

The Effects of Localising Cultural Values on Tourism Destination Websites on Tourist's Willingness to Travel

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Abstract

This paper discusses the effects the localisation of cultural values on tourism destination websites on user's willingness to travel. First, a preliminary research was conducted in order to test and propose adaptations to Singh's et al. (2005) framework of cultural values localisation on websites. Secondly, the authors conducted an experiment to test the localisation of cultural values on a website of a fictitious destination, developed for the purpose of this research and customised for the New Zealand audience. 400 respondents participated, performing tasks on the site and answering a survey. Results indicate that the exposure of opposite cultural values (i.e. *reverse-localisation*) to the target audience leads to a higher willingness to travel, contradicting previous works that supports the effectiveness of website localisation.

Keywords: Destination websites; website localisation; cultural values.

1 Introduction

Tourists can only experience a location after having finalised their decision making process and travelled to the chosen destination. This characteristic of tourism leads to a series of risks and uncertainties during the traveller's destination selection process and information search process. However, these negative factors can be reduced by destination websites, as they act as official self presentation platforms online. In view of their relevance, in this paper the authors investigated the effects of the localisation of cultural values on user's willingness to travel.

2 Theory

2.1 Localisation of cultural values on websites

The virtual world is not culturally neutral. The norms and values which rule cultural groups are also represented online and countries consciously and unconsciously depict them while developing their websites (Singh, Zhao et al. 2003; Singh and Matsuo 2004). The investigation of cultural values on websites has been frequently and successfully conducted through the framework developed by Singh et al. (2003; 2005). It contains the dimensions of collectivism and individualism, power distance and uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1980) and high-low context (Hall, 1976). Hofstede's (1980) dimension of masculinity-femininity was excluded during a refinement of the framework, due to low reliability (Singh, Kumar et al. 2005), and the dimension of long-short orientation was never included. Overall, the 6 cultural dimensions of the web-related framework are operationalised through 23 cultural categories.

In spite of the criticisms at Hofstede's methodology and age of data (Fernandez, Carlson et al. 1997), Singh's et al. (2005), Singh's et al. (2005) cultural framework has been widely used to investigate cultural values on websites from a number of countries such as USA, Japan, Germany, France, China, and India, encompassing retail and e-commerce stores from distinct industry segments (Singh, Zhao et al. 2003; Singh and Matsuo 2004; Singh, Kumar et al. 2005; Singh, Zhao et al. 2005). Surprisingly, it still hasn't been applied on destination websites to investigate their depiction of cultural values.

Website localisation represents the adjustments of website content, cultural values, design and other website elements to meet the characteristics and needs of target markets. The localisation of cultural values has shown to cause positive outcomes, such as on the level of satisfaction, and previous researchers have revealed that users prefer sites that depict similar values to their own (Baack and Singh, 2007).

2.4 Hypotheses of the study

Studies related to tourist motivations have shown that visitors, especially from individualist cultures, consider trips as moments for unplanned behaviours, and freedom from social norms or regulations which rule the culture they live in. In this context, attitudes of individuals are driven to satisfy their own self and not the social norms from the culture they belong (McIntosh and Goeldner 1990; Gnoth, 1997). It is then expected that users would not appreciate the cultural localisation of the destination websites, as it would represent a view of the world from which they intend to get away from during their trip. Consequently, it is hypothesised that the emphasis of

opposite values of the target markets (i.e. *reverse-localisation*) would generate more positive perceptions. In view of this, the present study proposes the following hypothesis:

H: *the localisation of cultural values on tourism destination sites does not generate a higher willingness to travel, when compared to its reverse-localisation.*

3 Methods

The research consisted of two phases: a preliminary study and an experiment.

3.1 Preliminary study

Initially, New Zealand was defined as the target market of the study. Next, a preliminary research was conducted with two main objectives: to test the validity of Singh’s et al. (2005) framework of cultural values localisation on tourism destination sites, and to investigate the need for, and propose, if necessary, adaptations for the framework under the new context.

The authors investigated a total of 130 websites through content analysis: 48 New Zealand, 36 Indian and 46 Chinese. Based on Hofstede’s cultural scores (1980), New Zealand is represented by two extremes: highly individualistic and very low in power distance. Also, on Hall’s (1976) context dimension, the country is classified as being a low context culture. India and China were included as their cultural scores are opposite to those of New Zealand: both countries are characterised as highly collectivist and score high in power distance values and are classified as being high context cultures, therefore representing an interesting contrast for comparison.

The websites were evaluated according to Singh’s et al. (2005) cultural framework on a 1 to 5 likert scale, ranging from “Not depicted” to “Prominently depicted”. The results indicated significant differences in the cultural values exposed, with the New Zealand sites depicting more individualism and low context values, while China and India showed more power distance, collectivism and high context values. The results also indicated that the type of destination did not moderate the values depicted on the websites. A brief summary of the results is shown on Table 1.

Table 1. Means, ANOVA and reliability scores of the cultural dimensions.

