Research paper

Effects of cultural difference on users' online experience with a destination website: A structural equation modelling approach

Juan Miguel Alcántara-Pilar[a,*], Tanja Armenski[b], Francisco Javier Blanco-Encomienda[c], Salvador Del Barrio-García[d]

[a] University of Granada, Department of Marketing and Market Research, Faculty of Education, Economy and Technology, C/ Cortadura del Valle, s.n., 51001 Ceuta, Spain
[b] University of Novi Sad, Department of Geography, Tourism and Hotel Management, Faculty of Sciences, Dositeja Obradovića Square 3, 21000 Novi Sad, Serbia
[c] University of Granada, Department of Quantitative Methods for Economics and Business, Faculty of Education, Economy and Technology, C/ Cortadura del Valle, s.n., 51001 Ceuta, Spain
[d] University of Granada, Department of Marketing and Market Research, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Campus Cartuja, s.n., 18071 Granada, Spain

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the moderating effect of individuals' cultural values on the users' online experiences with the tourism destination presented online. The moderating effect of uncertainty avoidance (UA), individualism (IND) and long-term orientation (LTO) on the interrelationships within the proposed model are explored. A bespoke experimental tourism destination website is designed for the study and an online survey is conducted to capture cultural variations between Spanish and British Internet users. The findings indicate that the relationships in the proposed model are significant and moderated by users' cultural values, specifically uncertainty avoidance, individualism and time orientation.

1. Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that the Internet has become one of the main sources of information for pre-travel informing, researching into travelers offerings and identifying desired tourism destinations, travel planning, and purchasing services online (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006). Destination websites worldwide serve as a global competitive tool for promoting, attracting and enhancing users' visit intention (Dasgupta, 2014). The virtual environment overcomes the intangibility of the tourism product by visual simulation of potential travel experiences that stimulate consumers' desire to visit (Chung, Lee, Lee, & Koo, 2015; Kladou & Mavragani, 2015).

While the positive consumer attitudes toward the website and the product communicated by the site are recognized to be the key success factor for tourism destinations (Scharl, Wöber, & Bauer, 2004; Tierney, 2000), both academics and marketing practitioners still focus scant attention on understanding how users' online purchase experience generates their attitude toward the website and shapes perceptions of the destination promoted online (Shiu, Walsh, Hassan, & Parry, 2015). Moreover, the literature asserts that the 'web-based environment is not culturally neutral', meaning that cultural norms and values drive people's behaviour and their attitude toward destination website design,

their expectations while browsing and their online experiences (Tigre, Gnoth, & Deans, 2014). As different cultural groups have different preferences regarding online content and website design, universal online marketing strategies will not respond to the distinctive cultural backgrounds of all users of a site. As noted by Singh, Fassott, Zhao, and Boughton (2006), people's attitudes are guided by the cultural values of their society, which in turn shape their attitudes, affect preferences and influence actions regarding products or services. However, Shiu et al. (2015) make the point that relevant academic literature still lacks consistent evidence regarding the nature and direction of the impact of cultural orientation on users' behaviour in online settings.

To overcome this gap, the paper seeks to explore the moderating effect of individuals' cultural values on users' online experiences with the tourism destination presented online. More specifically, the paper aims to achieve two objectives: first, to assess the interrelationships between perceived risk online, attitude toward the website and satisfaction online on the image of the destination (generated by the user) presented on the website; and, second, to explore the moderating role of Spanish and British cultural orientation at individual user level and its consequences in terms of consumers' perceptions of destinations presented online.

Spain and Britain were chosen for this analysis as the two countries

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* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: jmap@ugr.es (J.M. Alcántara-Pilar), tanja.armenski@dgt.uns.ac.rs, tanjaarma@gmail.com (T. Armenski), jble@ugr.es (F.J. Blanco-Encomienda), dbarrio@ugr.es (S. Del Barrio-García).

present highly distinct cultural value scores (Hofstede, 2001), thus providing an interesting comparative research context. For the purpose of the study, three dimensions of Hofstede's (2001) cultural framework were employed: individualism–collectivism, uncertainty avoidance and long-term/short-term orientation.

The study makes two specific contributions. First, it analyzes the formation of the destination and its antecedents; satisfaction online, attitude toward the website and perceived risk online. Second, it establishes the moderating effect of the cultural dimensions, namely uncertainty-avoidance, individualism and long-term orientation. The present study provides information of value to those offering online services, since providers often simply translate the version of their website to attract tourists from different nationalities, without taking into consideration the ways in which culture accounts for patterns in tourist preferences and behaviour.

The paper is structured as follows. First, proposed hypothetical relationships between perceived risk, attitude toward the website, satisfaction online and users' perceptions of a tourismdestination are discussed in detail and supported by the previous relevant literature. Second, the experimental design and data collection procedure are presented, followed by the research results. Conclusions and managerial implications, limitations and potential future research themes are presented at the end.

