



Research note

Received: November 22, 2023
Reviewed: February 27, 2024
Accepted: March 22, 2024

UDC: 911.3:338.48
<https://doi.org/10.2298/IJGI2401139D>



BREAKING THE BUBBLE—ADDRESSING MANAGERS' CULTURAL BIASES IN DESIGNING TOURIST EXPERIENCES

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Abstract: Although cross-cultural interactions and cultural bubbles have been researched extensively in tourism, these issues have often been viewed one-sidedly. More precisely, in contemporary literature, cultural bubbles are mostly considered one-sided biases that prevent tourists from fully enjoying the culture of their hosts. Besides that, it is important to bear in mind that a tourist offer itself is also formed from the perspectives of tourism experience designers and tourism managers. Therefore, it is important to consider how the perception of a tourist offer is distorted by looking from inside the bubble of tourist culture. This paper highlights managers' cultural biases in designing tourist experiences, which have often been overlooked in cross-cultural tourism studies. It is crucial to have this discussion now so that the global tourist industry can continue to provide local experiences, as tourism managers and employees in the sector are increasingly interacting with people from diverse cultural contexts. This might be beneficial for the cultural expression of destinations, on the one hand, as well as for providing more valuable experiences for tourists, on the other.

Keywords: cross-cultural interactions; cultural bubbles; bias; perceptions; designing tourist experiences

1. Introduction

The international growth of tourism has helped to turn the world into a global village (Dragin et al., 2022; Mijatov et al., 2022), but important aspects of each country's culture still have a significant impact on how tourists perceive their experiences. Despite transitional processes that can promote the unification of cultures, some fundamental aspects of national cultures have not yet been internationalized. Models for measuring national cultural characteristics were developed after decades of developing scientific ideas about them. In essence, most of the models state that people are shaped by the national culture in which

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they live (Hofstede et al., 2010, as cited in Minkov & Kaasa, 2021; House et al., 2001; Nedeljković et al., 2018). For example, the model of Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory (Hofstede, 1980), and its later alternations, explains in detail how each dimension is affected by different patterns throughout people's lives, such as those from their family, friends, teachers, employers, partners, laws, religion, or the media (Hofstede et al., 2010; Minkov & Kaasa, 2021). Actually, numerous researchers agree that culture shapes human thoughts, attitudes, and dominant values, which also affect their behavior, as well as their perception of others (Boroch, 2018; Covas & Pirlog, 2019; Hartmann, 2014; Kolešnik, 2013; Pirlog, 2021; Smith et al., 1996; Tocar, 2019).

Understanding the fundamental characteristics of a nation's culture has also been the subject of extensive theoretical and practical discussion in the tourism domain (Ahn & Mc Kercher, 2018; Dragin, 2017; Huang & Crofts, 2019; Lehe et al., 2022; Litvin et al., 2004; Matzler et al., 2016; Pizam & Fleischer, 2005; Pizam & Jeong, 1996; Rinuastuti et al., 2014;). Reisinger and Turner (1998) argued that cultural differences are fundamental and a useful way to segment and market international tourism by guiding more accurate, stable, and predictable inputs. In this regard, Crofts and Buhalis (2000) noted that business strategies must be adjusted to various tourist cultures (bubbles; Figure 1A). Figure 1 shows a visual self-explanatory representation of the concepts discussed in the paper. Such claims remain valid as a starting point for all cross-cultural tourism strategies and the practical design of tourist experiences. This was the inspiration for this paper.

1.1. In the bubble (one-sided or two-sided cultural bias)

"Bubble" is a term that is often used in the context of cross-cultural tourism research. In the field of mass tourism, it has been said that modern tourists do not leave their familiar environment for a new one, so much as that they arrive on foreign soil in an "environmental bubble" (Cohen, 1972) of their own culture. According to the same author, this bubble distorts tourists' views of people, places, and cultures. In a very similar manner, Laenui (1994) explained it by using the example of Japanese tourists who were involved in a group tour to Hawaii. Such a tour was specific, considering the fact that it was completely organized in a cultural bubble of Japanese culture. To start with, the travel agent was from Japan. Furthermore, tourists were staying in hotels owned by the Japanese people (in Japan before leaving and within the destination upon arrival). Besides that, they used the services of a Japanese airline, while Japanese companies were also selected to use the services of bus transfers, tour guides, restaurants, golf centers, and shops. Finally, while staying in hotels, they watched Japanese TV programs and listened to Japanese radio stations. This means that these people traveled inside the bubble of Japanese culture and actually experienced foreign places through such lenses and perspectives.

