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Lost in translation: ethnocentric tendency in website communication

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Abstract

This paper reports on an exploratory case study investigating the proposition that a locally-embedded organization may exhibit a natural tendency towards ethnocentric perspectives in website communication. Particularly, in multicultural audience environments, such as exist in international tourism, ethnocentric website communication may impede the consistent formation of desired organizational image and undermine the effective transmission of product information among those stakeholders holding different cultural frames. The research builds upon the results of another study using Hofstede's cultural dimensions in website analysis, by introducing the idea of ethnocentric tendency, and linking to the relevant theoretical arenas of organizational identity, organizational image and strategic communication. Empirical material was collected via observation, key informant interviews, workshop/focus group, website content analysis, customer surveys, and email questioning. Ethnocentric tendency was found to be a possible source of website miscommunication for the case organization. The results indicate scope for further investigation of ethnocentric tendency as a source of miscommunication in multicultural stakeholder environments.

Keywords: *ethnocentric tendency; tourism; strategic communication; websites.*

JEL Classification: M31 Marketing

1. Introduction

Ever since Freeman's classic stakeholder view of the firm emphasized those "that can affect, or are affected by, the accomplishment of organizational purpose" (Freeman, 2010, p. 25), increasing attention has been paid to the ways that communication with internal and external stakeholders may influence organizational success. More recently, strategic communication has emerged as a "unifying paradigm ... [about] purposeful communications by organizations" (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007, p. 16), broadly concerning "what organizations actually do to create and exchange meaning with others" (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 27). As "members of (stakeholder) groups can have versatile

expectations and may interact” (Oestreicher, 2009, p. 4), strategic alignment of organizational communication is essential to the attainment of consistent organizational perception among the organization’s various stakeholders (Bernstein, 1984; Blauw, 1994; Hofbauer & Hohenleitner, 2005, p. 119; Horton, 1995; Oestreicher, 2009).

All organizations possess an identity (Bernstein, 1984; Markwick & Fill, 1995), which may be viewed as “the manifestation of its spirit in comprehensible form” (Wally Olins, 1979, p. 218), arising from “the impressions, image and personality projected by an organization” (Schmitt & Yigang, 1994, p. 34). As Melewar and Jenkins (2002) describe, identity comprises “the sum of all the factors that define and project ‘what the organization is’, ‘what it stands for’, ‘what it does’, ‘how it does it’ and ‘where it is going’” (2002, p. 197). Organizational identity is communicated to stakeholders (Markwick & Fill, 1995, p. 397; Wolff Olins, 1995, p. xvii) through all the various market and non-market communications of the organization (Oestreicher, 2009; Van Riel, 1992). As Schmitt, Simonson, and Marcus (1995, p. 82) relate, all the forms, shapes, colours, materials, visual and auditory elements of an organization’s communications, products, and buildings “express its culture and values”; basically, “everything an organization says, makes and does will ‘communicate’” (Baker & Balmer, 1997, p. 362).

The multiplex communication of organizational identity collectively shapes the perceived image of the organization as held by its various stakeholders. As Bernstein (1984, p. 57) sees it, an organization is knowingly or unknowingly communicating all the time to all its stakeholders, creating impressions and forming images. As Abratt (1989) explains, organizational identity produces an “assemblage of cues” (1989, p. 68) and the resulting overall impressions constitute the organizational image (1989, p. 87). Organizational image basically amounts to the “totality of a stakeholder’s perceptions of the way an organization presents itself, either deliberately...or accidentally” (Markwick & Fill, 1995, p. 398).

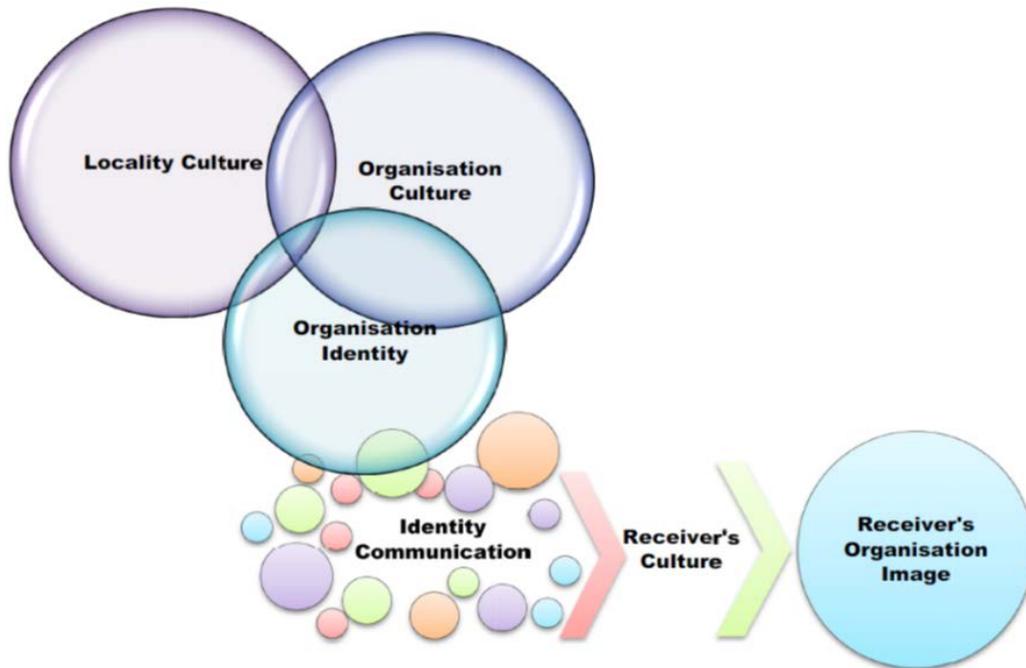
The organizational identity that informs stakeholders’ image of the organization is fundamentally influenced by the organizational culture (Baker & Balmer, 1997; Markwick & Fill, 1995; Wally Olins, 1991). Organizational culture comprises a set of shared knowledge and beliefs (Hofstede, 1980b; Pettigrew, 1979; Schein, 1990; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005) that are manifested in the ‘unwritten rules’ directing how people communicate and ‘get things done’ (Brunetto & Farr-Wharton, 2006; Hofstede, 1993; Nelson, Brunetto, Farr-Wharton, & Ramsay, 2007; Schall, 1983; Smircich, 1983).

