
Culture-specific Well-being Phenomena in Tourism: An Evaluative Approach to Establish Uniqueness

Henrik Vejlgard, Copenhagen Business Academy

Abstract

*Research has revealed that many cultures around the world have apparently unique well-being phenomena that they also have a unique word for, a word that may appear to be untranslatable. These well-being phenomena are also cultural phenomena that may have economic value in tourism if their uniqueness can be established. This study presents an approach on how to evaluate these culture-specific well-being phenomena, using the Danish word and well-being phenomenon *hygge* to illustrate the approach's usefulness in tourism. It is proposed that an evaluative approach consisting of eight focus areas is used to evaluate an untranslatable well-being phenomenon. It appears from the evaluation that words may be unique to a country, but the actual cultural phenomenon may not be unique. If that is the outcome of an evaluation of an untranslatable word, tourist authorities are advised to be careful to announce the phenomenon as unique to their country in mass-communication.*

Key Words *Culture, hygge, Denmark, transformative experiences*

Track *Fourth Track*

Focus of Paper *Practical/applied*

Kind of submission: *Paper*

Entrant for PhD student competition *No*

Introduction

In a globalized world, with an increasing merging of cultures, tourist destinations crave to stand out and be unique. A new path to be unique may emerge from the Positive Lexicography Project, “an evolving index of 'untranslatable' words related to wellbeing from across the world's languages.” (Lomas, 2017). The Project charts positive mental states that may be particular to a culture. It appears that many cultures around the world have unique cultural phenomena that they also have a unique word for, a word that is not (easily) translatable. Lomas has identified 216 such words that have been analyzed and categorized into three categories: feelings (comprising positive and complex feelings); relationships (comprising intimacy and pro-sociality) and character (comprising personal resources and spirituality) (Lomas, 2016). (An updated Provisional Lexicography lists 236 words (Provisional Lexicography, 2017)). A well-being phenomenon in this paper can thus be about feelings, relationships, and/or character.

In research wellbeing is seen as an umbrella term, which incorporates a range of aspects (Hjalager et al., 2011). Wellbeing and wellness are related terms where wellness has been defined as wellbeing of body, mind and soul (Smith and Puczko, 2009, p. 9.). In a study of wellbeing in a Nordic tourism context, wellbeing as a stand-alone term was defined as ‘a multidimensional state of being describing the existence of positive health of body, mind and soul. Wellbeing is an individual issue, but is manifest only in congruence with the wellbeing of the surrounding environment and community.’ (Hjalager et al., 2011). While individual words in the Positive Lexicography Project (PLP) may not involve the positive health of both body and mind/soul, the combined listing of words on the list do. Thus, the understanding of wellbeing in tourism research and in the PLP appears to overlap.

Evaluation Criteria

Both wellness and wellbeing are topics in tourism, as both are motives to travel (Konu and Laukkanen, 2009). The culture-specific well-being phenomena investigated here may be viewed as a new development in tourism because these elusive, difficult-to-see cultural experiences represent unique branding opportunities. However, branding is a discipline that can work in different ways, and it may be relevant to be aware of the distinction made in branding research between marketing branding and corporate branding (Schultz et al., (2000) also in destination branding. Corporate branding is about a brand reflecting the actual organizational culture of an organization. Marketing branding is branding of a product or service with its own brand identity, often independent of the organizational culture (Hatch and Schultz, 2008). In research on corporate branding it has been pointed out that in corporate branding there may be image issues if there is a misalignment between the actual organizational culture and what is being communicated about the culture. Likewise, if what is being said in destination branding is not a true reflection of the ‘wellbeing culture’ at the destination, tourists may experience this misalignment, which is likely to lead to disappoint among tourists wanting to experience the wellbeing phenomenon. Therefore, a critical approach to incorporating these wellbeing words is advisable.

It is here suggested that a first step in such a critical approach is an evaluative process of the untranslatable well-being words. While there are many approaches to carry out an evaluative process, here it is proposed to establish criteria that relate to the wellbeing phenomena, as they are understood in the PLP, that is, as linguistic concepts, as single words or word combinations. Thus, the criteria must relate to language, as spoken and written language, and as culture, as language is also a cultural element (Tylor, 1924). The criteria must establish the robustness of a word both linguistically and culturally. Here it is proposed that the following eight criteria can establish the robustness of a wellbeing word in a PLP context: a. degree of difficulty in translating the definition; b. grammatical classification of the word; c. translation into English (or other relevant language), based on an analysis of the phenomenon; d. degree of comprehension of translation, without further explanation; e. categorizing the phenomenon culturally; f. establishing the historical origin of the phenomenon; g. outlining a present-day cultural context; h. establishing the tangible elements of the phenomenon.

