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THE NORDIC MARKET VERSUS INTERNATIONAL MARKETS IN BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS TOURISM IN IRELAND

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ABSTRACT

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The aim of this thesis was to examine whether it is possible to determine behavioural and cultural traits for the clients from the Northern European countries. The region is compared to other regions, such a Belgium, Russia and the United States of America. The thesis was done in collaboration with Tour Operator X, an inbound tourism company based in Dublin, Ireland.

The theoretical study includes cultural theory, destination management, and destination image of Ireland. As of the empirical study, both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used. The qualitative study included interviews with the management and employees of the Nordic and International departments. The quantitative study focused on numerical data from the company database.

The research found the Nordic clients to have shared traits between the countries, as the region is homogeneous in Hofstede's theories. The Nordic agents tend to be disloyal in the tourism market, and needs to be won each time a new quotation is made. To win an enquiry, the communication should be professional and quick, the answer given within 48 hours. The programs prepared for the Nordic and International clients differ on hotel locations and classifications.

The guidelines for communication are given at the end of the thesis, and will be provided to Tour Operator X.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Opinnäytetyö pyrkii selvittämään onko mahdollista määrittää yhtäläisyyksiä pohjoismaisten asiakkaiden välillä. Tutkimus vertailee pohjoismaisia ja kansainvälisiä asiakkaita. Pohjoismaiden vertailukohteina toimivat muun muassa Belgia, Venäjä sekä Yhdysvallat.. Työ tehtiin yhteistyössä Tour Operator X yrityksen kanssa. Yritys toimii Irlantiin suuntautuvan turismin kanssa ja toimipiste sijaitsee Dublinissa.

Teoreettinen osuus käsittelee kulttuuriteoriaa, matkakohteiden hallintaa, Irlannin imagoa matkakohteena sekä päätöksentekoprosessia. Opinnäytetyön toiminnallinen osuus sisältää sekä määrällistä että laadullista dataa. Laadullinen osuus pitää sisällään johtoportaan sekä työntekijöiden haastatteluja alueisiin erikoistuneissa osastoissa. Määrällinen osuus koostuu numeerisesta datasta, joka on otettu yrityksen tietojärjestelmästä.

Tutkimuksesta voidaan päätellä pohjoismaalaisten asiakkaiden olevan samanlaisia Hofsteden teorian luokkien mukaan. Pohjoismaalaiset asiakkaat ovat melko epäuskollisia asiakkaita turismissa, joten matkajärjestäjän tulee voittaa asiakas puolelleen jokaisessa tiedustelutilanteessa. Tärkein asia on kommunikaatio, jonka tulee olla ammattimaista ja nopeaa. Asiakkaan tulee saada matkasuunnitelma 48 tunnin sisällä. Kansainvälisille ja pohjoismaisille asiakkaille suunnatut tarjoukset poikkeavat toisistaan hotellien sijaintien ja luokituksien suhteen.

Suositukset kommunikoitiin löytyvät tutkimuksen päätelmästä, joka toimitetaan opinnäytetyön yhteistyökumppanille.

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1. INTRODUCTION

When considering a vacation, people from the same countries have tendencies to go to similar locations. Of course, there are differences between people, but the general picture can be drawn on one's country. Before the arrival of the internet, most vacations were booked via agencies. With the emergence of online platforms for booking vacations, the importance of travel agencies has diminished. Nevertheless, they still exist and are in business.

The Nordic countries, consisting of Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Finland and Norway, can be considered as the third largest outbound travel market in Europe. The tourists from the Nordic countries generally spend around 90% more money than the average European tourist while on holiday. Besides that, on average about 60% of Nordic people take at least one vacation per year. (Medieministeriet, 2011) With keeping these numbers in mind, it is crucial to be able to deliver a good proposition to the clients. With the perfectly tailored proposal, it is significantly more likely for the client to come back with a definite booking.

As Ireland does not consist of many large cities except for Dublin, the largest amount of tourism in Ireland is to the rural areas if the product offered is not a city break- kind of a vacation. The Business of Rural Tourism, International Perspectives (1997) determines that rural tourism can be seen as an untapped resource. Rural areas are not as of yet very attractive to a modern person, but due people moving to cities, people might turn to more rural tourism instead of now popular urban tourism. (Page & Getz, 1997)

Since this research is commissioned by an Irish privately owned company, most of the data will be specified for purposes of Irish travelling and that will be the setting for the empirical section of this research. For data about Irish tourism this research will consult the Fáilte Ireland, the Tourism Development Board of Ireland. As their annual report of 2014 states, the annual tourism revenue has increased roughly 9 percent annually since the economic crash of 2008. (Fáilte Ireland, 2014)

1.1 Objectives of the thesis

The research problem states: How to conduct business with the Nordic markets compared to other non-English markets?