As Adler and Jelinek (1986, p. 74) point out, the cultural differences existing between different ethnic groups that were long recognized by anthropologists have in more recent decades attracted considerable attention in organizational management literature and practice, a development owing much to Hofstede’s book *Cultural Differences* (Hofstede, 1980a). Although organizational culture is distinguished from ethnic culture, the fundamental conception of culture at the root of both concepts is essentially the same – being that of a dominant set of assumptions or beliefs that shape behaviour. As an organization is a social entity situated within a broader social context, the boundaries between the culture within and without the organization are inevitably porous. Particularly, the ‘internal’ culture of an organization must necessarily be influenced, to at least some degree, by both the ethnic cultural characteristics of its members and by the dominant ethnic cultural context of the society within which the organization exists (Adler & Jelinek, 1986). This proposition does not pose a simple determinism, in which the organization’s internal culture slavishly mirrors its external ethnic culture, but instead serves to highlight the more nuanced perspective of the organization as culturally-infused social entity where the influences of its ethnic cultural context may also come into play (Adler & Jelinek, 1986). When viewed from this standpoint, an organization’s ethnic cultural context provides an important ingredient in the fuller understanding of organizational identity and organizational image; the specific logical argument being as follows: the ethnic cultural context of an organization will influence both the organizational identity and the ways in which this identity is communicated to organizational stakeholders; the stakeholders receiving the multiplex cues emanating from the culturally-infused organization will interpret these through their own individual ethnic cultural frames, ultimately shaping their perceptions of organizational image (Figure 1).

The key implication of ethnic cultural influence is the prospect of significant miscommunication of service information and identity in multicultural stakeholder environments. Specifically, cultural differences between the organization and its stakeholders may work to impair the “holistic communicative approach to all addressees of an organization” (Oestreicher, 2009, p. 2) essential for strategic communication, undermining

the effectiveness of the organization's communication efforts and hindering formation of desired organizational image.

Figure 1. Culture, identity, image and communication



Aviation market liberalization, technological advances in air transport (Dwyer, Forsyth, & Dwyer, 2010, pp. 584-585; Loughnane, 2005; Prideaux, 2000), and rising incomes (WTTC, 2011, p. 2) have greatly improved the affordability of international travel, contributing to the astonishing growth of international tourism over recent decades (Crouch, 1995; Harrop, 1973; UNWTO, 2013). Consequently, tourism has become “a major area of academic, government, industry and public concern” (Hall, 2008, p. 1), with international tourism now ranking among the world's fastest economic sectors and comprising nearly one third of world exports of services (UNWTO, 2013). This growth has also brought an inexorable rise in intercultural stakeholder environments for the many enterprises now engaged in tourism, as has the more recent but equally rapid expansion of internet communication channels. As a result of these developments, even many small enterprises whose customer base had formerly consisted mainly of local residents are now increasingly dealing with customers from other cultures. In fact as Luring (2011, p. 231) and Hallahan et al. (2007, pp. 27-28) point out, the increasingly virtual and global world has made it almost impossible for enterprises to avoid cross-cultural communication. Along with its many potential benefits, this expanding cultural environment poses an increased risk of intercultural miscommunication for all affected enterprises.

Even though it seems clear that the amelioration of intercultural miscommunication risk requires that all affected enterprises pay careful attention to intercultural communication, in practice this is often overlooked, even when intercultural environments are manifestly obvious (e.g. see: Tkalac Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2012). The curious neglect of intercultural sensitivity might just arise from an ignorance born out of a cultural embeddedness; simply because, as Hofstede (1980b, p. 27) explains, “the cultural component in all kinds of behavior is difficult to grasp for people who remain embedded in the same cultural environment”. This logic also applies at the collective level, since the culturally-infused, social entity of an organization is also situated within a cultural context (Adler & Jelinek, 1986). As Adler and Jelinek (1986, p. 81) explain, an organization's unconscious adoption of the local ethnic cultural frame may even produce a cultural “blind spot”, profoundly limiting its operation in other cultural settings.

Hence, for a locally-embedded organization, an inadvertent cultural myopia may go some considerable way towards explaining a peculiar lack of attention to intercultural communication in general and to website communication in particular. As the risk exposure is most acute for the websites of those locally-embedded enterprises working in the realm of international tourism, this paper explores the idea of cultural-centric communication tendency in website communication, within the setting of international tourism.

2. Literature Review

William Sumner's 1907 'Folkways' first defined ethnocentrism as "the view of things in which one's own ethnic group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it" (Sumner, 2002, p. 13) and since the own group "boasts itself superior" (ibid), ethnocentrism is typically viewed as the "belief that one's own ethnic group is...superior" (Lauring, 2011, p. 248). However, Merton (1972, p. 17) points out that centrality and superiority are "analytically distinct", thereby admitting the less restrictive view that an implicit assumption of superiority is sufficient for an ethnocentric standpoint; this wider view, which effectively amounts to a 'cultural myopia', is that which is adopted here. In this respect, ethnocentrism is practically a 'natural condition' because people usually develop a worldview in which their culture is the norm (Seidner, 1982) and the societal values that shape the mental programs of every individual ultimately find expression at individual and collective (institutional and societal) levels (Hofstede, 1980b).

The extent to which the external ethnic cultural context influences the internal organizational culture of an enterprise will of course be a matter of degree, according to the particular circumstances of the enterprise. However, the degree of alignment between organizational culture and ethnic culture will logically be influenced by an enterprise's : 1) situation, since an organization is a social institution in a given (local) cultural context, wherein societal values and norms dictate acceptable institutional forms and actions (Hofstede, 1980b); 2) custom, as a locally situated organization will typically interact intensively with local suppliers and local customers, whose mental programs are all shaped by the dominant cultural values of the local society (Hofstede, 1980b; Seidner, 1982); and, 3) membership, as the organization's culture arises from the social interaction of its members (see Hofstede, 1980b, 1991; Hofstede, Neuijen, Ohayv, & Sanders, 1990; Pettigrew, 1979; Schein, 1990), who do not enter the organization as "tabula rasa" (blank slates) (Adler & Jelinek, 1986, p. 83), but instead bring their personal ethnocentricity into the organization with them (Hofstede, 1980b; Seidner, 1982).

