
Foreign Nationals' Perception of a Destination's Culture: A Survey of Cultural Categories Associated with Denmark

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Abstract

Perception is a key element in tourism. This study focuses on foreign nationals' perception of a destination's culture. Culture is notoriously difficult to define. However, this study uses a conceptual framework for studying culture that takes the complexities of culture into account. The variables in the framework are categorized into five key categories: cultural values, cultural behavior, cultural artefacts, cultural perishables, and language, organized in a taxonomic hierarchy with subcategories. The study then explores which cultural categories foreign nationals from five countries associate with Denmark. The cultural categories are values, behaviour, artefacts, perishables, and language. In an online survey one open-ended question was posed to randomly selected representative sample populations in five countries. A choice was made to categorize only the 50 most common words within the conceptual framework. Foreign nationals seem to associate Denmark with all five cultural categories, and they associate Denmark with specific values, behaviour, artefacts, perishables, and language.

Key Words *Culture, perceptions, values, behaviour, artefacts.*

Experience Theme *Consumers' Experiences: Experiences of niche tourists (cultural tourism); cultural dimensions.*

Focus of Paper *Miscellaneous*

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Introduction

Perception is a key element in tourism, as it influences tourists' decision-making, their social interaction with hosts, as well as many other aspects of tourism. Perception can in principle encompass all aspects of a destination. This study will focus on foreign nationals' perception of a destination's culture, specifically the following five cultural categories: values, behaviour, artefacts, perishables, and language. While it is often quite simple to categorize values, behaviour, artefacts, perishables, and language, this study will aim to categorize perceptions of culture in more specific subcategories. Values, behaviour, artefacts, perishables, and language each represent many aspects of a culture, and by categorizing and specifying these as detailed as possible this may give us insight into specific types of perceptions of culture that tourists have. If certain patterns in tourists' perceptions of culture can be established, tourist authorities and hosts may get a deeper understanding of tourists' perception of a destination's culture. This may contribute to more satisfying social interactions between guests and hosts.

Perception is a psychological concept which is defined as "the process by which meaning is attributed to an object, event, or person encountered in the environment" (Reisinger and Turner, 2003, p. 148). Reisinger and Turner present three types of perceptions: 1. Perceptions of other people. 2. Perceptions of one's own. 3.

Perceptions of the perceptions (Reisinger and Turner, 2003, p. 151). This study will focus on type 1, specifically tourists' perception of a (potential) host destination's culture.

This paper will explore foreign nationals' perceptions of a destination's culture using a conceptual framework introduced by Vejlggaard (2015a). This conceptual framework introduces a taxonomic categorization of culture that includes very specific key aspects of culture. The object of this study is the culture of Denmark in the beginning of the 21 century. The unit of analysis is countries that represent important tourist markets to Denmark.

Theoretical Framework

After an extensive literature review of the concept of culture, Reisinger and Turner concluded, "Culture is a complex multidimensional phenomenon that is difficult to define, and the hundreds of different definitions presented in the literature reflect this." (Reisinger and Turner, 2003, p. 4). In 1985 more than 160 definitions of culture in academic literature were identified (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1985). This offers several challenges in research, as there does not appear to be consensus on one specific definition, even within disciplines. However, a recent study introduced a conceptual framework for studying culture that takes this into account (Vejlggaard, 2015a).

The starting point of Vejlggaard's 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). This definition is expanded on by including a synthesis of 16 scholarly definitions of culture into the conceptual framework, based on a literature review carried out independently of Vejlggaard's study. The variables in the framework are categorized into five key categories: cultural values, cultural behavior, cultural artefacts, cultural perishables, and language (Vejlggaard, 2015a). The five key categories are organized in a taxonomic hierarchy with subcategories. The category and subcategories each represent a cultural variable. Except for the five key categories the conceptual framework is not static, in that, that the number of subcategories and the actual subcategories are not firmly established. As Vejlggaard (2015a) writes, "The selected variables and taxonomic levels are not definitive. When tested empirically new insight can be gained as to which variables and taxonomic levels that will be relevant and meaningful to include when studying a country's culture in the beginning of the 21st century." (Vejlggaard, 2015a). Not all subcategories should necessarily be used in any study. In the present study the conceptual framework is used below in the version that has also been used in a study of tourists' guidebooks (Vejlggaard, 2015b).

Conceptual Framework (Vejlggaard 2015b)

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

1. Cultural Behaviour

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

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

This conceptual framework makes a clear distinction between culture and many other aspects of society. Nature, political elements, economic elements, history, and geography are not culture in Tylor's sense and are, therefore, not part of the conceptual framework. These aspects of a society are studied by other disciplines.

