Education's Impact on Cultural Distance Perception: The Case of Turkish Service Providers and European Guests

Yasin Boylu, Asli D. A. Tasci and William C. Gartner

Background of the Study

Culture and its various aspects has been an intriguing subject of inquiry for tourism researchers. At the national level, culture is shared by most people over long periods of time while subcultures might exist within this dominant culture, based on ethnic, religious, location, age, or other factors that can change in time (Hofstede 1980). Reisinger and Turner (2002b, p. 347) define culture and its relationship to tourism as "differences and similarities in values, rules of behavior, and perceptions, which influence interpersonal contact between international tourists and hosts and their satisfaction with each other. Culture is identified as the underlining factor of people's stereotyping other groups of people (Boissevian and Inglott, 1979; Brewer, 1978; Pi-Sunyer, 1977). Culture, which could be seen as 'group personality' (Litvin & Kar 2003), is one of the factors distinguishing groups from one another, especially physically distant groups; thus, it is seen as an important agent of bias, especially in formation of country images. Weiermair (2000) postulates that authentic physical attributes of a destination may constitute the least biased images of a destination, while discussing the significance of stereotypes or cultural "helos" as potentially the strongest biases influencing tourists' travel choices. Differences and similarities in cultures of different groups of people seem to determine the level of stereotyping. Although Dann (1993) question the accuracy of such national stereotypes it is a common belief that culture influences people's behavior (You et al., 2000; Pizam and Sussmann, 1995; Assael, 1987).

Therefore, researchers have been spending effort on conceptualizing culture and trying to categorize groups of people. Hofstede (1980) and his colleagues (Hofstede and Bond, 1988) have developed 5 dimensions of culture using an instrument called the Values Survey Module or VSM. Crotts and Erdmann (2000) tested Hofstede's dimension on 983 respondents of the Inflight Survey of Overseas Visitors to the United States, specifically those respondents from UK, Germany, Japan, Brazil and Taiwan, controlling for previous visitation, purpose of the trip, occupation, and age. Their findings provided positive evidence to Hofstede's theory of culture "that national culture influences consumer's willingness to report dissatisfaction", providing insights to the tourism industry that "firms who serve visitors from countries where assertive behavior is encouraged should expect lower average satisfaction measures when compared to visitors from less masculine societies" (Crotts & Erdmann 2000, p.417).

Reisinger and Turner (2002a, 2002b) argue that culture, with its intricate relationships with several other constructs, can be a defining factor in people's perceptions, impressions and interpretations about other places as well as people in those places. They conclude that "cultural differences are very useful constructs for international tourism promotion, and they can provide very accurate criteria for targeting and positioning. As a result, tourism marketers should take into account the cultural backgrounds of international tourists to identify specific profiles of the market segment and determine how a destination should position itself in the international marketplace to appeal to international tourists"(2002a, p. 311).

As an international tourism destination, Turkey serves mostly European tourist markets due to her closeness to European markets. Turkey and Europe has a long shared history of relationships. However, Turkey and Turkish people have a rather biased and stereotypical image in western markets, including Europe (Tasci, Gartner & Cavusgil 2007; Tasci, Uygur-Meydan & Cavusgil 2006). "The contemporary image of Turkey is still shadowed by stereotypes dating from the Ottoman Empire, with connotations of mostly medieval wars and political events, accentuated by cultural and religious differences between Turkey and the western world" (Tasci, Uygur-Meydan & Cavusgil 2006, p. 82). The purpose of the current study is to measure the similarities and differences between Turkish and European cultures and identify the role of education.

Methods

A modified version of scales developed by Reisinger and Turner (2002a, 2002b) were used to gather data from Turkish service providers and European tourists. The scales were modified to fit the context of service encounter provided by Turkish service providers and European tourists. Service providers included a wide range of workers of tourism industry, ranging from hotel owners and managers to taxi drivers. The criterion of selection for hosts was face to face interaction with tourists while conducting daily business activities. Tourists from several European countries are included, majority being British and German; they were intercepted in several tourist spots.

The questionnaire included sociodemographics, including education, values (19), important human characteristics (19), rules of behavior (35), important service personnel characteristics (26), perceptions on Turkish service personnel's performance on important service personnel characteristics (26), amount and nature of social interaction (12), trip or job satisfaction for tourists or hosts, past travel behavior, current trip characteristics and personal information about European tourists as well as experiences and personal particulars of Turkish service providers. All scales used were 7-point except for satisfaction (with job for hosts and with the trip for guests), which was

a 10-point scale. The incremental numeric value of the scales were corresponding with incremental semantic values as well (i.e. 1=least, 7=most).

Results

A total of 889 surveys were collected, 490 from Turkish service providers and 339 from European tourists. A total of 137 variables are used to test the cultural similarities, differences and felt distance between the hosts and guests in this study; however, only a few of them are reflected here. The perception of the level of similarity between Turkish culture and European culture is significantly different for hosts and guests (3.55 and 4.89, respectively). Parallel to this perception is the significantly different views on most of the values, important human characteristics and rules of behavior. However, it is difficult to generalize on either group because hosts and guests place varying degrees of importance on different variables. The interesting finding is on perceptions on Turkish service personnel's performance on important service personnel characteristics; guests' ratings are significantly more positive than those of hosts themselves. The same difference exists between the satisfaction of hosts of their job and the satisfaction of guests of their trip. As can be seen from Tables 1 and 2, education level has a significant impact on how different Turkish tourism workers view their own culture compared to that of Europeans. Theoretical and practical implications will be provided in the conference presentation.

Table 1: Turkish tourism industry workers' with differing education levels and their perceived level of similarity between Turkish and European cultures

Education	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error
Primary school	18	2.17	1.425	.336
Secondary school	149	3.27	2.088	.171
University graduate	51	3.65	1.798	.252
Master's or Ph. D.	108	4.04	2.348	.226
Other	2	4.00	4.243	3.000
Tourism Education				
High school	92	3.49	2.211	.231
Vocational school	48	3.69	2.075	.299
Graduate degree	56	4.57	2.061	.275

1=Totally different, 10=Totally similar

Table 2: Results of ANOVA tests on the influence of education on Turkish tourism industry workers' perceived level of similarity between Turkish and European cultures

Education	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	76.418	6	12.736	2.842	.010
Within Groups	1487.794	332	4.481		
Total	1564.212	338			
Tourism Education					
Between Groups	53.297	3	17.766	3.910	.010
Within Groups	881.516	194	4.544		
Total	934.813	197			

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