Consequently, an ethnocentric organizational culture, or cultural myopia, will be more likely to arise when an enterprise is highly embedded within its local cultural context, such as occurs when an enterprise operates in a single location, is mainly staffed by 'locals', its supplier relationships are predominantly with other local businesses and the enterprise serves a significant volume of local customers. The cultural myopia of the locally embedded enterprise will infuse its organizational identity, subtly influencing the way in which it communicates with its stakeholders; thereby shaping the organizational image formed by them (Figure 1).

Ethnocentrism distorts intercultural communication (Lauring, 2011), even within organizations clearly facing intercultural operating environments (e.g. see: Tkalac Verčič et al., 2012). Moreover, by predisposing an organization to attend inadequately (if at all) to the needs of those stakeholders possessing different cultural perspectives, ethnocentrism undermines an organization's strategic communication. For the locally-embedded enterprise, the very subtlety of the problem makes it difficult to grasp, since as Hofstede (1980b, p. 27) so eloquently puts it: "the last thing a fish will discover is water; it finds out about water only when it has landed in a fisherman's net" (Hofstede, 1980b, p. 27). The fundamental problem is that the set of rules and assumptions that make up culture, whether organizational or national, are quite simply "taken-for-granted" (Adler & Jelinek, 1986, p. 74).

Websites are an increasingly important communication tool in tourism, playing an ever expanding role in marketing and information search (Jang, 2004; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), product selection, purchasing, and post-purchase evaluation (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Hudson & Thal, 2013; Jang, 2004; Law, Qi, & Buhalis, 2010, p. 297). Moreover, as a websites manifestly depict an organization's identity, websites provide a highly visible and accessible form of organizational communication, potentially exerting considerable influence on users' perceptions of organizational image.

In multicultural user environments, such as exist for all organization's serving international tourists, ethnocentric website communication may reduce website effectiveness both in terms of bringing about desired results (such as accurately communicating product information, generating customer interest and stimulating product purchase) and in supporting the formation of desired organizational image. It is therefore important to evaluate the websites of organizations serving international tourists so as to check that ethnocentric tendency does not insidiously operate to weaken website effectiveness.

Website evaluation broadly entails the assessment of content and features so as to ascertain the extent to which they satisfy user needs (Law et al., 2010). For enterprises operating in the arena of international tourism, this requires the evaluation of effectiveness as regards stakeholders from different cultures. A promising approach to addressing this need may exist in the work of Kang and Mastin (2008), in which Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions were applied in an examination of national tourism promotion websites.

Since coming to light in the 1980s (in Hofstede, 1980a), Hofstede's National Cultural Dimensions, Power Distance Index (PDI), Individualism vs. Collectivism (IDV), Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI), and Masculinity vs. Femininity (MAS), have been widely applied, as well as widely critiqued, in various domains of intercultural research (Jones, 2007). A basic summary of the constructs is as follows: PDI describes the extent that less powerful members of organizations and groups accept unequal power distribution, with low PDI cultures expecting consultative or democratic power relations and high PDI cultures being more accepting of unequal power distribution; IDV describes the degree of independence versus interdependence in a particular culture, with High IDV cultures placing importance on individual actions and rights, and low IDV cultures placing emphasis on groups and cohesion; UAI describes the extent that the members of a society attempt to cope with anxiety by minimizing uncertainty, with high UAI cultures being less tolerant of uncertainty than low UAI cultures, and so preferring more structure, planning and rules; and MAS concerns the distribution of emotional roles between the genders, with high MAS cultures valuing personal qualities like competitiveness, assertiveness, and materialism, while low MAS cultures place more importance on relationships and quality of life (Clearly Cultural, 2013; Jones, 2007; Kang & Mastin, 2008; The Hofstede Centre, 2013b).

Here, it is proposed that the work of Kang and Mastin (2008) may be used to inform a framework that can then be applied more generally in the assessment of ethnocentric tendency in website communication. The logical argument is as follows: the website of a given organization may be characterized as ethnocentric when it contains features that are congruent with the cultural dimensions of the local society, seemingly without regard to the effects this has upon stakeholders from different cultures; when present, ethnocentric website communication will most likely reduce the effectiveness of the website in terms of communicating relevant service information to, and eliciting formation of desired image among, those website users holding different cultural frames; moreover, by overlooking intercultural aspects of website communication, and effectively ignoring those organizational stakeholders that hold differing cultural frames, the unitary perception of organizational image (which is essential in strategic communication) also cannot arise.

3. Methodology

This study relates to intercultural communication within the field of strategic communication, and it specifically sets out to examine ethnocentric tendency in the planned website communication of an organization that serves international tourists, among others. The subject proposition is that a locally-embedded organization will tend to exhibit cultural myopia in communication practices because an ethnocentric organizational culture will infuse the organization's identity, and this will influence the communication of organizational identity to its stakeholders. It is logically anticipated that an ethnocentric tendency will lower the effectiveness of the planned website communication, both in respect to its capacity to accurately convey relevant service information to, and support the formation of desired organizational image among, stakeholders holding other, different cultural frames. The following research question is posed: To what extent does the website of a locally embedded organization exhibit ethnocentric tendency, and if so, how does this affect the organization's communication with stakeholders from other cultures, namely, international tourists?

Research paradigms are described in the dimensions of ontology, epistemology, methodology (Guba, 1990) and axiology (Heron & Reason, 1997; Jennings, 2010). This study follows the paradigmatic tradition of interpretive social sciences research (Jennings, 2010). Ontologically, the worldview (Heron & Reason, 1997) here is relativist and the epistemology or “the theory of knowledge justification” (Audi, 2011, p. xiii) is subjectivist. The “strategy by which the ontological and epistemological principles are translated” (Sarantakos, 2005, p. 30) is via single exploratory case study. Case study is useful in tourism research (Xiao & Smith, 2006, p. 747), helping to explicate theoretical development in a given context (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p. 305; Tellis, 1997, p. 4). Single case study is appropriate for examining unique phenomenon (Yin, 2005), such as ethnocentric tendency in the website communication of a given locally-embedded organisation.

