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# Depictions of Culture: The Case of Tourists' Guidebooks

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## **Abstract**

*Using a 2015 study of Danish culture as a reference source, three tourists' guidebooks about Denmark were examined to establish 1. how comprehensive the depictions of the culture of Denmark are in the guidebooks, and 2. if the guidebooks depict the typical cultural characteristics of Denmark. The object of this study is the culture of Denmark in the beginning of the 21 century. The unit of analysis is tourists' guidebooks to Denmark. Using a conceptual framework from the study of Danish culture as a checklist, the pages of the three guidebooks were examined for matches with variables in the framework. The conclusion is that guidebooks do give a comprehensive depiction of the culture of Denmark. But when it comes to the actual characteristics of the culture the guidebooks only were right about the cultural values, not the cultural behaviour of the Danes.*

**Key Words** *Cultural experiences, values, behaviour, artefacts, guide books, experience economy.*

## **Introduction**

For many tourists experiencing the culture of another country is a big part of the travel experience. But can we trust guidebooks to guide us also with respect to the culture of the country we want to visit? The question is relevant because authors of guidebooks can depict the culture of the country they write about in any way they like: They do not have to be unbiased; they do not have to base their writings on research, and they do not have to include sources. That this is the case becomes clear after examining three contemporary tourist guidebooks on Denmark. All three guidebooks include chapters on culture, as well as other aspects of Denmark, its history, political system, economy, and all the traditional information on cultural artefacts, language, and food.

It seems relevant to take a critical view of tourists' guidebooks with respect to their depictions of a country's culture. Is their depiction of a culture representative of that culture or is the culture misrepresented? In the tourist industry this matters for several reasons: Reading about a country's culture sets expectations which may not be met if based on arbitrary information. Also, if tourists are poorly guided by the guidebooks with respect to culture, it may also result in cultural misunderstandings, and it may affect the perceptions that tourists form.

Perception is a key element in tourism. However, there are multiple definitions of perception (Reisinger and Turner, 2003, p. 149). Mitchell (1978) referred to perceptions as the process that shape and produce what we actually experience. In that case, what guidebooks write about a country's culture will affect the cultural experience. If guidebooks write something that is outdated, incorrect, or inadequate this can affect the cultural experience, probably negatively. It can certainly prevent tourists from experiencing the full cultural experience of visiting a country.

In the experience economy there are both 'outward' and 'inward' (transformative) experiences. Experiencing another country's culture will typically fall in the latter category. Normally few people will expect to experience another country's culture just from visiting a few days or a week. However, if the guidebooks give a comprehensive and up-to-date introduction to a country's culture, their readers would have the chance to experience many of the invisible or hard to observe parts of culture, even if they only have a few days, because they would know what to look for.

What tourists going to Denmark could experience with respect to Danish culture have been surveyed in three academic studies of Danish culture: Reddy (1991), Jenkins (2011), and Vejlgard (2015). The study by Reddy is a qualitative anthropological study in a Danish town, by a non-Dane, carried out in 1989. The study by Jenkins, also a non-Dane, is a sociological field study of a Danish town, carried out in the 1990s.

The study by Vejlgard (who is Danish) is a quantitative study of Danish culture, part of which is a meta-survey. The starting point of the study is Edward Tylor's 1871 definition of culture as 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society' (Tylor, 1924, p. 1). The study introduces a conceptual framework, which takes as its starting point Tylor's definition of culture but makes it more comprehensive by including a synthesis of 16 scholarly definitions of culture. The variables in the framework are categorized into five key categories: cultural values, cultural behavior, cultural artefacts, cultural perishables, and language. The sub-categories of each of these five key categories are presented by the RQ section below. In the study by Vejlgard the framework was applied to Denmark, and it was confirmed that the framework can bring forth a distinct characterization of a country's typical culture.

The Vejlgard study is chosen as a reference source for this study for several reasons: It is the most recent study; it has a comprehensive framework for analysis of culture; it has two clearly stated conclusions with respect to Danish culture.

## **RQ**

The object of this study is the culture of Denmark in the beginning of the 21 century. The unit of analysis is tourists' guidebooks to Denmark. The guidebooks to be included in the study are three English-language guidebooks on Denmark currently available: *Eyewitness Travel* (2013), *Lonely Planet* (2008), and *Rough Guide* (2010).

This study is not about the validity or reliability of the content of the guidebooks. It aims to understand 1. how many elements of a country's culture they include in their depictions, and 2. if they get key cultural characteristics right. However, this may indirectly be a test of the validity and reliability of the guidebooks with respect to their cultural depictions. Based on these aims, the following two RQs can be posed:

RQ1: How comprehensive are the depictions of the cultural values and the cultural behaviour of Denmark in tourists' guide books about Denmark?