RQ

Based on the above conceptual framework the following two RQs can be posed:

RQ1: Which cultural categories do foreign nationals associate with Denmark?

RQ2: Which specific values, behaviour, artefacts, perishables, and language do foreign nationals associate with Denmark?

In both RQs "foreign nationals" represents inhabitants from five countries: Sweden, Norway, Germany, Great Britain, and Holland. It is not known if these foreign nationals have been tourists or have an intention to become tourists. The cultural categories to be used have been defined above.

Methodology

Measuring perceptions can be done in several ways (Reisinger and Turner, 2003, p. 157). One option is open-ended questions, and this option will be used in this study. Open-ended questions allow one to capture or measure individuals' holistic view of a destination as well as the characteristics of the destination they judge to be distinctive or unique (Frochot and Batat, 2013, p. 126; Echtner and Richie, 1993). However, as the data presented here were gathered by the national tourism organization of Denmark, many types of questions, both closed and open-ended, were included in the actual data gathering. The data gathering method was an online survey. Data gathering took place in February-March 2015.

The online survey questionnaire was distributed to randomly selected representative (pre-stratified) sample populations of adults aged 18+ years, in each of the following five countries: Sweden, Norway, Germany, Great Britain, and Holland. The survey questionnaire was translated from Danish into Swedish, Norwegian, German, English, and Dutch before distribution and distributed in the relevant language to each country's respondents. The five countries represent the main markets of Danish tourism. The selection of respondents took place in existing web panels, used by professional opinion polling organizations in the respective countries. For the part of the survey used in this study one specific open-ended survey question was asked:

Survey question: With what do you associate Denmark?

Respondents replied in their own language and the responses were reported in the original language.

Table 1: No. of Respondents and Response Rates for the Five Participating Countries

Country	N	Response Rate
Sweden	682	85%
Norway	678	85%
Germany	1.930	63%
Great Britain	915	58%
Holland	977	65%

The raw data was gathered by the national tourism organization of Denmark, in connection with a much wider annual brand survey (VisitDenmark, 2015). The responses to the survey question included in this study were subsequently categorized specifically for this paper, as follows:

Basic sorting process: Replies that were not readily meaningful, numbers, conjunctions, and numerals were excluded.

Quantitative process: Only the 50 most often used words were included. This limitation of words was chosen to highlight key themes, and not necessarily identify all themes.

Excluding process: Only words or combinations of words that can be categorized in the conceptual framework without interpretation were used. Words that can be said to be synonymous or words that come in different grammatical representations were categorized as one word, the most common word (“nice” was considered a variation of “friendly”). Words that represent nature in the widest sense were not included. Words that represent political organisation, the economy, history were excluded. Purely geographical terms were excluded (thus, for instance, “Copenhagen” was excluded). Words that represent only accommodation were left out. Adjectives that reflect only judgement (“good” or “bad”) without it being clear what judgement was passed on (for instance, behaviour, food, or artefacts) were left out.

Each time a key word or a variation of the key word was mentioned in the survey the relevant country code was placed in the category or sub-category in the conceptual framework. The following country codes were used: S = Sweden; N = Norway; G = Germany; GB = Great Britain; H = Holland.

While the specific data used in this study were not meant to be used quantitatively, the fact that the unit of analysis is five different countries may allow for a cautious quantitative approach to the data, depending upon the actual findings.

Findings

The outcome of the survey is as follows. For each category that got a response one or more examples of actual responses are highlighted in brackets.

1. Cultural values [Relaxed]: N

2. Thoughts
 3. Beliefs
 4. Faith
 4. Mythology
 3. Ideology
 3. Morals
 3. Philosophy
2. Feelings
 3. Social feelings [Friendliness]: S, N, G; GB, H
 3. Personal feelings

- 3. National feelings
- 3. Tolerance
- 2. Knowledge
 - 3. Dates
 - 3. Persons
 - 4. Philosophers
 - 4. Artists [Hans Christian Andersen]: **GB, H**
 - 4. Heroes
 - 4. Historical inhabitants [Vikings]: **GB, H**
 - 3. Events
 - 3. Locations
 - 3. Audio-visual culture
 - 4. Movies, television, music, games

1. Cultural behaviour

- 2. Lifestyle
- 2. Norms
- 2. Rules
 - 3. Law
- 2. Habits [Shopping]: **S, N**
- 2. Customs [Informality]: **S, N**
- 2. Traditions