The case organization, SlotssøBadet, is a local recreational enterprise located in the town of Kolding, within the region of Southern Denmark. Although not solely a tourism enterprise, it operates within the realm of tourism as its products appeal to, and are in fact used by, domestic and international visitors in addition to local residents. The organization was purposely chosen as an ideal enterprise for study for the following reasons: it presented as a local (and possibly locally embedded) enterprise that, in addition to serving local residents, also served international visitors; and the cultural characteristics of its local Danish customer base were likely to differ markedly from that of the predominantly German visitors to the region. Accordingly, the organisation presented as an ideal example for an investigation of the possible effects of ethnocentric website communication (if extant) in respect to its German customers.

Building from Kang and Mastin (2008), the theoretical frame of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions is applied qualitatively in this exploratory case study. The research approach is broadly described in three steps. The first step involved efforts to gain a deep understanding about organizational operation and identity, including efforts to gauge the degree of influence exerted by the local (Danish) ethnic culture. Drawing on Denzin (2009) and (Andersen, 2012), multiple sources of qualitative material were collected to triangulate the research, the methods comprising: an escorted site visit and presentation from a senior manager; researcher participation and observation during a site visit as a customer; two semi-structured interviews with a key informant (a senior manager); a survey randomly administered to customers at the entry of the enterprise (41 respondents); and, an intensive workshop (involving two key members of the case organisation and a manager of a local hotel working cooperatively with the case organisation). The second step of the analysis entailed a careful evaluation of the website to gauge ethnocentric tendency, conceptualized as the degree to which the website features aligned with those expected according to local (Danish) cultural dimensions. Finally, in order to gauge the effects of ethnocentric website communication on German tourists, a purposive sampling strategy (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was used to obtain ‘first impression’ reports from a convenience sample of Germans via email distribution of a single, open-ended question (10 respondents).

The axiology, “the value of knowing, the type of knowing and influence of values on knowing” (Jennings, 2010, p. 34) is propositional and transactional: the intent of this case study is to gain insight into the phenomenon of ethnocentric website communication within a locally embedded organisation; the “intrinsically worthwhile” (Heron & Reason, 1997) aims are to assist theoretical understanding of intercultural issues in website communication by testing extension of the Kang and Mastin (2008) approach in applying Hofstede’s cultural dimensions to tourism websites, and identify areas for research and practice attention in respect to intercultural communication issues as concerns the strategic communication of enterprises serving international visitors, particularly as pertains to their websites.

4. Results

The case concerns a recreational enterprise in the town of Kolding, situated within the local government municipality of Kolding Kommune in southern Denmark. In 2012 the municipality had a population of around 90,000 inhabitants, some 57,600 of whom residing within the central town area (Statistics Denmark, 2013a). At the time of the study, the main components of the enterprise consisted of an aquatic centre with seven different recreational pools; a wellness centre with a sauna, steam room, spa and three relaxation pools; a fitness centre / gym (under separate management); a small café and merchandise area located in the central entry area. Functionally, the enterprise essentially existed as a venue for structured and unstructured recreation for individuals and families as well as local schools and clubs, and it provided various exercise classes as well

as an assortment of special recreational and wellness events (Senior Manager's Presentation, 2013). User statistics stood as testament to its evident popularity, the enterprise averaging in excess of 1,200 entries per day over the preceding calendar year (SlotssøBadet, 2013).

The Hofstede Centre (2013a) describes that Denmark is characterized by relatively low scores in the cultural dimensions of PDI (8), MAS (12) and UAI (14) and by a very high score for IDV (80). Generally speaking, the low PDI indicates a tendency towards informality, where leaders coach respected, autonomous employees in consultative fashion; the high IDV indicates a preference for a loosely knit social frameworks wherein people take personal responsibility and lean towards a direct and logical approach in social and business interaction; the low MAS describes a feminine society, wherein emphasis is placed on caring for others and quality of life, so work-life balance ranks highly and managers strive to involve employees to build solidarity in consensual decision making; and, the low UAI indicates a tolerance for unstructured situations, an openness towards flexibility, and a tendency to seek innovation, creativity and novelty (The Hofstede Centre, 2013a).

Identity and culture in the case organization

Senior management viewed the overarching product theme as the provision of 'relaxation', the underlying logic being that the rising stress of modern life had made "people more willing to pay for relaxing" (Senior Manager's Presentation, 2013); as a senior manager related at interview, "relaxing is becoming a lifestyle" (Senior Manager Interview, 2013b). Nuances were also recognized within this overarching theme since not all customers were considered the same, with clear product differentiation existing between the Aquatic Centre and the Wellness Centre, since the latter was seen to be for "top-end customers willing to pay more to get more" (Senior Manager Interview, 2013b). Customer service was regarded as another key plank of the operational ethos, customer satisfaction being viewed as a vital ingredient in generating repeat visitation and stimulating positive word-of-mouth (Senior Manager's Presentation, 2013). The enterprise engendered a collective and cooperative approach in the drive for customer satisfaction: as a senior manager explained, employees were encouraged to develop "good social relations" with all the customers so as to best help them have "great social experiences" when visiting the enterprise (Senior Manager's Presentation, 2013). Arguably, the apparent concern with the central themes of relaxation, cooperative effort and social experiences, are congruent with the typical cultural traits expected in a low MAS culture, such as exists in Denmark (The Hofstede Centre, 2013b), wherein the locus of concern rests upon relationships and quality of life.

