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A commentary on cross-cultural research in hospitality & tourism inquiry

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1. Introduction

“The most powerful drivers of continued growth for the US hotel market continue to be a swell in the global traveler pool from an emerging middle class, healthy indicators for consumer spending in the U.S., healthy corporate travel demand and a consumer spending shift from goods to experiences. I think the industry sometimes forgets how powerful the rising global economy is. Over the past two decades or so, global international travel departures grew from 600 million to 1.3 billion. Many of these consumers are traveling for the first time. That’s a direct injection of new bookings into the travel economy.” <https://www.hotelbusiness.com/outlook-hospitality-poised-for-growth-in-bookings-in-2018/>

As the above quote indicates a large proportion of today’s travelers includes globe-trotters who are looking for new experiences. The increasingly popular sharing economy platforms focus on providing authentic experiences, thus putting a great deal of pressure on their more traditional counterparts to showcase the local culture. But what do we mean by culture? Culture can be viewed as a lens through which experiences are interpreted. Unfortunately, people are easily bound by their own cultural worldviews and assume that others see the world as they do. To that end, there is an urgent need to gain a better understanding of the main drivers of culture and their consequences in intercultural service encounters and global business practices. The purpose of this paper is to summarize some key notions of culture used in recent hospitality & tourism research. This commentary is entirely based on my own observations rather than on a thorough synthesis of the current state of cross-cultural research in our field. For excellent recent systematic reviews of cross-cultural research in hospitality and tourism, see [Chen et al., 2012](#) and [Li \(2014\)](#).

In this paper, I will first discuss the dominant cultural dimensions in existing hospitality & tourism research, including individualism-

collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance and low vs. high context. I will then offer some suggestions for widening our views on culture’s consequences in hospitality & tourism inquiry.

2. Individualism and self-construal

Individualism vs. collectivism is the dominant cultural dimension examined in the hospitality & tourism literature. In individualistic cultures, people tend to prioritize their personal goals over group goals. Conversely, in collectivistic cultures, personal goals are secondary to those of the in-group ([Singelis et al., 1995](#); [Triandis, 1989](#)). There is also an increasing interest in self-construal in understanding cross-cultural differences in consumer behavior. The notion of self-construal is closely linked to individualism and collectivism. People with a highly independent self tend to focus on their internal thoughts and uniqueness. Conversely, individuals with a more interdependent self-construal place a greater emphasis on the social context, thus being highly sensitive to cues reflecting status and group cohesion ([Singelis, 1994](#)). Horizontal collectivism, a subset of individualism-collectivism continuum, can be defined as a cultural pattern in which people perceive the self in relation to in-groups, thus assimilating self-concept with their in-groups’ ([Singelis et al., 1995](#)).

These two core dimensions of culture (individualism vs. collectivism and self-construal) have been employed to examine issues involving a host of factors such as globalization vs. localization ([Liu et al., 2014](#)), leadership and workplace issues ([Tang et al., 2015](#); [Magnini et al., 2013](#); [Fock et al., 2011](#); [Chathoth et al., 2011](#)), loyalty reward programs ([Hwang and Mattila, 2017](#)), wellness spas ([Han et al., 2017](#)), service encounters ([Fan et al., 2015](#); [Levy, 2010](#)), pricing ([Beldona and Kwansa, 2008](#)) and spatial crowding ([Kim et al., 2010](#)), just to mention as few.

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3. Uncertainty avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance is another commonly studied dimension of culture. Uncertainty avoidance refers to the degree to which a society strives to minimize ambiguity by establishing laws, rules, or rituals (Hofstede, 2001). In high (vs. low) uncertainty avoidance cultures, people tend to exhibit a stronger adherence to such laws, rules, and regulations (Hofstede, 2001; Reimann et al., 2008). The notion of uncertainty avoidance is closely linked to risk perceptions of tourists (Seabra et al., 2013), destination image (Lu et al., 2017; Santana-Jiménez et al., 2015), consumers' food choices (Seo et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2016) and corporate strategies (Ayoun and Moreo, 2008).

