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Cultural Do's and Don'ts of Doing Business in a Foreign Country

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Introduction:

Cultural awareness and fluency is a skill that has never before been so demanded in the world as today. With increases in globalization and technology the world is seemingly getting smaller and smaller, and with this has come greater opportunities to interact and do business with other countries and their respective cultures. Additionally, more businesses are investing in and doing business outside of the United States and have increasingly been offering opportunities for employees to work in these countries where knowledge of the local culture is crucial to success. Students of business (and truthfully of all majors) can greatly benefit in their careers by increasing their knowledge and experience levels with other countries while still in school. For both students studying abroad and those simply wanting to expand their knowledge, I wanted to assist in informing them of some of the cultural expectations they should consider before visiting or doing business in another country. Moreover, my ultimate goal of my honors project was to assist students' cultural education by creating a website that other BGSU students and faculty can access to get a basic overview of various cultural do's and don'ts of traveling to and doing business in the Emerging Seven (E7) countries of Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Russia, and Turkey.

I chose to focus my project's cultural analysis around the E7 because I wanted to create a resource that discussed these important cultures and made students' cultural search easier. The E7 are regarded as the worlds' economies that are developing at a high rate and are considered to be great opportunities for travel and business now and into the future. However, since they are still rising in prevalence on the world stage, they have not received the same attention as other more economically dominant countries in research magnitude and availability. Within my own research process, I had to spend many hours attempting to find credible sources with enough

information for even one country, so I hope that by me consolidating my collected information into one location I will make someone's cultural research more efficient and enjoyable.

Furthermore, it is increasingly feasible for students to have the opportunity to travel to these countries for studying abroad, vacation, and on business after they graduate. Therefore, there is a strong need for a resource of this form within Bowling Green State University to better prepare its students for the world outside college.

Theoretical Underpinnings:

The theoretical lenses I chose to support my research are Hofstede's Cultural Framework and Critical Cultural Theory. The study of culture is by no means a recent research field. It has been around for many decades, if not centuries in some capacity. Just like other fields of research cultural studies have evolved to include numerous ideologies and theories. One such theory that could be heavily applied, although not outrightly mentioned within my project, is Hofstede's cultural dimensions.

Hofstede's Cultural Framework:

Since its introduction, this theory has helped to organize and categorize various cultures, and has served as a useful tool for many who seek to better their understanding of cultural differences and similarities. Although not recommended as someone's only source of insight, Hofstede's cultural dimensions often function as a crucial foundation for cultural research in interdisciplinary interests and comparisons across multiple cultures (Orr, L. M., & Hauser, W. J., 2008).

Hofstede's cultural dimensions currently involves six recognized dimensions. These include:

- “1. Power Distance, related to the different solutions to the basic problem of human inequality;
2. Uncertainty Avoidance, related to the level of stress in a society in the face of an unknown future;
3. Individualism versus Collectivism, related to the integration of individuals into primary groups;
4. Masculinity versus Femininity, related to the division of emotional roles between women and men;
5. Long Term versus Short Term Orientation, related to the choice of focus for people's efforts: the future or the present and past.
6. Indulgence versus Restraint, related to the gratification versus control of basic human desires related to enjoying life” (Hofstede, G. 2011).

Many of these traits were clearly recognizable throughout my research on the E7. For instance, China, India, Indonesia, and Mexico were much more collectivist in their cultural tendencies than the United States which is considered very individualistic as a society (UT Dallas and Williams), (Scroope, 2018), (UT Dallas and Taylor), (Evason, 2018). Russia was somewhere in between these extremes. Russians were also generally reported to be more oriented towards the short-term situation in business settings and might not consider the long-term outcomes as much as a Westerner might. Within much of the E7 there were also more countries that demonstrated higher masculinity rating than femininity. Furthermore, I noticed that countries that shared a lot of the same ratings had a lot of similarities in other aspects of their culture. For example, adopting a more indirect communication style was most common in collectivist rated cultures, and these same countries tended to hold a high regard for the family unit and elders within their

societies. Based on my own experience, I therefore second the recommendation that one should possess a basic comprehension of Hofstede's cultural dimensions in addition to what a country's rating within these dimensions entails. Thanks to the additional background one establishes from these conscious efforts to learn and research Hofstede's cultural dimensions, a more wholistic understanding of cultures can be gained.