International tourists were viewed as an important customer segment; so much so, that collaborative arrangements had been set up with regional accommodation providers, (including streamlined booking arrangements, special packages and discount pricing offers) to entice them (Senior Manager Interview, 2013b). Innovation and product variety were also seen as central operating tenets, a senior manager relating the view that in order to attract and retain customers there was a need to always "be first mover" (Senior Manager's Presentation, 2013). Hence, the enterprise strove to consistently deliver novel products, as demonstrated by the plans for a new small children's pool with features "never seen before" (Senior Manager's Presentation, 2013), and by the efforts to hold interesting special events to attract different customer segments and gain publicity (Senior Manager's Presentation, 2013). Additionally, each member of staff was encouraged to "make innovation every day" (Senior Manager's Presentation, 2013) and, somewhat uniquely, the enterprise had also formed a dedicated 'innovation department', inter alia providing a forum for all staff members to contribute their own ideas for enterprise innovation (Senior Manager's Presentation, 2013). These themes evidenced the influence of fundamental Danish cultural values: the drive for novelty and innovation aligned closely with the creative tendency of a low UAI society (The Hofstede Centre, 2013a); the idea that all the staff had a responsibility to contribute to innovation, in large and small ways, importance of individual responsibility and initiative of a low-IDV society; whilst the cooperative tone of the innovation process also aligned with the cooperative and consensual approach typical in a low MAS culture.

The organization's value statement was divided into three dimensions: a customer dimension that stressed high-quality service, customer experience, and hygiene; an employee dimension that emphasized personal responsibility, prompt action, friendliness, creativity, innovation; and a management dimension that highlighted personal responsibility, cooperation, prompt action and staff development. This value statement

both reinforced the key enterprise themes and provided further support to the view that the enterprise was infused with the Danish cultural values of its context; in particular, the emphasis placed upon personal responsibility aligned with the high IDV of Denmark, and the emphasis placed on cooperation and staff development was also congruent with the feminine, low MAS, dimension.

The results of the customer survey (41 respondents) confirmed that the enterprise did seem to satisfy a wide range of recreational and relaxation interests in practice. In particular, the results showed that the enterprise appealed to males (56%) and females (44%) of all ages and all walks of life, mostly from the local area (88%); the majority (66%) of whom visited the enterprise with others, remaining there for up to two hours (81%) in order to use the Fitness Centre / Gym (19%), the Wellness Centre (17%) and especially, the Aquatic Centre (63%).

Among other things, the survey asked the respondents to provide up to three keywords that captured what the enterprise meant to them, and the resulting keywords strongly indicated that local (Danish) customer perceptions mirrored those of senior management. Specifically, the customers most frequently described the enterprise as being “Nice” or “Good” or having a “Good Atmosphere” (31%) and as a place for “Fun” (19%); “Relaxation”, “Wellness,” or “Health” (11%) or “Exercise” and “Training” (8%), or associated it as a place for social time with “Friends” or “Family” (7%). These descriptors aligned with senior management’s view that the central product themes were “relaxation” and “great social experiences” (Senior Manager Interview, 2013b). Moreover, the survey revealed high levels of local customer satisfaction; as indicated by the high repeat visitation among the respondents, with nearly three quarters of them (72.5%) visiting the enterprise at least four times a month to use its services.

Observations during a site visit as a customer buttressed the view of the enterprise as a high quality facility offering a wide variety of options for recreation and relaxation. It also reinforced the picture of an enterprise evidently committed to achieving high levels of customer satisfaction through the efforts of friendly and efficient staff members who made a genuine effort to help each customer gain the most from their visit.

Moreover, when the keywords derived from the surveys were utilized as tools to trigger reflective conversations in the workshop, the discussions similarly highlighted the importance placed on high quality service, a good atmosphere, relaxation and fun, being innovative, and providing a variety of product offerings (Table 1). The evident satisfaction of these local Danish customers, and their shared view of the enterprise held by them, also hints at the alignment of expectations associated with the ‘taken for granted’ cultural values of the customers, and the similar Danish values that apparently infused the enterprise.

Table 1. Workshop participants’ reflections on keywords

Keyword	Participants’ reflections
Good service*	All customers/areas listening to people.
Good atmosphere*	All customers/areas.
Fun*	Swimming pool customers/area.
Relax*	Wellness customers/area.
Activities*	Trendy place (something new each time) - for different ages.
Clean:	All areas.
Authentic:	Wellness centre.
Friends & social life	All the facility, all customers, helps attract new customers.
Nice events	Pool events: expect less pay less. Wellness events: expect more pay more.
Big	Possibilities.
Wellness	Right food, air, training, treatment. Reduce cost of life (stress).
Sustainability:	<i>Picked up and contemplated but only produced a lengthy silence.</i>

* Described as a key service element / service value by participants.

The situation, custom and membership of the enterprise all indicated close alignment between the internal organizational culture and that of the Danish ethnic culture of the organization’s local context. The organization’s internal membership certainly implied local ethnic cultural alignment, since only a tiny proportion (two) of the enterprise’s 110 staff were not native Danes (Senior Manager’s Presentation, 2013;

Senior Manager Interview, 2013b). The external relationships also provided strong indication of the preponderant influence of local cultural values, one example of which concerned the fundamental arrangement between the enterprise and the local government of the area (Kolding Kommune), whereby the facility housing the enterprise was leased to the current Board of management by the local government that in fact owned it (Senior Manager Interview, 2013a). In addition to this, the enterprise had cultivated many other relationships with other local businesses: the organization had formed relationships with the scores of local businesses involved in the development and promotion of its corporate and community events (Senior Manager Interview, 2013a); it had developed close cooperative relationships with dozens of local accommodation providers to attract the domestic and international tourists staying with them (Enterprise Workshop, 2013; Senior Manager Interview, 2013a); and it had formed close promotional links with some 100 other local companies, whose employees then received promotional offers such as discounted entry to special events (Senior Manager Interview, 2013b).

The collective orientation of Danish culture was also reflected in the nature of the various relationships that existed, and in the way that these relationships were perceived. For instance, the Board engendered a community-oriented ethos: as one senior manager (and Board Member) described it, the Board saw itself “as more of a foundation”, whose aim was not just to deliver economic results but to deliver social benefits to the local community as well (Senior Manager Interview, 2013a). This social ethos was displayed in the composition of the Board, which in addition to the members from the management company included two representatives from external community organizations - one from the local tourism agency and one representing all the local social and sporting clubs as well (Senior Manager Interview, 2013a). The enterprise’s social orientation was also arguably demonstrated in the organizational commitment to reinvest all the operating profits in facility maintenance and improvement, rather than treating the enterprise solely as a profit making concern (Senior Manager Interview, 2013a).