Hygge as Example

In order to illustrate the usefulness of the criteria to establish the uniqueness of the cultural phenomena and in order to evaluate the marketability to foreign tourists, the Danish word and well-being phenomenon *hygge* will be analyzed using the evaluative criteria. *Hygge* is one of the words in the Positive Lexicography Project, and it was selected for evaluation as it is gaining international attention, making it a somewhat familiar reference point to observers outside of the culture in which the word originates. A word may not be unique or it may be too elusive to relate to unless one is very familiar with the use of the word, making it difficult to relate to for foreign tourists. As *hygge* is often related as having this elusive quality (Author’s observation), it seems a relevant word to use in a test of an evaluative approach.

In 2016, *hygge* was on the Oxford Dictionaries shortlist of words of the year (BBC, 16-11-2016). Around the same time, a handful of books on *hygge* were published in English (Publishers Weekly, 2016). International media have been reporting on *hygge* in recent years (Author’s observation). One observer has pointed out that *hygge* can become the next ‘big thing’ in services (Stephens, 2016). It certainly seems plausible that *hygge* can be an experiential factor in Danish tourism in the near future. If that is the case, Danish tourism authorities need

to evaluate the word in order to decide how to inform foreign tourists how they can experience hygge, just as tourist authorities in other countries may want to evaluate well-being phenomena unique to their country.

Evaluation

With respect to hygge, it does seem to be notoriously difficult to translate into English (Author's observation, based on casual participation-observation 2000-2017). In Danish, hygge belongs to three word classes: Hygge can be a noun (*hygge*), a verb (*at hygge*), and an adjective (*hyggelig*) (Politikens Forlag, 2011). In Danish you say the equivalent to 'Tonight we are going to *hygge*', indicating behaviour and to 'It was *hyggeligt*', indicating a feeling. In a translation of hygge, the translation must reflect these three word classes. In addition, it must reflect both a feeling and behaviour.

According to a widely used Danish-English dictionary, hygge is translated into 'comfort; cosiness' or 'friendly atmosphere' (Gyldendal, 2005). The Oxford Dictionaries define hygge as 'A quality of cosiness and comfortable conviviality that engenders a feeling of contentment or well-being, regarded as a defining characteristic of Danish culture.' (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). Hygge has also been studied in academic literature: In three phenomenological studies, hygge is defined as 'notions of intimacy, informality and relaxation' (Bille, 2015); as 'an informal, intimate and relaxed ambience' (Bille and Sørensen, 2007); as 'cosy, homey, informal, sincere, down-to-earth, warm, close, convivial, relaxed, comfortable, snug, friendly, welcoming, and tranquil' (Linnet, 2011). Here the definitions stemming from academic literature are considered the most credible.

Many of the words in the three academic definitions are synonyms, and it is worth noting that the same two words occur in two different word classes in the three definitions: informal/informality and relaxed/relaxation. It seems that these two words are key words in understanding hygge. Hygge can thus be 'relaxed informality' or 'informal relaxation'. Grammatically, only one of the two word combinations, informal relaxation, work in all three word classes in which hygge is used in Danish: informal relaxation; to relax informally; informal and relaxed. One can add to this, that probably most people will feel that 'informal relaxation' is the most idiomatic expression of the two translations. The translation of hygge as informal relaxation lives up to hygge as communicating both a feeling (informal) and behaviour (relaxation). Culturally, feelings are in the value category. As behaviour, hygge is categorized as a custom; a custom being defined as a habit that is established ('established behaviour') (Jary and Jary, 2000). In addition, idiomatically 'informal relaxation' is easily comprehensible to English-speakers and is translatable into other languages.