The research aims to find out if there are any major and minor differences and similarities when in business with Nordics compared to international markets. Secondly, the aim is to find out if there is a product that can be offered to the core client with only minor modifications.

This thesis is done with commercial success as main objective. If guidelines of communication with the client can be established, this could possibly cut back on lost clients due to miscommunication and mishandling and increase the number of return-clients.

1.2 Introduction to company and the current situation

The commissioning company is Tour Operator X, which is one the largest inbound tourism operators in Ireland. The company works in business-to-business sector, which means it does not give the package travel deals straight to the travellers, but instead the travel agencies who then arrange the flights. The company consists of three branches: Tour Operator X, which is the travel operator, Conference and Events Department, which arranges conferences and practical arrangements for the delegates and, finally, Luxury Operator X, which does incentive and luxury travel. This research concentrates on the Tour Operator X branch of the company.

The travel industry in Ireland is continuously growing in quantity and quality. In 2014 more than 7 million tourists arrived to Ireland according to Fáilte Ireland, the tourism development board of Ireland. This correlates to 5,1 billion euros in foreign capital in revenue flowing to Ireland. Since the number of tourists grew by 7% that year, the development of tourism activities has been on continuous rise. The board developed the tourism industry with over 9 million euros in infrastructure and continues to donate grants to national festivals, significant tourism areas and training. (Fáilte Ireland, 2014)

1.3 Research Methodology

The research will be conducted using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Due to the fairly long existence of the Nordics and Non-English department at Tour Operator X, it is a fair assumption that the employees and management have had successes and failures with working. With keeping this in mind, the personnel of the department will be interviewed with a focus on personal experiences, both positive and negative. The quantitative study will be looking into the company database for successful and unsuccessful quotations to clients, as well as the package offered.

1.4 Structure of the study

The thesis can be divided into four separate sections, the theoretical frame of reference, research methodology, empirical study and finally conclusions.

The theoretical section will give the framework for the empirical study with research on cultural theory and destination management and -brand. This is done in order to give the reader an understanding of cultural traits in the later stage and how the destination management of Ireland as a destination will affect the possible traveller. It is important to remember that the client mentioned multiple times in the research is not the end client, the traveller, but the travel agency.

The second section of the thesis is the empirical study. In this section, the research will conduct the qualitative and quantitative research and interpret the findings. The results are then discussed and refined into more specified scientific data. The section will end with a summary of the findings.

Finally, the conclusions are presented and guidelines are offered. The validity and reliability, limitations and future research suggestions are also depicted in the last section of the thesis.

1.5 Limitations

The research is limited to a comparison between the Nordic region, non-English regions, and English regions to a smaller aspect. By limiting the research to certain cultural and regional areas, the scope of the thesis will be more accurate on the Nordic region. The limitations also apply to the interviews, as the people interviewed are subject to cultural bias which needs to be considered. The interviewees represent management and executives; the management might view the subjects differently from the executives. The influence of the management perspective is not discussed in this research, and it could offer a topic for other research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAME OF REFERENCE

The theoretical framework introduces the reader to the theories relevant to the research topic. This thesis will have three significant sections; cultural theory, destination management, destination image and Ireland as a destination and decision making process.

2.1 Cultural theory

This section will consist of different larger cultural theories and theorists, and the theories will be applied to this setting

When considering culture, it is important to initially define what it is. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines culture as "*the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group; also: the characteristic features of everyday existence (as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time*" (Merriam-Webster, 2017)

Another definition is by Geert Hofstede: *"[Culture] is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another."* (Hofstede, et al., 2010, p. 6)

Both can be broken down to two different pieces; Collective or group and traits or programming. The first one depicts that culture has to be within a certain number of people. It cannot consist of only one person. Secondly, the traits or programming is the common attributes of the collective that everyone within it share.

Yet, culture is much more complex. Beneath the surface of culture, there are multiple layers and groups. Almost everyone belongs into several groups or subcultures, and each subculture affects their mentality and mental programming, in accordance with different levels. Examples of subcultures are: National, regional, linguistic, generation and social class. (Hofstede, et al., 2010, pp. 20-22)

2.1.1 Culture by Hofstede

Professor Geert Hofstede conducted a comprehensive research with the company IBM, where he analysed the employee value scores of the company. The study was done between 1967 and 1973 and it originally covered 40 countries, but was later expanded to over 50 countries and 3 separate regions. Subsequently the research was validated and extended by multiple other studies. In the latest edition of his book Cultures and Organisations: Software of the mind (2010) the study is expanded to cover 76 countries (Hofstede, 2016)

Hofstede found with this research that cultural traits can be given values ranging from 1 to 100. He created a model with six comprehensive cultural traits, which as a combination create a set of distinctive cultural aspects that can be traced to country. The categories are:

Power Distance (PDI) – The amount of inequality accepted in a culture. If the power distance value is high, the culture tends to be very hierarchical. As an example, in Finland, the teachers are on first name basis with the students who attend the class. When comparing to Arabic cultures, referring to one's teacher on their first name might end up in detention

Individualism versus collectivism (INV) – Is the culture based on individuals or collectives or groups. If the score is high, there is a higher tendency to divide into groups, which are very close and have undoubted loyalty amongst them. If scored low, the culture values individuals more, and connections to other people are loose.