The collective orientation (low MAS) of Danish culture was clearly demonstrated by the specific language, and forms of expression used by staff members when relating their views on the position of the enterprise within the wider society, and in the description of the relationships the enterprise had with various other entities. In the workshop (Enterprise Workshop, 2013) for instance, the relationships were consistently described in cooperative and collective terms: the relations with key suppliers (heat, energy, catering and others) were described as being important because “they help us operate”; the relations with event cooperators and networking companies were described as important because they “help us promote new events”; the ties with local clubs and schools were described as important to “meet social obligations”; and there were even cooperative links with competitors because, “although we compete, we help and learn from each other too”(Enterprise Workshop, 2013).

In all, the research conveyed the essence of organizational identity as an underlying concern with the delivery of satisfying relaxation experiences, a result ostensibly achieved through the provision of consistently high levels of customer service; the provision of a range of different products to satisfy a variety of relaxation needs; and, an unwavering pursuit of product innovation so as to extend the enterprise appeal and generate ongoing customer interest. Additionally, the research abundantly conveyed that the organizational identity was heavily influenced by Danish cultural values, as these values infused almost every aspect how the organization’s members communicated and ‘got things done’ (Brunetto & Farr-Wharton, 2006; Hofstede, 1993; Nelson et al., 2007; Schall, 1983; Smircich, 1983).

Germans are by far the largest segment of foreign visitors to Denmark (Liburd, 2013), comprising nearly 40% of the 14 million annual visitor nights in the region of Southern Denmark (Statistics Denmark, 2013b). Yet somewhat surprisingly, management expressed the view that the enterprise probably attracted a lower proportion of German visitors than might be expected on the basis of the regional visitor statistics (Senior Manager Interview, 2013b). Significantly, although the enterprise collected detailed user statistics in almost every other respect (by using sophisticated data collection methods involving automatic capture of user data from the access devices that every customer used to enter different parts of the facility) no attempt had been made to differentiate the data in respect to international users (Senior Manager Interview, 2013b). Moreover, this situation persisted even though the enterprise recognized the importance of international tourists as customers, and had in fact made particular efforts to attract them as customers (Enterprise Workshop, 2013; Senior Manager Interview, 2013a). When asked about the anomalous lack of data capture relating to international tourists, a senior manager responded: “[pause]...yes, we probably should do that” (Senior

Manager Interview, 2013b). Given that this was, in most every other respect, a nimble, customer-focused enterprise, this peculiar oversight arguably demonstrates just the type of insidious cultural “blind spot” described by Adler and Jelinek (1986, p. 81).

Assessing ethnocentric tendency in the website

Although Germany’s scores are similar to Denmark in respect to PDI (26) and IDV (72), the high MAS (68) and high UAI (55) scores (The Hofstede Centre, 2013a) starkly contrast with the (markedly lower) scores for Denmark (noted earlier) along these dimensions. According to the proposition in this study, the website communication of an organization may be deemed to exhibit ethnocentric tendency to the extent that it has elements that are similar to those elements described by Kang and Mastin (2008) that are aligned with Denmark’s cultural dimension scores. In order to establish the existence of such an ethnocentric tendency, the website of the case organization was carefully perused to ascertain the presence of the relevant website elements described in Table 2. Using this framework, each element of the case organization’s website was assessed as being fully, partly or not present, and the resulting scores were used to calculate gross percentages of congruence according to the relevant (Danish) ethnic cultural dimensions (Table 3).

The website analysis indicated substantial cultural alignment: the website was entirely congruent in UAI elements, highly congruent in PDI elements, and it was largely congruent in the IDV elements and the MAS elements. Hence overall, the website’s features substantially aligned to those to be expected according to the pertinent (Danish) cultural dimensions, the vast majority (90%) of the culturally pertinent website elements being completely (63%) or partly (27%) present. Additionally, the website was entirely lacking any internal language translation tools, and so was only presented in Danish (a language not typically spoken by Germans). By all accounts then, the website of the case organization apparently exhibited a substantial ethnocentric tendency.

Table 2. Website evaluation constructs along cultural dimensions

	Construct	Low	High
PDI	Function: Banner advertisements	<i>No banner advertisements</i>	Banner advertisements
	Function: Advanced search engines	Advanced search engines Family-oriented menus	<i>No search engines</i> <i>No family menus</i>
	Function and target audience:	<i>Emphasize market unification (use promotions).</i>	Emphasize market fragmentation (promotions irrelevant).
	Design:	Casual narratives to develop more personal relationships with website users.	News-casting style to convey information (official narratives trustworthy).
	Interactivity:	Prefer interpersonal (e.g. mail).	Q&A space often used.
UAI	Design	Creative designs (aid user understanding of website content).	Simple designs (horizontal and vertical compartment layouts).
IDV	Humor / fun appeals:	No humor / fun/elements. <i>Little/no eye-catching elements.</i> <i>Emphasize facts.</i>	Not just facts Eye-catching elements Fun elements (e.g. animated quizzes/ games, humor videos).
	Planning tools:	<i>No log-in/revisit features.</i> <i>No tailored planning tools.</i>	Tools to restore previous searches and tailor travel plans (logins and planner functions).
	Photographs:	Typically feature groups.	Typically individuals’ faces or faces of young couples.
MAS	Photographs:	<i>People dominate.</i>	Strong, magnificent images. Objects dominate.

	Flash and slogans:	<i>No slogans.</i> <i>No flash elements.</i>	Use of flash. Use of slogans.
	Menus and search engines:	Family-oriented menus <i>Use of advanced search engines.</i>	No advanced search engines (all needed info provided). <i>Info-oriented menus.</i>

Adapted from Kang and Mastin (2008); items in italics interpolated from their results.