1. Cultural Artefacts [Culture]: **S, N, GB, H**

- 2. The arts
 - 3. Fine arts
 - 4. Paintings
 - 4. Sculptures [Little Mermaid]: **G, GB, H**
 - 3. Architecture
 - 4. Palaces
 - 4. Museums
 - 4. Amusement parks [Tivoli, Legoland] **S, N, GB, H**
 - 4. Zoos
 - 4. Aquariums
 - 4. Concert halls
 - 4. Stadiums
 - 3. Monuments
- 2. Designed objects [Lego]: **S, GB, H**
 - 3. Clothes
 - 3. Furniture
 - 3. Tools [Windmills]: **GB**
 - 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 [Open-faced sandwiches, beer, sausages, cheese]: **S, N, GB**
 3. Prepared meals
2. Gardens
 3. Landscaped parks
 3. Botanical gardens

1. Language: S, N

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 appeared that some interpretation of words was necessarily. The word “culture” is interpreted as “cultural artefacts”. “Hygge” and the equivalent words in Swedish and Norwegian are translated as ‘informality’, which is the behaviour associated with hygge according to a recent study (Vejlgaard, 2015a).

Conclusion

With respect to RQ1 the conclusion is that foreign nationals seem to associate Denmark with all five cultural categories, though to a varying degree, and with variations between the five countries. In quantitative terms cultural artefacts had most associations; language had the fewest associations.

Out of the 73 categories in the conceptual framework replies fell into 13 categories, and replies that got responses from two or more countries fell into only 10 categories.

The conclusion with respect to RQ2 is that foreign nationals do associate Denmark with specific values, behaviour, artefacts, perishables, and language. Foreign nationals from all five countries associate Denmark with friendliness which is a social feeling (how an individual feels towards other people). Swedish and Norwegians are the only respondents to associate Denmark with cultural behaviour, specifically habits and customs. In this case the habits are shopping by which is most likely meant tourists’ shopping opportunities, that is, it is not a reflection on Danish culture as such. The specific customs that the Swedes and the Norwegians refer to are the informal customs of the Danes.

With respect to cultural artefacts the subcategories that got the most responses pertains to elements that may typically be directly experienced by tourists to Denmark, such as amusement parks and the Little Mermaid sculpture, but also elements that are not part of the traditional tourist experience, such as windmills and Lego, though Lego bricks can be part of a shopping experience.

Foreign nationals associate Denmark with a typical Danish dish, open-faced sandwiches, and other types of food and drink sausages, cheese, beer; with respect to the latter a specific Danish beer brand.

Swedes and Norwegians associate Denmark with language.

Discussion

With this study we get insight into how to categorize cultural perceptions and thus understand cultural perceptions on a more abstract level. With the categorization new insight into the patterns in tourists’ perceptions of a destination appears. One such insight is that it appears that there is not much variation in the cultural categories that foreign nationals associate with Denmark: The respondents from the five countries report a fairly uniform perception of Danish culture. It has to be taken into consideration that the survey question was asked in a tourist context which can have influenced the responses. If the context had been different the answers might be

different and more varied. One should also be aware that only one survey question was asked, and the question was not specifically about culture. If asked specifically about cultural values and cultural behaviour the responses may have been different. For these reasons, one should be careful with interpretation and generalization. However, the findings and conclusion can be contexted and commented on, in order to get insight into the direction of further research.

Sweden and Norway are the only countries to give replies in the cultural behaviour category. In both instances the replies relate to the Danish word *hygge* which is a uniquely Danish word that is not easily translatable into English, and even if it is translated directly the actual meaning of the word is not communicated. According to a study, *hygge* means relaxed and informal with respect to values and behaviour (Vejlgaard, 2015a).

It is worth noting that among the five countries surveyed, with respect to actual travel behaviour, Sweden and Norway stand out, as 85% of Swedes and 90% of Norwegians have visited Denmark at least once; most have visited multiple times. 42% percent of Germans, 23% of Britons, and 31% of Dutch people have visited Denmark one or more times; most have visited only once (VisitDenmark 2015). One could speculate that many visits to a country will lead tourists to comment on the cultural behaviour of the destination. This would not be surprising as behaviour is not easily observable, and it may take several visits to a country before a tourist can pinpoint cultural behaviour.

While the visible part of culture quantitatively got most replies, it is worth noting that respondents from all five countries associate Denmark with social feelings. In this case the social feeling is friendliness. Social feelings relate to the social interaction between the host population and the tourist—how you are treated by the hosts in the country you are visiting. This is obviously something that tourists care about, and it may be the category that tourist authorities also should pay attention to, not only when it is positive, as in the case of foreign nationals' perception of the Danes, but also when the perception is the opposite. A perception that has the opposite outcome must be understood in the context of social interaction and could be based on a clash of two different ways of communicating (see, for instance, Hall, 1988). If this is the case, social feelings issues can be addressed in the destination's communication to tourists.

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