RQ2: Do the guidebooks depict the typical cultural characteristics of Denmark?

With respect to RQ1 it should be pointed out that a comprehensive depiction of a country's culture would include all five key variables in the framework presented below. However, tradition tells us that cultural artefacts, cultural perishables, and language are the main focus of almost any tourists' guidebook; they are their *raison d'être*. Therefore, these three categories are excluded from the analysis; only the more 'tricky' part of culture, values and behaviour, are analysed, and if cultural values and cultural behaviour, as defined below, are included in the depiction of culture, this would indicate a more comprehensive depiction of the country's culture.

Cultural values encompass the following variables, presented taxonomically. They represent the cultural values part of the framework (Vejlgard, 2015).

### 1. Cultural Values

2. Thoughts
3. Beliefs
4. Faith
4. Mythology
3. Ideology
3. Morals
3. Philosophy

- 2. Feelings
  - 3. Social feelings
  - 3. Personal feelings
  - 3. National feelings
  - 3. Tolerance
- 2. Knowledge
  - 3. Dates
  - 3. Persons
    - 4. Philosophers
    - 4. Artists
    - 4. Heroes
    - 4. Historical inhabitants
  - 3. Events
  - 3. Locations
  - 3. Audio-visual culture
    - 4. Movies, television, music, games

Cultural behaviour encompasses the following variables, presented taxonomically. They represent the cultural behaviour part of the framework:

### 1. Cultural Behavior

- 2. Lifestyle
- 2. Norms
- 2. Rules
  - 3. Law
- 2. Habits
- 2. Customs
- 2. Traditions

Below the variables with respect to cultural artefacts, cultural perishables, and language are presented. However, as has already been stated, these variables are not part of the present analysis of guidebooks since guidebooks, per definition, have their focus on these variables.

### 1. Cultural Artefacts

- 2. The arts
  - 3. Fine arts
    - 4. Paintings
    - 4. Sculptures
  - 3. Architecture
    - 4. Palaces
    - 4. Museums
      - 4. Amusement parks
      - 4. Zoos
      - 4. Aquariums
      - 4. Concert halls
      - 4. Stadiums
  - 3. Monuments
- 2. Designed objects
  - 3. Clothes
  - 3. Furniture

- 3. Tools
  - 4. Computers and tablets
  - 5. Websites
- 3. Vehicles
- 2. 2D-objects
  - 3. flags
  - 3. DVDs
  - 3. Sheet music
  - 3. Post cards
  - 3. Photographs
- 1. Cultural Perishables
  - 2. Food
    - 3. Prepared meals
  - 2. Gardens
    - 3. Landscaped parks
    - 3. Botanical gardens
- 1. Language
  - 2. Language groups
    - 3. Spoken language usage
      - 4. Para-verbal language
    - 3. Written language usage
      - 4. Literature.
      - 4. Music notes
  - 3. Non-verbal communication

It should be pointed out that Vejlggaard writes that the listing of sub-categories is not exhaustive. In his study of typical Danish culture Vejlggaard identified the following key characteristics:

- i. Typical Danes are relaxed with respect to their moral values.
- ii. Typical Danes are informal in their behaviour.

In RQ2 typical culture is defined as the above characteristics, and to answer yes to the RQ2, the guidebooks must convey these two characteristics.

The guidebooks are analysed individually, but in concurrence with the RQs the results are presented collectively. One guidebook may not be comprehensive or depict typical culture but if all guidebooks on a country are consulted, one may get a comprehensive depiction of that country's culture.

The political system, economic system, and history are not part of this analysis, only culture ('the cultural system').

## **Methodology**

Using Vejlggaard's conceptual framework as a checklist, the pages of the three guidebooks were examined for matches with variables in the framework. Each time there was a reference in the text to one of cultural values or cultural behaviour variables in the framework, this was noted. If a reference was noted in the *Eyewitness* guide book, an E, followed by the page number, was placed in the relevant category. If a reference was in the *Lonely Planet* guidebook, an L was placed, followed by the page number, and if in *Rough Guide*, a R was placed in the relevant category, followed by the page number. The accuracy of the information was not taken into account. In other words, this part of the study is a purely quantitative word analysis.

Using the conclusion of Vejlgard's study of typical Danish culture as a checklist, the pages were examined again. Each time there was a reference to the two key characteristics of typical Danish culture, as presented in the RQ section, this was noted, using the same guidebook identifiers as mentioned above. Information that would state the opposite of the checklist was ignored. This part of the study is a qualitative text analysis.