Critical Cultural Theory:

Another important theory that explains the importance of culture is critical cultural theory. Critical cultural theory generally describes a grouping of ways to interpret and re-analyze concepts such as "notions of meaning, history, identity power, cultural production, and cultural consumption" (Cavallaro, 2006). Moreover, one of critical cultural theory's core traits is the belief that evaluating cultural aspects from a critical and objective perspective is necessary to have an accurate understanding of a culture. People must be willing to look back on cultural aspects of the past and how concepts were initially defined and interpreted in comparison to interpretations of meaning today. Cultures inevitably change, and societal expectations within cultures evolve, so it would be inadequate to try and advance cultural comprehension into the future without looking towards the past as a reference. Furthermore, looking at matters from a critical cultural perspective helps to remind people that cultural aspects are not fixed (Cavallaro pg. x and xi). What is traditional today might become an outdated practice in the future or past traditions might arise in prevalence again, so it is best to have as much knowledge as possible to draw upon for guidance.

Using critical cultural theory as an analytical lens can also give insight into the "why" and "how this came to be" of certain cultural expectations and traditions. Therefore, additional background into a society's culture can be gained as well as explanations for why certain

traditions might be offensive for one culture and the norm for another. Various cultures may simply have different evidence they have used to reach their conclusions, and if we as scholars can take the time to research their affirmations and history, we can view cultural differences and similarities much more objectively.

Finally, applications for critical cultural theory are not restricted to academic uses but can and should be utilized within all facets of one's social life. The practice of critical cultural theory can offer useful "paradigms, models, and concepts that can be applied in the diverse settings that we encounter in our personal, public, and intellectual lives" (Smith, P., & Riley, A., 2011). Whether the setting be school, home, work, or recreation, whenever someone is engaging with society critical cultural theory can be utilized to better comprehend a given situation. Moreover, with better understanding comes improved tolerance and social prosperity as a global culture. These reasons offer further examples of why students should be willing to engage in active study and critical thinking towards cultures both surrounding them and far away.

Research Method:

To collect information, I heavily utilized the BGSU library's various resources and services. For instance, I had two separate research consultations to try and find the best sources for my project. I used both "*Summon*" and the "*EbscoHost*" database collection significantly within my initial search, as well as some outside sources such as "*Google Scholar*" and "*Google Books*" in my attempts to find relevant sources. During this initial period I struggled to find the type of information I sought though. Scientific studies tended to be overly specific to a particular cultural aspect and not inclusive of daily life elements and general mannerisms unique to the E7 cultures that I hoped to include in my country cultural profiles. However, many other sources I encountered were at times questionable in their credibility or were still failing to include some of

the key cultural aspects that are crucial to know in order to conduct oneself in a socially acceptable manner when visiting for extended periods of time. My search did improve some when I began using the key words and phrases of “Cultural Taboos”, “Business Culture in [country]”, “Cultural Etiquette”, etc..., but it took me significant time to find sources I was satisfied with.

Even with this more specific search criteria I was still unable to find sufficient cultural information for the E7. This led to utilize the LibGuide “International Business: Doing Business in the Global Arena” which was created by Linda Rich. I also met with her personally to seek some of her recommendations for my project, and I was even able to recommend the resource “Cultural Atlas” which was subsequently added to the LibGuide for other students to use. Much of my final sources came from the LibGuide’s referenced databases and research sources, particularly from the “Country Information Section”. Upon finding this pathway of research I was able to finally begin pulling and citing the information to be used within my website.

