

Cultural Diversity in Tour Guiding: An Exploration of Communication and Practices in Oman's Tourism Industry

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Purpose: The present study aims to examine the dimensions of cultural diversity in the tour-guiding industry in Oman and the communicative strategies used in intercultural and multicultural contexts. The present study tries to determine the current levels of intercultural diversity among tour guides in Oman and the challenges they face in communicating with tourists from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Originality: This is the first study to systematically investigate the cultural interactions involved in Oman's tour-guiding industry, which has been a relatively neglected area of investigation within the intercultural communication field. With a focus on the lived experiences of tour guides and including views from industry professionals and academic experts, this research aims to contribute to the development of a tailored model for improving intercultural communication within the tourism industry.

Literature Review: The importance of cultural diversity in the context of tourism is increasingly recognized as a key area of research, particularly in countries like Oman, where traditional and modern ways co-exist. This literature review considers key theoretical frameworks and empirical studies that identifies the critical role played by intercultural communication, cultural sensitivity, and the challenges tour guides face in dealing with diverse cultural settings.

Theoretical Frameworks on Culture: Hofstede's (2001) seminal work describes culture as a "collective programming of the mind" that distinguishes one group from another, underlining the idea that culture is learned from one's social environment and is not innate. Hofstede (2010) describes six dimensions of culture.

1. **Power Distance:** refers to how various societies deal with inequality and authority. In high-power distance cultures like Oman, there is respect for hierarchies, which may impact how guides communicate with tourists.

Understanding these dynamics is relevant to effective tour guiding (Hofstede, 2010). Tourists expect guides to portray certain aspects of authority and knowledge. This expectation is not only related to communication styles but also to the way information is delivered. For example, guides have to present their knowledge in an authoritative but friendly way to gain the trust and respect of tourists. This may result in a more profound tourist experience because tourists feel protected by a knowledgeable guide who respects the local cultural etiquette.

2. Individualism vs Collectivism: describes the level at which a culture favours an individual or a group. In individualistic societies, personal freedom is highly regarded, while group harmony takes precedence in collective societies. Once these are understood, tour guides can build better relationships with each type of tourist. In the collectivist society of Oman, where community and family ties are close, the tour guides have to change tactics to create group harmony among the tourists.

3. Masculinity-Femininity: talks about gender roles and what society expects from men and women. This affects how people communicate and interact in tour guiding. Tour guides must understand these cultural differences to prevent gender-related misunderstandings. Gender roles significantly affect how tour guides and tourists behave and interact. Awareness of these cultural norms helps avoid misunderstandings, especially with mixed-gender groups. For example, being aware of gender roles can influence how guides approach tourists so that they may use appropriate styles of communication in light of the local culture but are still sensitive to the varied backgrounds of their clients.

4. Uncertainty Avoidance: assesses the extent to which cultures deal with ambiguity. Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance favour structured conditions, whereas low tolerance cultures accept ambiguity. While examining Uncertainty Avoidance, the relevance to tour guiding becomes evident in how guides prepare for varying levels of ambiguity in tourists' reactions and expectations. Tour guides in Oman must adapt to the comfort levels of their tourists, particularly when faced with the unpredictability of group dynamics or unexpected situations. Those from high uncertainty avoidance cultures may prefer a highly structured itinerary and clear guidelines, but more flexible tourists may enjoy spontaneity. The ability of a guide to instinctively sense and adapt to these preferences leads to a more enjoyable experience that is congruent with the diverse comfort levels of tourists.

5. Long-term vs Short-term Orientation brings out differences in attitudes toward planning and future rewards. Tour guides have to be cognizant of these orientations so they could properly manage expectations. In tourism, short-term rewards mostly determine satisfaction—especially spontaneous leisure experiences. Guides have to balance this in accordance with Oman's long-standing traditions in developing a narrative that is respectful of

local customs and enjoyable for the tourist. This calls for an awareness of time, expectations, and deliverables management to ensure all parties feel accommodated.

6. Indulgence vs Restraint reflects societies' yearnings for gratification. It is particularly relevant in tourism, where guides balance promoting leisure with respect for cultural standards. Guides have to manage the expectations of Oman tourists who want to have fun and explore, with the need to respect local cultural norms. This means encouraging fun and enjoyment while being sensitive to norms. An awareness of the different inclinations of tourists toward indulgence allows for an experience that is more tailored and thus more authentic to the visitor and the host culture.

The Intercultural Competence Model, developed by Deardorff (2006), provides a foundational framework for analyzing the impact of intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes on effective communication. This model is organized around four dimensions: *Attitudes*, *Knowledge & Comprehension*, *Desired Internal Outcome*, and *Desired External Outcome*. This model has given much weight to respect, openness, and cultural awareness from the side of the tour guides in their capacity to generate a hospitable environment for the tourists.

Cultural sensitivity in tour guiding helps in fostering mutual respect and enriching cross-cultural interactions. Reisinger & Turner (2003) defined cultural sensitivity as the "ability to recognize and respond to cultural differences respectfully" and suggested that such sensitivity enhances the overall tourist experience. Studies emphasize that culturally sensitive practices allow guides to navigate tourists' diverse expectations effectively (Sezerel et al., 2024).

Within Oman's context, tourist activities are shaped mainly by the country's religious and cultural values. Tour guides are supposed to exhibit cultural appropriateness in that they should respect various traditions while building a good rapport. Promoting awareness and reciprocity in tourism encounters can overcome prejudices and build better understanding (Viken et al., 2021).

Design/Methodology/Approach: This study employs a mixed quantitative and qualitative approach. A survey enabled the collection of varied responses from tour guides, while additional interviews enabled deeper thematic exploration. This methodological integration was essential in obtaining an adequate understanding of the challenges in intercultural in tour guiding.

Results: The results indicate that tour guides are highly sensitive to cultural differences and attach great importance to active listening and respectful modes of communication. The key challenges identified include negotiating cultural and communicative barriers, handling the differences between individualistic and collectivist

cultural backgrounds, and correcting cultural misconceptions. This review emphasizes the critical need for training in intercultural communication focused on non-verbal cues, understanding, adjustment, and the ability to use technologies and linguistic skills.

Implications: The findings of this study significantly impact enhancing intercultural communication strategies in the tourism industry in Oman. The new framework will increase the cultural diversity among tour guides and properly train them to interact effectively with all kinds of tourists. By focusing on intercultural education and awareness, the parties involved can ameliorate the overall experience in tourism and, hence, create a highly inclusive setting.

Limitations: The study is constrained by certain limitations. The sample included only tour guides and experts in Salalah, which may not represent the whole industry. In addition, relying on self-reporting data from respondents might introduce biases, as individual perceptions of cultural issues can vary much. Future research could extend the scope by including a more extensive and more diversified sample to enhance the validation of the findings.

Keywords: Intercultural communication, tour-guiding, communication strategies, cultural interaction, diversity.

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