions have been extensively replicated and are therefore crucial to cultural theory (Singh & Baack 2004, p.3).

5.2 Edward T. Hall

Edward Hall was a famous anthropologist and key protagonist as far as culture studies are concerned. He contributed several influential books in the area of cultural research. In his research he focused on the “nonverbal, unstated realm of culture” (Hall 1976, p. 16). Hall is most renowned for his time and context theories.

Hall (1976, p.17-18) distinguishes between monochronic and polychronic time. Both “represent two variant solutions to the use of both time and space as organizing frames for activities”. Hall (1976, p.24) states that “monochronic and polychronic have to do with the way time and space are organized and how this organization affects the very core of existence”. Monochronic signifies that a person focuses at one thing at a time. Monochronic time is, according to Hall, synonymous with American time, and many other Western cultures. This entails the need for scheduling, segmentation and promptness. Many aspects of daily life are dominated by time; thus it also requires the need for prioritization and determining what and who is important or not. Monochronic time is, for many people that were brought up in a monochronic culture, learned and therefore perceived as normal and logical (Hall 1976, p.20). Austria and the United Kingdom are generally perceived as societies where monochronic time prevails. Polychronic time, on the other hand, is characterized by many things happening at the same time and is therefore much less tangible. Hall identifies Latin American, Mediterranean and Middle Eastern countries as national cultures where the polychronic system is used.

Furthermore, Edward Hall is well-known for his high/low context theory. High context communication is characterized by very little explicit content and relies on physical context and learned code whereas low context communication is much more explicit and straight-forward (Hall 1976, p.91). According to Hall “the level of context determines everything about the nature of the communication and is the foundation on which all subsequent behaviour rests” (Hall 1976, p.92). Every national culture makes neither use of high context communication nor low context communication but can be placed on a continuum between those two. Austria and the United Kingdom generally make use of high context communication. Japanese and Chinese people, on the other hand, make use of low context communication. These high context cultures make use of non-verbal sign such as body language, rituals, internalized context, etc.

6. Methodology

A content analysis of tourism destination websites from Austria and the United Kingdom is to be conducted. Content analysis is suitable to analyse cultural values systematically (Singh & Baack 2004). This method was already successfully applied in previous studies that are related to this topic (Singh & Baack 2004; Singh, Zhao, & Hu 2005; Tigre Moura, Gnoth, & Deans

2015). The two countries were chosen due to the author’s personal relation and knowledge about Austria and the United Kingdom. The content analysis is to be carried out using tourism destination websites in English language as a sampling unit. Official websites of Austrian and British tourism destinations are going to serve as samples for this study. The analysis tries to cover a diversity of destinations on 3 distinct levels. First, both countries as a whole destination are going to be looked at. Second, provinces and countries (constituent parts) are investigated. To provide equally as many websites for Austria as for the United Kingdom, only the 4 most visited provinces in Austria are part of the sample. Third, the 3 most visited cities of both countries are part of the sample.

McMillan (2000) describes content analysis on the web as “the microscope on the moving target”. In addition, Schneider and Foot (2004, p.115) describes web content as ephemeral, because it only lasts a short time. Media such as printed materials, film and sound are much easier to archive because they cannot be altered as easily as web pages. In order to avoid websites being changed during the analysis, the sample websites are going to be downloaded as offline copies at the same time. In doing so, it is ensured that the content of the websites does not change throughout the analysis process.

7. Expected Results

The content analysis is expected to shed light on website design in Austria and the United Kingdom and awareness towards cultural values. It should provide recommendations for professionals who are implementing websites for tourism destinations. The results are expected to establish once again, what other researchers have already concluded, that the internet is not a culturally neutral medium. The content analysis is predicted to reveal which side of each cultural dimension is more dominant in each country. Additionally, website features that are “cultural markers” are going to be used for analysis. Knowledge about established cultural markers can help website designers to design a website that is culturally congruent. Furthermore, it is aimed to provide a framework for tourism professionals and website developers who oversee and implement the creation of websites for tourism destinations. The study on Austrian and British websites can be of excellent value for tourism managers and destination marketers, since both countries welcome many tourists each year.

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