Uncertainty avoidance (UAI) – How tolerant the individuals and collectives are to uncertainties and ambiguities. If the rating for this section is high, the cultures are prepared for any situations, and strive to avoid situations, which have an unpredictable outcome.

Masculinity versus Femininity (MAS) – Does the culture define success by the material gains, as in new cars and large houses, or are the successes softer elements, as happiness and family life. If the society scores high on this section, the

culture tends to be more assertive and prefer material rewards from accomplishments. If the culture scores low, the value of life is held to higher regard.

Long-term orientation vs Short-term orientation (LTO) – Describes the connection between the past, present and future. A low score determines the culture to be more long-term oriented, keeping traditions in high regard, and viewing change with suspicion. On the other hand, short term orientation is a more pragmatic approach. A culture that is described oriented this way, tend to enforce and encourage change.

Indulgence versus Restraint (IVR) – If a society is indulgent, members are relatively free to gratify their basic and natural needs. When compared to a culture on the other edge, the needs are regulated strongly by the society by means of social norms

With a combination of the above described attributes, all cultures can be differentiated. Nevertheless, it is important to recall, that culture is not the same as identity. Identity is based on personal feelings. How to answer the question: "where do I belong?" As mentioned before, culture can differ between levels, and each of the levels affect the individual. Even within a small proximity of each other, people might recognize different cultures. (Hofstede, 2011, p. 23) An example to this is the city of Vaasa; It is a predominantly Finnish-speaking city, but with a significant portion of native Swedish-speakers. With all services provided in both languages, the city is much more diverse than other cities in Finland.

2.1.2 Criticism of Hofstede

Although peer-reviewed and internationally recognized, Hofstede's theories have been criticised. The most acclaimed criticism was by Brendan McSweeney (McSweeney, 2002), who criticised the idea of national culture and if it can be used to definitely describe large populaces. He also raises questions about the research methodology of Hofstede, as the questionnaires that were used to measure national culture were insufficient to gain actual data of the cultures. In some coun-

tries, over 1000 questionnaires were conducted, when in Pakistan the number was only 37.

Another point McSweeney makes is that the collected data does not necessarily represent the nation, as all the respondents of the original study were from the company IBM, and therefore influenced by the organisational culture of the company, as well as a common occupational culture. When considering these implications to the responses, he questions the validity of the research. (McSweeney, 2002)

McSweeney dealt with five separate areas: a survey is not a suitable way to measure the differences, nations are not the best unit to measure and study cultures, the sample was too small and too affected by the company, the data of IBM was too old and that the dimensions created by Hofstede were not enough. (McSweeney, 2002)

Hofstede answered the criticism in the same publication ten issues later. He answers to all the five points made in the original article written by McSweeney. Considering the surveys not being a suitable way to measure, he answers that the surveys should not be the only way to conduct the study. The unit of nation as a measure is to be considered to be the only unit available for comparison. As for the criticism about the influence of the company and sample size, Hofstede claims that the what was measured was the differences in national cultures, and as such, a set of functionally equivalent samples can supply information about the differences. Since the dimensions have been tested and tried and the data which remained stable was used in his original research, the data is not affected by the passing of time. To increase the number of dimensions would be an enormous undertaking, since the existing dimensions have been scientifically validated and to create something independent from them would be increasingly difficult. (Hofstede, 2002)

2.1.3 Practical applications of Hofstede's Theories

The theory created by Professor Hofstede have been used in cross-cultural communications around the world and they are still considered relevant in many fields ranging from marketing to aviation. The research has been collaborated and replicated on numerous occasions ever since it was conceived.