Table 3. Website analysis along pertinent cultural dimensions

Low PDI elements:				
Website Feature:	Fulfilled:			Comments:
	Fully	Partly	Not	
Absence of banner advertisements.	1			No banner advertisements present.
Uses advanced search engines.		1		Not in typical sense, although some tools aid info search and navigation (i.e. search cloud, 'page down' tabs).
Uses family-oriented menus.	1			Features family oriented topics and menus including information about activities for babies, pregnant women, children, older people and families.
Uses promotions.		1		Price promotions not apparent in the website, but product promotions appear in the Activity Calendar.
Uses casual / personal narratives.	1			The news tab on front page uses a conversational style; page content reflects personal approach (i.e. addresses user personally).
Uses interpersonal interactivity options (vs. Q&A space).	1			No FAQ page or Q&A space. The Contact page offers personal contact (via telephone number and a map of the enterprise location). The website also links to a Facebook page. Contact Form states that each inquiry will get close, personal attention.
Total for PDI	4	2	0	
Congruent (%)	67%	33%	0%	
Low UAI elements:				
Website Feature:	Fulfilled:			Comments:
	Fully	Partly	Not	
Uses creative design layouts.	1			Website contains several creative design elements (e.g. a rotating search cloud, expanding menus, page down tabs).
Total for UAI	1	0	0	
Congruent (%)	100%	0%	0%	
High IDV elements:				
Website Feature:	Fulfilled:			Comments:
	Fully	Partly	Not	
Uses eye-catching and fun elements.	1			Website uses a rotating, interactive search cloud.
Uses planning tools.		1		Some planning tools exist - location map, aerial photo, and a smartphone scanning barcode (to upload location details).
Uses revisit tools.			1	No ability to save user sessions or particular user relevant site information.

Photos feature groups.	1			Banner image on every page contains group (12 of the 16 photos show groups).
Total for IDV	2	1	1	
Congruent %	50%	25%	25%	
Low MAS elements:				
Website Feature:	Fulfilled:			Comments:
	Fully	Partly	Not	
Photos feature people.	1			Banner and images feature people (14 of 16 photos show people).
Low use of flash or slogans.		1		No slogans; one dynamic cloud widget.
Has advanced search engines.			1	No search engines as such (although dynamic cloud widget may fulfill this criteria to some degree).
Uses family-oriented menus.	1			Site clearly displays menus and tabs relating to activities for babies, pregnant women, children, young people, older people, and families.
Total for MAS	1	1	1	
Congruent (%)	50%	25%	25%	
Overall Website:				
Website Feature:	Fulfilled:			Comments:
	Fully	Partly	Not	
All Elements	9	4	2	Website features align with those expected according to the cultural dimensions scores for Denmark. Website exhibits local cultural alignment, or ethnocentric tendency.
Congruent (%)	60%	27%	13%	

Having established the presence of ethnocentric tendency in website communication, the research turned to an examination of consequential effects, namely, that ethnocentric tendency might impair the effectiveness of the website as far as Germans were concerned in terms of its effectiveness in communicating product information and supporting the formation of desired organizational image. To explore this proposition, a convenience sample of Germans were presented with the following question by email: “Kindly view this website [link provided] and report your main impressions about it – whatever comes to mind, good or bad.” In light of the exploratory nature of the research, this open-ended approach was considered best since it offered the best prospects for an testing the overall soundness of this new proposition without constraining the responses through overt structuring.

As expected, the ten respondents commented positively and negatively about the website (Table 4). The negative comments frequently related to the lack of language translation tools and difficulty finding information, with the site often being described as “confused” and “unstructured”. Following Kang and Mastin (2008), Germans (due high UAI) may prefer simple designs with compartment layouts, and since the website did not follow this format, this cultural preference may go some way to explain the views of the respondents that the website seemed “confused” and “unstructured” to German users. The small logo was also commonly criticized and this too is consistent with the finding of Kang and Mastin (2008) insofar as the high MAS of Germans may dispose them to prefer bold, striking images. Additional support for this view is found in the often favorable comments that the German respondents made about the appearance of the website; especially regarding the use of bold colours (mainly vibrant blues) and the use of a prominent image, a close-up image of a young boy swimming towards the website user. The appeal of the latter also aligns with the high IDV score for Germans which, according to Kang and Mastin (2008), gives rise to a preference for people in photos.

Moreover, although the responses from the Germans indicated that they liked the appearance of the website, this did not translate into a favourable assessment of its effectiveness; if anything, the respondents’

frequent criticisms that the website was confusing and lacking in language translation tools (to German or English) indicated quite the reverse.

Notably, there was also at least some degree of impairment in the communication of the desired organizational image. Specifically, while the organizational identity of the enterprise embodied clear concern with excellence in customer service, the perceived confusion of the website conveyed the exact opposite; and the nearly universal misinterpretation that the products of the enterprise seemed mainly suited young people deviated significantly from the enterprise's concern to cater for a wide range of customer needs for relaxation, which in fact was the reality. Consequently, incorrect organizational images were indeed being formed.

Table 4. Germans' website impressions

Respondent	Functionality & Appearance		Service Impressions (Image)
	Positive	Negative	
Female aged 20-25		Information: Tags confusing, headings all the same, scrolling for information not good. Only in Danish. Appearance: News small and unnoticeable in blue. Logo: ineffective, invisible in corner.	Products: Wide variety but for who? Seems aiming for young people - children only [but noted multiple offerings]. Leisure and sports mixed?
Female aged 20-25	Appearance: contemporary, freshness and style. Information: Easy handling of information (ball [search cloud]).	Information: Set up / vertical direction. Unstructured. Logo: Small logo.	Products: for teenagers, kids.
Female aged 55-60		Information: Confused, overloaded.	Products: A children's paradise
Male aged 60-65	Appearance: really positive impression, nice image of boy.		Products: Only for children (older people disturbed)
Female aged 20-25	Appearance: Nice background picture.	Information: Confusing (hard to navigate). Only in Danish (no English).	
Female aged 20-25	Appearance: like photos and colours. Information: like the search ball (but misplaced).	Information: Tab navigation, lacks subcategories, position of search ball; disorganized. Language: Only in Danish.	
Female aged 20-25	Appearance: blue font colour looks nice (but hard to read).	Information: Scrolling annoying, poor display; tabs need categories. Appearance: Blue font hard to read (but looks nice); more photos to make it friendlier.	Products: Wide range of offerings.
Female aged 20-25	Appearance: Nice main picture.	Information: Globe navigation fancy but too many words; theme tabs annoying; need to highlight events calendar. No English. Appearance: Needs more and more varied pictures.	Products: Pool for children (may discourage older people).