2. Cross-cultural research in tourism studies

Culture exerts a great influence on many dimensions of human behaviour, and it is those related influences that make defining culture so difficult (Correia, Kozak, & Ferradeira, 2011; Pavluković, Armenski, & Alcántara-Pilar, 2017; Reisinger, 2009). Culture, and its consequences for consumer behaviour have been predominantly investigated in the behavioural sciences (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001; Lenartowicz & Roth, 1999; Miller, 1984; Schwartz, 1999). As noted by Tigre et al. (2014), there are almost as many definitions of culture as there are academics devoted to the conceptualization of the construct. For the purpose of the present research, culture is defined as a complex concept that includes knowledge, beliefs, norms, values and customs, and collective ways of thinking, feeling and behaving that are utilized in society and that define the characteristics of one cultural group and distinguish them from others (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001; Schwartz, 1999).

Cross-cultural research has attracted significant academic attention in the area of business management largely due to the increasing globalization of markets as cultural variation can provide a meaningful explanation of why certain marketing strategies applied by firms internationally work successfully in some countries but not in others (Jin, Park, & Kim, 2008). This need for cross-cultural research is further heightened by the proliferation of the Internet, where business success is reliant on global consumers and effective online marketing strategies.

Since the 1980s there has been an on-going debate regarding which approach is the most appropriate for studying and comparing cultures (Mazanec, Crotts, Gursoy, & Lu, 2015). According to Engelen and Brettel (2011), the approach most favoured by the scientific literature on business management and marketing is that of Hofstede (2001); with this author being acknowledged as a key reference in the comparative study of national cultures. Hofstede's (2001) work provides a strong empirical base and a roadmap in this field, thanks to the cultural dimensions it defines (Kolman, Noorderhaven, Hofstede, & Dienes, 2003).

Briefly, Hofstede (2001) identifies five distinct cultural dimensions: power distance (PD) which refers to the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a society expect and accept that power is distributed unequally; individualism (IND) which refers to the relative importance given by individuals to their personal benefits and successes, compared to those of the group or community; uncertainty avoidance (UA) which measures the degree to which people in a society deal with situations that involve uncertainty

and ambiguity; masculinity (MAS) which measures the extent of 'masculine' values in a country, such as competitiveness or assertiveness; and long-term orientation (LTO) which describes the degree to which a society fosters virtues oriented toward future rewards, perseverance and thrift.

3. The baseline model

The baseline model of the present study explores the relationships between users' perception of risk, satisfaction online, attitude toward the website and destination image.

3.1. The effect of perceived risk on attitude toward the website

As perceived risk is an expectation of a probable potential loss, it is likely to negatively influence attitudes toward a behaviour (Quintal, Lee, & Soutar, 2010). Several studies have supported this relationship in a variety of contexts (Campbell & Goodstein, 2001; Lobb, Mazzocchi, & Traill, 2007; Stoddard & Fern, 1999). Perceived risk online is a determinant generated in the initial stage of users' website interaction that can lead to feelings of insecurity and vulnerability during their browsing experience and, consequently, decrease the likelihood of willingness to engage in buying behaviour or continue using the website (Zimmer, Arsal, Al-Marzouq, & Grover, 2010). Consumer perception of the risks of engaging in online transactions has been found to negatively impact attitude toward the website (Shiu et al., 2015) and the most important determinant of consumers' purchasing behaviour (Cheung, Chan, & Limayen, 2005). By contrast, the more trustworthy the website is perceived to be in terms of reduced complexity and transaction uncertainty, the greater the likelihood that users will positively evaluate the site and form a positive attitude toward it (Ryu, Lee, & Kim, 2012).

Hence the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₁. Perceived risk online directly and negatively affects attitude toward the website.

3.2. The effect of attitude toward the website on satisfaction online

In general terms, satisfaction is defined as an affective consumer condition that results from a global evaluation of all the aspects that make up the consumer relationship and shows a favorable attitude of the consumer (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993). Lohse and Spiller (1999) point out the influence of website design on the degree of consumer satisfaction in the online context. Flavián, Guinalíu, and Gurrea (2006) demonstrate that satisfaction is influenced by the website design. Chen, Gilleson, and Sherrell (2002) define attitude toward the website as Internet users' predispositions to respond favorably or unfavorably to the site's content in natural exposure situations. This construct is closely related to the individual's evaluation of whether the utility of the website (such as security and convenience) is satisfactory or not (Shiu et al., 2015).

The following hypothesis is therefore submitted:

H₂. Attitude toward the website will directly and positively affect satisfaction online.

3.3. The effect of satisfaction online on destination image

Satisfaction is a key variable in the study of consumer loyalty and determines attitudes (Altunel & Erkut, 2015; Dick & Basu, 1994). Furthermore, consumers' satisfaction with a brand will lead them to improve their attitudes toward it (Castañeda, Rodríguez, & Luque, 2009). Many previous studies evidence that a satisfactory browsing experience elicits continuous website use intention among consumers and enhance their positive assessment of the product or service promoted via a given