Having made to Singh’s (2005) framework destination	Cultural Values	Mean NZ	Mean India	Mean China	F	Sig.	Cronbach’s Alpha NZ/India/China	tested and adaptations et al. cultural for websites
	Collectivism	2.00	2.60	2.52	7.26	.001	.45/.39/.43	
Individualism	3.86	3.17	3.71	11.70	.000	.61/.62/.49		
Power Distance	1.85	3.25	2.52	42.86	.000	.74/.82/.71		
Uncertainty Avoid.	3.28	3.33	2.99	4.48	.013	.57/.62/.55		
High Context	2.57	3	3.48	17.71	.000	.66/.61/.54		
Low Context	3.27	3.24	1.93	33.63	.000	.73/.73/.62		

(not detailed here due to word limitation of the conference paper), the next step consisted on the development of an experimental website and an experiment to test the hypothesis of the study.

3.2 Experiment

The experiment investigated the effects of the localisation of cultural values on destination websites on the user’s willingness to travel. Four versions of a website of a fictitious tourism destination tailored for New Zealanders were created based on the adaptations of Singh’s (2005) cultural framework: two versions with congruent cultural values of New Zealanders (the versions differed on the use of cultural markers on the design of the site) and two versions with incongruent cultural values (the versions differed on the use of cultural markers on the design of the site). (Due to a word limitation of the conference paper, the influence of the different cultural markers on the willingness to travel is not reported in this paper). The content of the site (photos, texts and headings) was evaluated by four post-graduate researchers in the areas of culture, tourism and psychology. The content was ranked according to the cultural dimensions that were used on the manipulations (collectivist-individualist, high-low power distance and high-low context). Only material that achieved consensus among all judges was used on the different versions of the site.

Each version of the experimental website contained an average of 26 web pages, covering information about the destination, a detailed map of the place, a list and description of eleven different types of attractions, a description and list of accommodation, events, a detailed list of restaurants and bars, local cuisine, testimonial page, contacts, shopping and a photo gallery.

A pre-test of the experiment was conducted with 30 New Zealand undergraduate students and changes were made to the site and survey. After this, the experiment was performed. 400 New Zealand undergraduate students from the University of Otago participated in the study; 100 per condition. First, they navigated the site and chose their top two places to eat, sleep and activities to do. Following this, they answered an online survey that included the evaluation of the willingness to travel to the destination (Krishnamurthy and Sujana 1999). Willingness to travel was evaluated on a 1 to 5 point likert scale, ranging from ‘Totally disagree’ to ‘Totally agree’. Participants took an average of 20 minutes to complete all tasks.

4 Results

The means of each condition shown on Table 2 indicate a higher willingness to travel on conditions 2 and 3, which depicted incongruent cultural values for New Zealanders.

Table 2. Means and ANCOVA scores.

Dependent variable	Condition 1 (n=100)	Condition 2 (n=100)	Condition 3 (n=100)	Condition 4 (n=100)	F	Sig.
Willingness to travel	3.52	3.79	3.88	3.62	12.6	.000

Means are significantly different at the .05 level.

Condition one: Congruent cultural values and design 1; Condition two: *Incongruent* cultural values and design 1; Condition three: *Incongruent* cultural values and design 2; Condition four: Congruent cultural values and design 2

A univariate ANCOVA was conducted to verify the significance of the differences among the four conditions. Results indicated that the covariate ‘trust’ was significantly related to the willingness to travel, $F(1, 390) = 28.8$, $p = .000$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .069$. Having controlled for the effect of ‘trust’, there was a significant effect of the cultural values exposed on the site on the respondents willingness to travel, $F(1, 390) = 12.6$, $p = .000$, *partial* $\eta^2 = .031$. Levene’s test indicated that the assumption of homogeneity of variance was met ($p > .05$). Finally, the means of congruent and incongruent cultural values are plotted on Figure 1 and indicate a higher influence of incongruent values on the willingness to travel.

Estimated Marginal Means of Willingness to travel

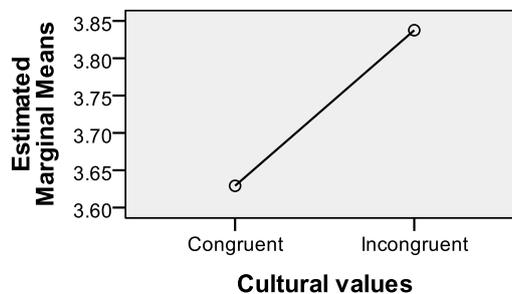


Figure 1. Plotted means of congruent and incongruent cultural values.

5 Conclusion and Managerial Implications

The finding that the *reverse-localisation* of cultural values generated a higher willingness to travel contradicts previous work which has pointed to the effectiveness of the localisation of cultural values on websites (Singh et al., 2004; Baack and Singh, 2007). This finding is believed to be attributed to the characteristics and motivations related to tourism activities, where tourists seek unplanned behaviours and a way of escapism from the social norms they live in. The effectiveness of the *reverse-localisation* of cultural values on destination websites offers new strategic ways of customising online communication to target markets in a tourism context, leading to new tactics to better promote places on the web. This will benefit destination managers when developing country specific versions of their websites for different markets. However, the ethics of this practice and the impacts of this strategy on visitors experience need to be investigated.

6 Limitations

Conducting the experiments with individuals from other countries would have provided a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of the localisation for the New Zealand audience. Finally, student sampling may also be considered a limitation of the study.

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