4. power distance and power distance beliefs

Power distance can be defined as “the extent to which less powerful members of the society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally” (de Mooij, 1998, p.74). Power distance beliefs (PDB), on the other hand, refer to the extent to which a society agrees on whether an inequality in wealth, power, and prestige is functional or inevitable (Hofstede, 2001). In cultures with high (vs. low) PDB, such an inequality is perceived as more legitimate and acceptable (Oyserman, 2006). As such, power distance beliefs are an important factor in examining cross-cultural differences in organizational commitment (Raub and Robert, 2013), compensation practices (Hon et al., 2015), service encounter evaluations (Lee, 2015) and customer complaining behaviors (Swanson et al., 2014). Conversely, the notion of power distance has been used to in the tourism literature to understand perceived discrimination (Ye et al., 2013) and volunteer tourism (Wong et al., 2014).

5. High vs. Low context

In terms of culture-based communication styles, Hall (1984) argues that low context cultures are characterized by direct, explicit, and unambiguous communications. On the other hand, in high context cultures, individuals prefer indirect ways of communication and emphasize nonverbal cues such as body language (Würtz, 2005). Understanding such communication styles is important when examining consumer responses to pricing (Jeong and Crompton, 2017) and revenue management practices such as rate fences (Song et al., 2017)

In addition to focusing on a specific cultural dimension, there are numerous studies that incorporate several cultural dimensions in a single study. Such studies tend to cover Hofstede's six cultural dimensions (Reisinger and Crotts, 2010; Mazanec et al., 2015; Ekiz and Au, 2011) or Schwartz' cultural values (Jahandideh et al., 2014; Hsu et al., 2013). In terms of operationalization of culture, most studies in hospitality & tourism use nationality as a proxy for culture. Such an assumption is logical yet it might be questioned in today's highly globalized world. It might be a smarter idea to measure the dimensions of importance and use these in explaining why differences across cultures exist.

6. Some New dimensions to consider

Despite the tremendous interest in cross-cultural issues in recent research in our field, there are some interesting dimensions of culture that have been overlooked. It is well-known that concern for face is a crucial component in understanding the Chinese (and many other East-Asian) cultures. Face refers to “a claimed sense of favorable social self-worth that a person wants others to have of her or him” (Ting-Toomey and Kurogi, 1998, p. 187) and it has been linked to consumer responses to service failures and complaining behaviors (Fan et al., 2015). A similar construct – honor- has received scant attention in the hospitality & tourism context. Honor reflects concerns about reputation and respect (Oyserman, 2017) and given its close link to collectivism (Leung

and Cohen, 2011), it might be a fruitful avenue for future research.

Another cultural dimension that is missing in the hospitality & tourism literature is tightness-looseness. Tight and loose cultures differ in the norm strength and tolerance for deviations from such norms (Gelfand et al., 2011). It seems that such a differentiation would enhance our understanding of acceptance of deviant behaviors both in terms of employees and other customers. Or, it could even apply to standards of physical appearance –an important component in an aesthetic labor industry such as hospitality.

However, a word of caution is needed to remind us that a theory developed in one culture might not apply to other cultures. Many constructs in the hospitality & tourism literature are borrowed from mainstream psychology, marketing, organizational behavior, consumer behavior and strategic management, and as such, they are biased by the Western cultural mindset. To highlight the role of culture (and to find significant differences?) most studies involve comparing East-Asians with their Western counterparts. Consequently, we know very little about cultural norms driving people's behaviors in other parts of the world. Given their huge populations, it would be insightful to gain a better understanding of the core cultural forces in other geographic locations such as Africa, India and Russia (For notable exceptions see Stone and Nyaupane, 2016; Matzler et al., 2016; Pavluković et al., 2017; Mkono et al., 2013; Schroeder and Pennington-Gray, 2015).

7. Conclusion

Comparisons of thought and behavior across cultures have been one of the most interesting developments in the recent hospitality & tourism research. The increased interest is driven by the ease of travel, opening of borders and technological innovations. However, some very important questions remain unanswered. First, is there such a notion as a global citizen? One could argue that today's teenagers and young adults share the same taste in music, clothing and social media. If so, has the notion of cultural values lost its influence among Millennials and GenZs? This is clearly a philosophical question that is hard to grasp empirically. Another equally important issue is the debate whether cultures are homogenous. A perfect example is the US. Is there a single American culture or are the differences driven by sub-cultures? It can be argued that diverse societies are a mix of different cultural constructs such as individualism, collectivism and honor or face (Oyserman, 2017). As the US population is becoming more diverse, this question will only gain strength in the future. As our understanding of cultural norms advances, it will be crucial to gain insight into how cultural and individual processes intertwine. New research methods such as big data analytics might help us to get there. I will end this commentary with the following quote from Cesar Chavez:

Preservation of one's own culture does not require contempt or disrespect for other cultures.

Cesar Chavez

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