In the PLP, hygge is listed as having a Danish/Norwegian origin (Provisional Lexigraphy, February 2017). Hygge is originally a Norwegian word but has been part of the Danish language since the Middle Ages (Linnet, 2009), however, with a different meaning than what the word has today, namely 'wanting to take care of', for instance, an ambience. At around 1800 hygge starts having the meaning that it has today in Danish (Lauridsen, 2016). (Today the Norwegians have their own word for hyggelig, 'koselig', which is also in the Provisional Lexigraphy.)

To fully evaluate an untranslatable well-being word some cultural context seems relevant. In this evaluation study, secondary sources are used to give a brief insight into the cultural context of the hygge phenomenon: Trust appears to be an important value in Danish culture. 76% of Danes have trust in each other and 62% have trust in their institutions (Sørensen et al., 2011, p. 253). Trust in other people is likely to be conducive to relaxed social behaviour. In Denmark it is common to socialize in people's private homes, friends are invited for food and/or coffee (Author's observation, 2000-2017). When at work, Danes work in companies with low power distance; Denmark has the second lowest PowerDistance among the 100+ countries surveyed by Hofstede (based on Hofstede, 2014). Denmark ranks highest amongst the 27 European countries in terms of employee autonomy. According to Hofstede this means that "Workplaces have a very informal atmosphere with direct and involving communication and on a first name basis." (Hofstede, 2014) When Danes are done working, they continue to mix socially outside of the family, due to a high participation in civilian society (Juul, 2004, p. 165). In a statistic on use of candles in Europe, Denmark came second. 87% of Danes light candles during the winter months (Bolius, 2016).

Previous studies have revealed that light (Bille, 2015) and food and drink (Linnet, 2009) often play a part in *hygge*. However, if no knowledge on the role of material elements in a well-being phenomenon exists, a visual study methodology may yield insight into the tangible aspects of the phenomenon. Here such a method is utilized in a focused but miniscule study of the material elements involved in *hygge*. Without insight on the materials elements, the methodology may be utilized exploratively.

Methodology

In traditional academic research, scholars solve problems by analyzing. In 1979, an empirical study revealed how designers solve problems (Lawson, 1980); it appeared that they solve problems by synthesis (Cross, 1982); also sometimes termed design thinking (see, for instance, Brown (2008). Analysis and synthesis are both well-known concepts in science (Ritchey, 1991), but represents different methodologies in different disciplines. In trend sociology, the synthesis method involves `synthesizing a lot of small signs and observations and seeing if they follow a pattern [...]` (Vejlgaard, 2008, p. 189). A key aspect of this method is a synthesis of visual observations. Knoblauch et al. (2008) have pointed out that the use of visual research methods has become widespread throughout the social sciences, including sociology. Compared to traditional qualitative methods, quantity plays a role in synthesis in that a certain number of visual observations are required to identify a pattern. Here synthesis is utilized by studying photos in the *Hygge + Danish* category of photo-sharing website Pinterest on one specific date (Pinterest, 2017). 231 photos were included in the synthesis. The origins of the photos are not taken into account, which can be an issue with respect to validity. The photos are synthesized with respect to material elements, specifically but not limited to light other than daylight and food and drink. If human beings are present in the photos, it is determined if they can be said to be engaging in informal relaxation or not.

Findings

One dominating element in the photos in the *hygge* section of Pinterest appears to be indirect artificial light and/or lit candles, open fire places, or bonfires. Drink and food may be involved, but only in a minority of the photos. No particular type of food seems to dominate. If there are people in the photo, they can be by themselves or be together with one other person or a small group of people. If people are shown in the photos, they are relaxing, in both private and public spaces, though it appears to be mostly private spaces, and the photos show private situations. What goes on in the photos can be described as informal relaxation or showing a setting with the possibility of informal relaxation. What is considered relaxation seem to be about but not limited to being with a pet animal, reading a book, listening to music, relaxed conversation, or actually doing nothing. Relaxation appears to be a non-strenuous activity.

Discussion

Hygge can be said to exist within some core values of Danish culture (trust, informality), and those values may be conducive to informal relaxation. This is something that further research can more clearly establish.

With a precise definition and evaluation of a culture-specific well-being word, one unintended outcome may also be a demystification of the word, which may have positive or negative aspects with respect to people's perception of the phenomenon. Certainly, in this evaluation, what *hygge* is about—informal relaxation— can take place in many cultures around the world; informal relaxation is certainly not something that is unique to one country. What is unique to Danish culture is that in Denmark there is a unique Danish word for informal relaxation. This can very well be an indication that informal relaxation is deeply ingrained in Danish culture. Other countries may have their own cultural well-being words that are equally deeply ingrained in *their* culture.