This illustrates our captivity in frames of our own culture, which is further strengthened by the concept of a tourist arrangement, or more precisely by the manner and form of services that we are receiving when traveling. All of it together resulted in a fact that tourists are observing and experiencing the world through the lenses of their own culture, as well as through the lenses of the culture of creators and providers of tourist services. In some cases, they are all members of the same national culture, but in many others, these are bubbles shaped by different national cultures of tourists, creators and providers of numerous tourist services.

This could be especially discussed when we are conducting research related to the development of a brand, positive image, and competitiveness. The findings of the previously conducted research indicated that a specific culture might shape the dominant values, human thoughts, and their behavior. In accordance with the previously mentioned facts, research of the national culture might provide significant information for further development of tourism, especially in the field of marketing and management. Besides that, new insight into customer behavior, as well as the manner in which it is perceived, represents important topics for various stakeholders within tourism destinations.

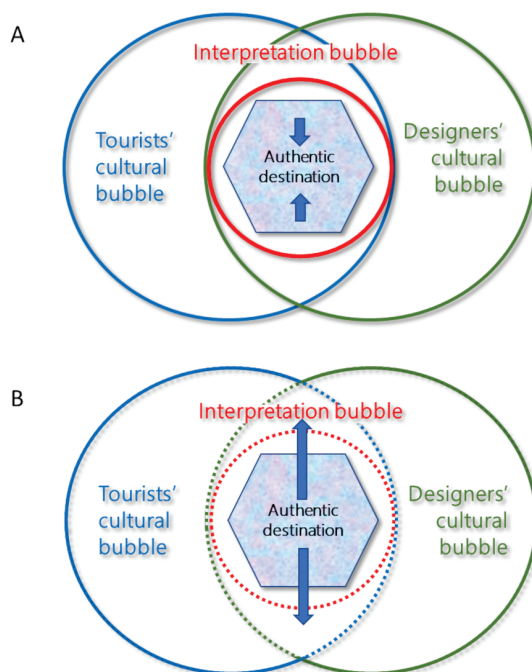


Figure 1. The traditional view on the existing bubbles in designing tourist experiences (A) and the possible effect of breaking design thinking that breaks the existing bubbles (B).

Laenui's (1994) example illustrates people's captivity in terms of their own culture, which can be further strengthened by the design of mass tourism products, services, and experiences (Figure 1A). In particular, in the case of designed tourism experiences, cultural bubbles affect not only the delivery phase (interpretational bubble) but, more importantly, it can be a bias that influences the planning phase, in which tourism managers anticipate future tourism experiences. Creators and providers of tourist services can also be captives of the same bubble in the design phase. In many cases, colleagues will all be members of the same national culture. This has implications for the design and delivery of cultural experiences in a destination (Figure 1B).

Numerous studies were published in the field of tourism and international differences in relation to behavioral characteristics, travel motivation, behavior during the data collection, travel patterns, consumption, satisfaction, etc. (Anđelković et al., 2022; Chen, 2000; Gholipour & Tajaddini, 2014; Gursoi & Chen, 2000; Hsieh & Tsai, 2009; Huang & Crotts, 2019; Jordan et al., 2013; Kay, 2009; Kim et al., 2002; Kozak, 2001, 2002; Kozak & Tasci, 2005; Lee & Sparks, 2007; Pizam & Jeong, 1996; Reisinger & Turner, 1998; Tasci & Boilu, 2010). Cross-cultural interaction, as a term, has also found wide application in such research in the tourism sector. Thyne et al. (2006) highlighted the cross-cultural exchange between hosts on the one hand and guests on the other. Nevertheless, tourists' culture and the assessment of its importance in tourist flows are still the focus of their study.

The main aim of this paper is to point to the significant effects of two-sided disturbances of cultural characteristics, or more precisely, the formation of experiences under the influence of the twin biases of the individual cultural milieus of managers, on the one hand, and tourists, on the other. This two-sided bias has not been sufficiently researched in tourism to date, which brings us to the point of this paper. The main question here is how much managers are biased by the bubble of their own culture when they create a tourist offer for representatives of other cultures. In other words, do managers design tourist experiences for tourists as they really are or what they think they are?

2. Breaking multiple cultural bubbles

As we stated before, behavioral traits, travel motivation, behavior during data collection, travel patterns, consumption, and satisfaction are just a few of the topics covered in a wide range of published studies on tourism and cross-border variations (Koc, 2020; Lim & Ok, 2021; Mele et al., 2021; Pizam & Jeong, 1996; Sharma & Gao, 2022). From these, we learn that, because specific cultures can shape the dominant values and thoughts of their members, as well as their behavior, this has to be accounted for in the product design phase as a bias or as a possible advantage.