Once my sources were found I organized the information within a document sorted first by country and then into “do’s” and “don’ts” which were then placed into their respective cultural categories. The categories of cultural information I focused on included the following: greetings and conversation, social and home visits, business etiquette, dining, and gender considerations. Once my research was completed, I was able to essentially copy and paste my content into my website with some additional reformatting as needed.

Research Result and Data Presentation:

How one presents their information can play a large factor into how effectively the content is conveyed, retained, and accessed. Therefore, my advisors and I spent significant time deliberating about the best way to present the final product of my project. I wanted it to look

professional enough to be included within the college of business's website or linked on the college of business's study abroad webpage, however, it also would ideally be simple to operate due to my limited coding and technological skills. Furthermore, because of the usefulness of this project, we hoped to create it in such a format that it could easily be added to by other students in the future if the opportunity arose.

All of the above criteria eventually led us to the decision to present my project in the format of a blog through BGSU Blogs. Since every BGSU student has the ability to create a blog through this program for free, it was an ideal situation financially, but more importantly it has allowed me to incorporate everything I had hoped to include into my website. The organization of my website included a home page where I explained the importance of cultural literacy, and why it is increasingly relevant to be informed culturally on the E7. I was also able to include a menu bar with links to separate pages for each of the countries, along with accompanying pictures and videos to increase interest as well as better illustrate the cultures the reader is researching. I also included a bibliography page in a side menu that readers can access to look at what sources I used for each country along with hyperlinks to relevant sources. Overall, the end product looks visibly appealing, is user-friendly, and conveys the information in a clear and easily understood manner so I am very pleased with this result.

Contribution and Conclusion:

As enjoyable and informative as this project was to complete, it was not without its challenges. As previously mentioned, the research process offered some complications when initially trying to find relevant sources due to the more limited information on the E7 in comparison to other countries. At one point in the project, I had some countries with a lot of detail and others with very little, and I knew I needed to try and rectify this imbalance. There was

also the added struggle of trying to choose sources that were unbiased and with the intention of explaining cultural elements respectfully rather than from an overtly Western perspective.

Finding sources that fit this criterion was crucial because I wanted to ensure I was not unintentionally presenting prejudiced information towards different cultures. This transferred into my search for appropriate supplemental images and videos as well since I wanted to be sensitive to potentially inaccurate cultural perceptions of my own and to visibly portray the countries as someone from there would like them to be represented.

With most large projects there is also the need to keep oneself accountable to a schedule in order to complete it on time and within design expectations. Although I felt I did an acceptable job in keeping to my self-imposed timeline, there were weeks when I had to postpone a deadline and catch up the next week. Overall, through keeping myself diligent I was able to complete all of my tasks within an appropriate timeframe and without rushing myself.

It should be noted that my project only touched upon the surfaces of each of the E7's cultures, and there is much more information out there to be collected and learned. As critical cultural theory illustrates, cultures are also prone to change over time. Due to both of these considerations I intentionally chose my website platform so that more information can be easily added or modified as necessary. I also have included a disclosure specifically stating that information may be subject to change, so the reader should consider the presented details critically and not as concrete fact. It is also my and my advisors' hope that another student chooses to continue conducting research on other countries, and potentially keep their resource in a similar format. The links to these resources could be shared within the international business webpage or in other locations so that a wider cultural reserve could be drawn upon by future students for whatever they needs are. The continuation of this project by other students would

also help to demonstrate BGSU and the Schmidthorst College of Business for what they are: an advocate for multicultural interests and appreciation.

In conclusion, cultural literacy is not merely beneficial to people, but is a duty we all should strive to complete. Change occurs in culture because of the individuals within it adopting a new way of thinking and behavior, so why not make this cultural change ourselves in the form of greater tolerance and understanding towards those different than us. It may be that we learn something new or a better way to do things. We may even learn that we are not so different at heart after all.

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