While the words in the PLP do not signal that material elements are part of the well-being phenomenon, analysis utilizing visual research methods may reveal that material elements are part of the phenomenon. Indeed, what appear to make informal relaxation in Denmark particularly Danish is the decorative setting and ambiance with indirect, subdued light and/or lit candles that play a part in informal relaxation in Denmark. Thus, it may be artefacts that constitute the uniqueness of Danish *hygge* in early 21st century.

Tourism Industry Implications

While the PLP may be a catalogue of `new` cultural experiences from a tourism perspective, some caution is also advised: Words may be unique to a country, or some countries, but the actual cultural phenomenon may not be unique. If that is the outcome of an evaluation of the untranslatable word, tourist authorities are advised to be careful to announce the phenomenon as unique to their culture in mass-communication. With respect to hygge, this evaluative study did reveal that there may be some uniqueness to informal relaxation in Denmark, namely the use of indirect and subdued light and the extensive use of candles. This may be unique enough to call hygge a unique Danish well-being phenomenon.

However, in a present-day tourist perspective, the question to ask is, if the well-being phenomenon can be understood by, marketed to, and experienced by tourists who are not part of the culture in which the word has originated. A clear definition of the phenomenon that is less abstract than the dictionary definitions is a first step towards establishing this. In addition, with insight into which cultural categories in which the phenomenon is encapsulated, can make it easier to market the phenomenon. Not least, the use of artefacts may be important, as these may be what make the phenomenon unique. This appears to be the case with respect to hygge: This well-being phenomenon may be experienced by a particular use of artefacts, most notably subdued lightning and/or open fire. It is worth noting that a subdued lightning ambiance can already be experienced in many Danish cafes, restaurants, and hotels. This is likely not new to foreign tourists who already know Denmark but what may be new to foreign tourists is the use of a unique word to describe this cultural phenomenon. However, what may ultimately be a more satisfying hygge experience to some tourists may be a visit to a private Danish home. Private home visits concepts for tourists are already in existence in Denmark (www.meetthedanes.dk).

Input from the PLP may be relevant in varying degrees to different sectors. As the spa sector 'encompasses a range of establishments whose common goal is to enhance overall well-being through a variety of professional services that encourage the renewal of mind, body and spirit' (Thorsteinsdottir, 2005), this sector in particular can be said to benefit from the PLP project. However, this will not be case with hygge, as hygge is not related to relaxation in spas (cf. Bille 2015; Bille and Sørensen, 2007; Linnet, 2011) but to relaxation in cafes, restaurants, and hotels, and private homes.

Culture-specific well-being phenomena may be seen in a wider tourism perspective, and they may be further explored as tourism experiences relating to other aspects of tourism, currently in vogue, such as slow tourism, co-creative tourism, and live the local life (Richards and Wilson, 2006; Richards, 2011; Richards, 2014).

Practice and/or further studies need to be carried out in order to establish if elusive and sometimes untranslatable cultural phenomena make sense from the tourists' point of view and can be conceptualized and marketed successfully to foreign tourists. This can then be an important next step in tourism towards the transformations stage of the experience economy, which, as outlined by Pine and Gilmore (2011), is the stage which yields the highest economic value. A potential well-being phenomenon may also have an economic aspect that must be considered by tourist authorities: The more unique, the higher value the phenomenon represents.

References

- BBC (2016). <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-37995600>
- Bille, M. (2015). Lighting up cosy atmospheres in Denmark. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 15, 56–63.
- Bille, M. and T. F. Sørensen (2007). An Anthropology of Luminosity: The Agency of Light. *Journal of Material Culture*, 12(3), 263-284.
- Bolius (2016). <https://www.bolius.dk/derfor-elsker-danskerne-stearinlys-24773/>
- Brown, T. (2008). Design Thinking. *Harvard Business Review*. June 2008, 85-92.
- Condon, J. & LaBrack, B. (2015). Culture, the definition of. In *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Intercultural Competence*. Thousand Oaks, CA.: SAGE Publications.
- Cross, N. (1982). "Designerly Ways of Knowing". *Design Studies*, 3(4), 221-27.
- Gyldendal (2009). *Dansk-Engelsk*. Copenhagen, Denmark: Gyldendal.
- Hatch, M.J. and Schultz, M. (2008). *Taking Brand Initiative: How Companies Can Align Their Strategy, Culture and Identity Through Corporate Branding*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Hjalager, A-M., Konu, H., Huijbens, E.H.; Björk, P., Flagestad, A., Nordin, S. and Tuohino, A. (2011).