Male aged 26-30		Information: Set up is a catastrophe. Looks a bit like a blog.	Products: Wide range of offerings.
Female aged 50-55	Appearance: looks really nice.	Information: Pictures, information and links lack alignment. Appearance: Lack alignment with content.	

In summary, the analysis showed that the case organization’s website did exhibit an ethnocentric tendency and that this did appear to impede communication with German tourists (a key customer segment). Particularly, the website did not produce an accurate understanding of the case organization’s products or identity – inaccurate images were formed. Moreover, since the images formed by the German respondents apparently differed from those formed by the organization’s local (Danish) customers - whose reflections about the enterprise largely mirrored those of management - unitary perception did not exist among these two key stakeholder groups. This failure of strategic communication could be improved by explicitly recognizing the extant, culturally inspired miscommunication and taking even a few small steps to redress it. In this particular instance a few simple measures could help, namely: 1) including language translation tools for content conversion into German, and perhaps English too; redesigning the website content to simplify the presentation of product information; and increasing the use of bold images depicting people using the facilities in the many different ways open to customers. Of course, in taking steps to realign the website towards predominant German cultural preferences, the organization must remain mindful not to go so far as to alienate its local, Danish, customer base; the answer is, as often the case in practice, one of striking the right balance.

In order to make any useful refinements to website communication in multicultural user contexts, an organization must sidestep the cultural “blind spots” (Adler & Jelinek, 1986) by gaining some insight into its cultural context. So, as far as websites in multicultural environments are concerned, a means to identify the insidious risks arising from ethnocentric tendency, and the possible avenues for addressing those risks, could be very useful indeed.

Limitations and further research

One of the many criticisms levelled at Hofstede’s cultural dimensions is that of levels of analysis (e.g. see McSweeney, 2002). Particularly, the existence of similarities within national cultural groups of course does not equate to cultural homogeneity; not all individuals are the same, and cultural differences may vary among individuals. As Adler and Jelinek (1986, p. 74) points out, “a range of attitudes and beliefs is typically present in any culture”. Such individual variation can in fact be seen in the present case, with the German respondents noticing, and placing varying degrees of emphasis upon, particular website features in their comments. Yet, despite the cultural outliers in any population (Adler & Jelinek, 1986, p. 75), commonality also exists: “most people in a culture, most of the time, act in consonance with their culture” (Adler & Jelinek, 1986, p. 85). In this case the comments proffered by the German respondents are remarkably similar; encouragingly, even in this small sample there are more similarities than differences.

Still, this is an early exploration and the sample of Germans is small, so it remains possible that systemic bias exists in the German’s website impressions collected in this case. Therefore, although the initial indications are promising, it would be useful to test for consistency across a larger sample of Germans. Measurement across other cultural groups could also test the wider existence of ethnocentric tendency in website communication. Since cultural alignment will exist as a matter of degrees, instruments using with scaled measurement would enable a more sensitive assessment of website features along cultural dimensions.

Moreover, as Jennings (2010) relates, each of the various paradigmatic standpoints pose implications for the outcomes. As in any qualitative case analysis, the subjective standpoint of this study poses a risk of researcher bias. Given the underlying thesis of this study, the researcher must acknowledge a, necessarily,

ethnocentric lens (though it is neither German nor Danish) that may influence the interpretations offered here; though as the method and results are clearly depicted, others can readily judge this for themselves.

5. Conclusion

Organizational identity is communicated to stakeholders and the resulting perceptions produce organizational image. Strategic communication is essential for unitary perception of organizational image (Melewar & Jenkins, 2002). Organizational identity derives from organizational culture (Baker & Balmer, 1997; Markwick & Fill, 1995; Wally Olins, 1991) and organizational culture will be shaped to at least some degree by the organization's cultural context (Adler & Jelinek, 1986). When an organization is locally embedded (i.e. it only operates locally, is mainly staffed by 'locals', and its customers are largely 'locals') an ethnocentric organizational culture seems more likely; this will be reflected in the organization's identity and in the communication thereof. Cultural differences between the organization and its stakeholders may impair the communication of service information and impede desired image formation: some stakeholders may glean incomplete or incorrect service information and incorrect views of organizational image may form.

The website (or other) communication of an organization may be considered as being ethnocentric when it depicts information in ways aligned to the cultural dimensions of the local society within which the enterprise is situated, seemingly without regard to the effects on stakeholders with differing cultural perspectives. To the extent that some website users may have significantly different cultural frames, the organization's website may be rendered less effective. Moreover, the failure to attend properly to the communication needs of all key stakeholders will produce multiple perceptions of organizational image, instead of the unitary perception that is fundamental to strategic communication.

This exploratory case study examined the proposition that local organizations have a natural tendency to adopt ethnocentric perspectives in website communication. Ethnocentric tendency was indeed found in the website of the case organization and it did seem to impair the communication of service information to, and image formation among, Germans (a key customer segment). The strategic communication of the case organization could be improved by amending culturally incongruent website elements, even with only a few small adjustments, thereby enhancing the likelihood of unitary perception among all stakeholders.

The case highlights the potential for ethnocentric tendency in local organizations as a potential source of miscommunication in multicultural stakeholder environments. Additionally the case provides a glimmer of scope for theoretical development and useful application in practice. The first step is to test the wider application of the concepts presented in this case through other studies of ethnocentric tendency in website communication, in Denmark and elsewhere.

Significant practical implications arise in respect to the effectiveness of websites for the growing proportion of enterprises operating in, or soon to be exposed to, multicultural stakeholder environments. For these enterprises, a means to identify the insidious risks arising from ethnocentric tendency, and the possible avenues for addressing those risks, could be very useful indeed.

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