## **Findings**

There may be multiple references to each variable, sometimes using different wording, in the pages of the guidebooks. Only the first time there is a reference is this noted by a page number. In the instances when all three guidebooks reference the same information the specific information is presented in [ ], for instance, [Vikings]. With respect to RQ1 the outcome is as follows with respect to cultural values:

### 1. Cultural values

- 2. Thoughts
  - 3. Beliefs
    - 4. Faith [Protestant] (E (p. 17), L (p. 42))
    - 4. Mythology (E (p. 16), L (p.43))
  - 3. Ideology (E (p. 16), L (p. 17), R (p. 4))
  - 3. Morals (E (p. 18), L (p. 40), R (p. 298))
  - 3. Philosophy
- 2. Feelings
  - 3. Social feelings [trust] (E (p. 16))
  - 3. Personal feelings [happiness] (L (p. 16), (R (p. 4))
  - 3. National feelings [pride] (E (p. 16), L (p. 39), (R (p. 4))
- 2. Knowledge
  - 3. Dates
  - 3. Persons
    - 4. Philosophers (L (p. 43),
    - 4. Artists [Hans Christian Andersen] (E (p. 15), L (p. 43), R (p. 304))
    - 4. Heroes
      - 4. Historical inhabitants [Vikings] (E (p. 15), L (p. 16), R (p. 4))
  - 3. Events
  - 3. Locations
  - 3. Audio-visual culture (L (p. 301), R (p. 45))
    - 4. Movies, television, music, games (L (pp. 45-46), R (p. 302))

With respect to cultural behaviour the outcome is as follows:

### 1. Cultural behaviour

- 2. Lifestyle (E (p. 17), L (p. 39))
- 2. Norms (E (p. 18), L (p. 39))
- 2. Rules
  - 3. Law
- 2. Habits (L (p. 41), R (p.35))
- 2. Customs (E (p.17), L (p. 39), R (p.35))
- 2. Traditions (E (p.17), R (p.35))

With respect to RQ2 the outcome is as follows:

- i. Typical Danes are relaxed with respect to their moral values (E (p. 16), L, (p. 17), R (p. 4)).
- ii. Typical Danes are informal in their behaviour [no references].

With respect to i. all three guidebooks use terms such as ‘liberal’ and ‘liberalism’ to describe the Danes. It is apparent from the context that the words are used as social terms, not economic terms. Liberalism used as a social term can be defined as relaxed about moral issues. Therefore, all the guidebooks depict the typical cultural values part of Danish culture.

With respect to ii. the *Lonely Planet* guidebook writes that ‘visitors will find Danes relaxed, casual [...]’ (p. 47). The word ‘casual’ would typically be used to describe behaviour. The *Rough Guide* mentions in a sentence that the Danes use the word ‘hej’ as an informal greeting (p. 35). Greetings are clearly behaviour. However, both examples are so vague that it would be more than a stretch to say that readers would become aware that typical Danes are informal in their behaviour.

## Conclusion

The survey shows that guidebooks do give a comprehensive depiction of the cultural values and the cultural behaviour of Denmark, in purely quantitative terms (RQ1). The guidebooks collectively reference most of the variables in the framework.

The guidebooks depict some aspects of the typical culture of a country, but not all parts. With respect to Denmark, the guide books got the relaxed (liberal) values right but not the informal behaviour of the Danes (RQ2).

Tourists, students, and professionals in the tourism industry should be aware that while the guidebooks in this study present multiple aspects of Danish culture, that is, a comprehensive depiction of the cultural values and the cultural behaviour of Denmark, it should be noted that this does not necessarily mean that the depiction is in accordance with research. A further analysis would show that the information presented is sometimes superficial, sometimes erroneous, sometimes politically and taste-wise biased, and sometimes based on what has been presented in the media prior to the writing. Tourists, students, and professionals should also be aware that while the guidebooks may include many aspects of culture they may miss key characteristics.

Guidebooks could give more value to their readers and make the cultural experience a unique part of travelling if their reporting on culture was not as arbitrary and superficial, as it appears to be. Culture is many things— values, behaviour, and artefacts, food, and language. We know that the guidebooks traditionally do an excellent job of presenting information on artefacts, food, and language. If they applied the same facts and details to cultural values and cultural behaviour as they do to locations and opening hours of museums and similar institutions, guide books could open up to cultural experiences that would fit right in with the transformative stage of the experience economy that we are likely to see dominate at some point in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, according to Pine and Gilmore (2011). At this stage tourists want to learn, reflect, and expose themselves to transformative experiences. If you know what to look for in a foreign culture, just by walking in the street or sitting in a café you can experience foreign culture. Foreign culture will then not just be something you see in a museum, but something you live, even for a few days as a tourist.

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