Innovating and re-branding Nordic wellbeing tourism: Final report from a joint NICE research project.
Oslo: Nordon

Hofstede (2014). <http://geert-hofstede.com/denmark.html>

Jary, D. and J. Jary (2000). *Sociology*. London, England: Collins.

Johns, N. & Lee-Ross, D. (1998). *Research Methods in Service Industry Management*. London, England: Cassal.

Juul, S. (2004). Solidaritet. In Gundelach (2004).

Konu, H. and Laukkanen, T. (2009). Roles of Motivation Factors in Predicting Tourists' Intentions to Make Wellbeing Holidays – A Finnish Case. ANZMAC Conference 2009.

Knoblauch, H., A. Baer, Laurier, E., Petschke, S. & Schnettler, B. (2008). Visual Analysis. New Developments in the Interpretative Analysis of Video and Photography. *Qualitative Social Research*, 9(3).

<http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1170/2587>

Linnet, J. T. (2011). Money Can't Buy Me Hygge. *Social Analysis*, 55(2), 21-44.

Lauritsen, O. (2016). <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/kultur/sprogforsker-man-skal-vaere-dansker-forstaa-hygge>

Lawson, B. (1980). *How Designers Think: The Design Process Demystified*. London, England: Routledge.

Lomas, T. (2017). <https://www.drtilomas.com/positive-lexicography>

Politikens Forlag (2011). *Nudansk Ordbog*. Copenhagen, Denmark: Politikens Forlag.

Oxford Dictionaries (2016). <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>

Pine, J. B. and J. H. Gilmore (2011). *The Experience Economy*. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press.

Pinterest (2017).

[https://dk.pinterest.com/search/pins/?q=hygge%20danish&rs=guide&term_meta\[\]=hygge%7Cautocomplete%7C0&term_meta\[\]=danish%7Cguide%7Cword%7C8&add_refine=danish%7Cguide%7Cword%7C8](https://dk.pinterest.com/search/pins/?q=hygge%20danish&rs=guide&term_meta[]=hygge%7Cautocomplete%7C0&term_meta[]=danish%7Cguide%7Cword%7C8&add_refine=danish%7Cguide%7Cword%7C8)

Provisional Lexicography (2017). https://media.wix.com/ugd/ce8de8_b357a7efa01c42cc864df6bf1c174f4a.pdf

Publishers Weekly (2016). A Bite of Danish. *Publishers Weekly*, 263(42).

Richards, G. (2014). Creativity and tourism in the City. *Current issues in Tourism*, 17:2, 119-144, DOI: 10.1080/13683500.2013.783794.

Richards, G. (2011). Creativity and Tourism: The state of the Art. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 38: 4, 1225 – 1253, DOI 10.1016/j.annals.2011.07.008.

Richards, G. & Wilson, J. (2006). Developing creativity in tourist experience: A solution to the serial reproduction of culture. *Tourism Management*, 17(6), 1209–1223, DOI 10.1016/j.tourman.2005.06.002.

Ritchey, T. (1991). "Analysis and Synthesis: On Scientific Method – Based on a Study by Bernhard Riemann." *Systems Research*, 8(4), 21-41.

Schultz, M., Hatch, M. J. & Larsen, M.H. (eds.) (2000). *The Expressive Organization: Linking Identity, Reputation and the Corporate Brand*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Smith, M. and Puczkó, L. (2009). *Health and Wellness Tourism*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.

Stephens, M. (2016). The Hygge State of Mind. *Library Journal*. March 15, 2016.

Thorsteinsdottir, K. (2005). The state of the European hotel spa sector. *Journal of Retail & Leisure Property* 4(3), pp. 272 - 277

Tylor, E. 2010 [1871]. *Primitive Culture*. Volume 1. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Vejlgaard, H. (2008). *Anatomy of a Trend*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

www.meetthedanes.dk