If we also mention tourist guides here, then we can have several different cultural bubbles that are included in tourists' interpretation of a destination, i.e., what distorts their perception during the trip. Those additional bubbles are most often made by tourist guides, creators of the tourist offer, and the local community. Pizam and Jeong (1996) collected responses from 86 Korean tour guides who had direct contact with tourists from different national cultures, but their analysis excluded the influence of a cultural bias. In their paper titled "Cross-cultural tourist behavior: Perceptions of Korean tour-guides" the main question of the research was "Are all group tourists perceived to behave alike regardless of nationality, or does nationality make a difference?" (Pizam & Jeong, 1996, p. 277). Furthermore, Kim et al. (2002) also conducted "A cross-cultural study on casino guests as perceived by casino employees" to research the casino employees' perceptions of guests depending on the national culture to which the guests belong. There is a question what if tour guides (in the case of the study conducted by Pizam and Jeong, 1996) or casino employees (in the case of the study of Kim et al., 2002) were of different national cultures?

However, new insights into customer behavior should be an important topic for various tourism destination stakeholders, not just designers of tourist experiences. For example, this is something that should be considered in research into brand development, positive image, and competitiveness in different cultures. Thus, further investigation of national cultures and

how they interact with tourist experiences could help manage tourism development, especially in the areas of marketing and management. Additionally, research discusses differences in the perception of concrete topics when it comes to service providers and their national cultures.

Reisinger and Turner (1998) focused their research on providing a better insight into cultural differences, with the main aim of fostering positive relations between tourists and hosts. All this combined will increase the tourists' satisfaction, which could also lead to repeated visits and the creation of tourist loyalty. According to their findings, "tourism marketers should take into account the criterion of a tourist's place of origin together with information on the cultural differences between tourists and residents of the visited destination" (Reisinger & Turner, 1998, p. 185).

3. Conclusion

This paper brings up the issue of cultural biases in tourism, but this time from the point of view of designing the tourist experience. While cultural bubbles have been investigated before, they are mostly seen as one-sided biases that prevent tourists from fully enjoying the culture of their hosts. Here, we show that tourism experience designers and tourism managers, in a broader sense, who are in charge of the creation of tourism offers, are also prisoners of their own cultural biases. Managers' cultural biases could interfere both with the perception of tourism destinations and with the perception of the tourists for whom they design products. In a time when tourism managers and workers are more likely to work with people from other cultures, it is important to start this conversation so that the global tourism industry continues to offer local experiences. This will be beneficial for both the cultural expression of destinations and for providing more valuable experiences for tourists.

Considering all the aforementioned claims, the main focus of this research is oriented toward the cultural specifics of both tourists and hosts. However, creators of tourist offers or tour guides do not have to be members of the national cultures of the hosts nor members of the national cultures of tourists, which additionally increases the need for researching this issue. In this regard, the need for a new approach to research should be emphasized. There is a need for introducing new criteria, as well as for becoming aware of such two-sided disturbance of reality when traveling, which shapes experiences with so many distortions of bias that create cultural milieus of all participants in the organization and realization of tourist movements on both sides of tourism, offer (creators, service providers, and destination management) and demand.

This paper's theoretical contribution is reflected in the fact that previously conducted studies were mainly oriented toward tourists' perspective, i.e., toward the tourist bubble. This paper aims to fill the literature gap by indicating the importance of the managerial perspective, considering that managers are in charge of creating the tourist offer and, thus, the overall travel experience. Such an experience might be threatened if it occurs inside a cultural bubble.

Besides theoretical contribution, a practical implication of the main findings might be beneficial for various providers of services in the field of tourism. For example, the role of tour guides is significant and often crucial in experiencing other cultures (destinations) when traveling. It is also important to research their cultural dimensions and related effects on interpretation itself, especially when visiting more distant (culturally different) destinations,

destinations that are in various processes of intensive transition (especially in terms of politics), dark tourism sites, etc. The main aim is to realize whether tour guides and other providers of tourism services, as well as the creators of tourism offers, are prone to unconsciously present a destination full of distortion, conditioned by their own cultural patterns.

Besides managers, a cultural bubble might be present among all other actors in providing tourism services, which might be another proposal for future studies of these issues. Bearing in mind that tourism stakeholders are in constant interactions with tourists from other cultures, the practical implication of this study might be widespread. Therefore, further studies might be conducted in various cultural settlements in order to identify if tourism offers reflect the visiting culture in an appropriate manner or if managerial cultural biases hide them.

Acknowledgments

This research is a part of the project approved by the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, Provincial Secretariat for Higher Education and Scientific-Research Activity, Program 0201, with the project title "Research of the entrepreneurial potentials among the local population for using the thermo-mineral water resources of Vojvodina", registration number: 142-451-3467/2023-02 (2021–2024). The authors also gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia (Grants No. 451-03-66/2024-03/200125 & 451-03-65/2024-03/200125).

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