

# Cultural Distance in Tourist Behavior Research

## Introduction

Culture affects human beings' behavior and thinking in many ways. The distance between different cultures have been shown to affect tourists in various aspects, generally via an unconscious manner. In tourism field, there are numerous studies exploring the cultural distance and its relationship with other attributes. Are those cultural distance articles demonstrating cultural distance in a similar way? Does cultural distance mean the same thing to different scholars? To answer those questions, the current study aims to summarize the existing literature on cultural distance study and hence provide some future directions for continuing research.

Due to the huge number of articles regarding cultural distance, only papers in top three journals in tourism research field, *Annals of Tourism Research (ATR)*, *Tourism Management (TM)* and *Journal of Travel Research (JTR)* were chosen to be reviewed for current study. To specify the selective criteria, the study applied a two-stage selection approach. The first phase is to select articles with “cultural distance” or “cultural difference” in title, key words or abstract. To further purify the searching result, the second phase is to go through the content of articles and to assure that cultural distance is the main research topic or part of the research constructs. After those two phases, 41 articles in cultural distance research were identified.

## Review and summary

Articles were categorized according to their research method, role/importance of cultural distance, proxy of cultural distance, measurement, as well as the correlated attributes (as shown in Table 1).

### *Research method*

Regarding the research method, as indicated in Table 1, the majority (30/41) are applying a quantitative research method. The others either belong to qualitative (such as interview and observation) or review studies.

### *The role/importance of cultural distance*

Concerning the role/importance of cultural distance, even though it is listed as a core concept in articles, the position and function of cultural distance in each article vary according to the articles' specific research objectives. As a result, 9 out of 41 articles are setting cultural distance as their main research scale (cultural distance dimensions or measurement instrument development), and the other 32 articles are taking cultural distance (mostly the national cultural distance) for

	ATR	TM	JTR	Total
<b>No. of papers in cultural distance</b>	13	20	8	<b>41</b>
<b>Qualitative</b>	3	1	1	<b>5</b>
<b>Quantitative</b>	7	16	7	<b>30</b>
<b>Review and discussion</b>	3	3	0	<b>6</b>
<b>The role/importance of cultural distance in articles</b>				
Major research goal (dimensions or measurement development)	3	5	1	<b>9</b>
Independent variable of other attributes	10	15	7	<b>32</b>
<b>Proxy of cultural distance</b>				
Broader region (Continental) cultural distance	0	0	1	<b>1</b>
National cultural distance	9	16	7	<b>32</b>
Domestic regional cultural distance	2	1	0	<b>3</b>
Ethnicity cultural distance	1	3	0	<b>4</b>
<b>Cultural distance measurement (For those which set cultural distance as major research goal)</b>				
Hofstede cultural value	1	2	1	<b>4</b>
Perceived cultural value	1	1	0	<b>2</b>
<b>Correlated attributes</b>				
Perception	1	5	4	<b>10</b>
Interaction	1	0	3	<b>4</b>
Attitude	1	1	2	<b>4</b>
Motivation	1	3	0	<b>4</b>
Satisfaction	0	1	2	<b>3</b>
Acculturation	1	2	0	<b>3</b>
Destination image	1	0	1	<b>2</b>
Cultural ethnocentrism	0	2	0	<b>2</b>
Hotel/service	0	1	1	<b>2</b>
Discrimination	1	1	0	<b>2</b>
Impact to host	1	1	0	<b>2</b>
Authenticity	2	0	0	<b>2</b>

granted as a proxy or an underlying cause (e.g. independent variable) toward other correlated attributes.

Table 1. The statistical result of research in cultural distance

### *Proxy of cultural distance*

How to define a culture or cultural difference generates a great deal of argument. According to the statistics, close to 80% (32/41) of the cultural distance studies consider nation as the proxy of cultural distance. In other words, few studies have explored other manners of cultural distance,

such as politically separated regions, ethnicity, religion and any other potential proxy of sub-culture.

### *Measurement*

Hofstede cultural values are considered as a mainstream and systematic measurement of cultural distance. Besides, some studies develop perceived cultural distance (e.g. social norms and behaviors) via qualitative approach or comprehensive literature review.

### *Correlated attributes*

According to Table 1, the most researched attributes associated with cultural distance is perception (10/41), followed by interaction, attitude, motivation, satisfaction and acculturation.

### **Future research directions**

#### *Is nation the only proxy of cultural distance?*

The majority of studies on cultural distance (32/41) explored national levels of difference because of the strong forces toward further integration as well as promoting national cooperation purpose at the earlier research stage (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). However, such classification assumes the cultural homogeneity within a nation and the layers of culture existed in a country have been largely ignored (Li, Zhang, Xiao & Chen, 2013; Li & Cai, 2012). Indeed, those countries which possess large territories, diverse ethnics and cultures, are normally perceived to share the same culture or values. However, according to some previous research, cultural distance does exist within a nation (Teye & Leclerc, 2003; O'Guinn, Faber & Imperia, 1986; Kim-Jo, Benet-Martinez & Ozer, 2008; Chen, 2004). Consequently, sub-cultural distance within a country deserves much more attention in the future cultural distance research. Furthermore, studies are desired regarding the exploration of the cultural distance beyond the frame of country, for instance, politically separated regions, ethnicity, religion and any other potential proxy of sub-culture.

#### *Measurement diversity*

According to the statistical result in Table 1, articles which focus on the cultural distance in different regions, the majority are quantitative, adopting some ready-to-use cultural measurement and simply testing the score and its difference. It is highly suggested that more qualitative elements can be introduced to the cross-cultural studies and to explore some new perspectives

regarding the cultural difference. For instance, focus-group, or in-depth interview can be utilized to evaluate the validity of existing culture values. Specifically, a great portion of the cross-cultural studies is setting Asia as their research target. As most of the culture measurement were developed in western countries, the translated meaning of variables may differ or even not exist in Asian countries. Moreover, some unique cultural elements, such as face issue, harmony (Mok & Defranco, 2000) and some Confucius culture values are not included in the western culture literature. Therefore, it seems essential to capture such unique viewpoints, rather than simply copying the values from other cultures. To achieve that, a “localization” of the culture values needs to be processed via some qualitative techniques with experts from that relevant cultural groups.

#### *Broaden the research realm*

The most developed attributes associated with cultural distance were identified as perception, interaction, attitude, motivation, satisfaction and acculturation. In that case, future research may try to bridge gaps and contribute to the existing achievement from such perspectives as social impact, ethnocentrism and prejudice.

#### **Contributions of the current study**

This study tries to contribute to the existing literature in below directions. Firstly, it summarizes the existing literature of cultural distance study, and categories them by their research method, role/importance of cultural distance, proxy of cultural distance, measurement, as well as the correlated attributes. It is stated that cultural distance study may vary greatly according to aforementioned criteria. It provides various research possibilities in the way of conducting a cultural distance research. Such statistical findings may benefit the scholars who want to have an exclusive view of this realm or intend to explore this topic further. Moreover, for journal editors in tourism research, especially for those in top journals, the statistics may provide a holistic picture in cultural distance research and identify the individual journal’s focus and its attention allocated in specific research area as well as its position and strength compared with the others.

#### **References**

Due to the length of the reference list (49 references in total), the references will be provided on request. Sorry for any inconvenience caused.