Hofstede's theory on culture is perhaps most used in the field of Human Resources to manage new employees or to educate their workforce departing for expatriation. Due to the globalisation being the key word of today, companies take cross-cultural competence much more seriously. When considering foreign people for a position or establishing operations in other countries, Hofstede's model has been proven to be relevant (Wursten, et al., 2016)

For the purpose of this research, the models created can be used to explain the differences between the Nordic region compared to the other regions. Of course, it is important to point out that the Nordic region is composed of different cultures within itself. However, the similarities in the Northern Europe are strong and can, therefore, be used as a "Nordic" culture. Even so, the differences between the cultures should be pointed out. (Hofstede, 2011) As it is visible from Figure 1, the region has its differences, but a correlation is visible. All countries score high on Individualism and Indulgence meaning that they value groups and the free rights of basic needs for people, without much regulation. The largest difference is in the uncertainty avoidance. When Sweden and Denmark are more much less uncertainty averse, Finland, Iceland and Norway tend to be more cautious about the uncertainties that might occur. This is because the countries are much more production focused compared to the other two. (itim International, 2016)
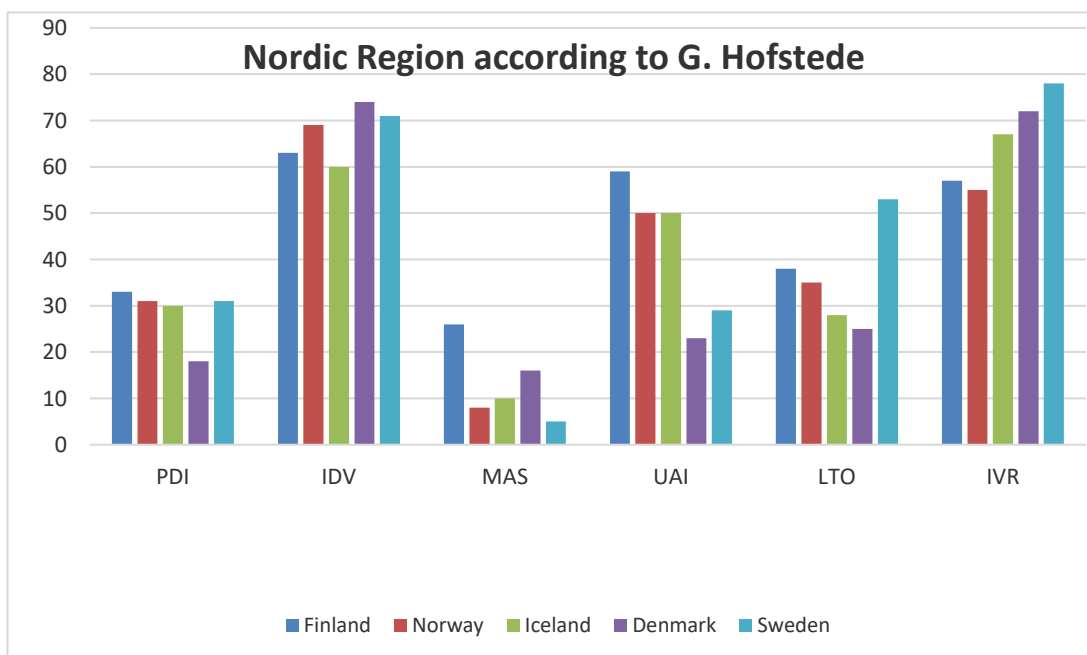
Figure 1: Nordic Region by Hofstede's Dimensions

Relating to tourism industry and more to the customer satisfaction aspect of the business, the Hofstede model can be very useful. When looking at the power distance aspect of the model, it is important to realise the difference in the cultures. When a customer from high power distance country, such as the Arabic countries, is in contact with the customer service personnel, the customer will expect to be treated like royalty. As opposed to a customer from a lower one, such as Denmark comes in contact with the company, they will expect to be treated more as equals. Individualism versus collectivism will describe which will take importance in correspondence, the task or the relationship. The more individualism concentrated the culture, the more task oriented the customer will be. A similar situation is seen with masculinity dimension, as the client with masculine culture expects more special treatment, when a feminine culture expects a lasting and prosperous relationship to be built. The main difference between the Nordic countries is with the uncertainty avoidance and that is one of the most important considering an industry like tourism. The less uncertainty averse countries, such as Sweden and Denmark have much higher tolerance of ambiguities and are more likely to accept a quote with less information to more adverse countries, such as the other Nordic countries. (Wursten, et al., 2009)

2.2 Culture by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner

Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner created the model of national culture differences; a framework that can be used in general business and management. The model was created by using a large-scale survey including 43 different countries. Unlike Hofstede's model, this survey included many former Soviet nations and was conducted with multiple companies instead of just one. (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997, p. 17)

The questionnaire Trompenaars conducted was based on the differences of personal and cultural "pattern variables" or value dilemmas. It consisted of forced choice questions between two statements regarding the aspects of general issues or organisational behaviour. The other section consisted of asking the respondents how they would behave in a shortly described imaginary situation. This database provides a good opportunity to look into values of individual nations across the world, much like Hofstede's database. (Trompenaars, et al., 1996)

Much like Hofstede, Trompenaars detected dimensions in the cultures he was measuring. He divided the dimensions to seven, when Hofstede only divided them into five. Of the dimensions, five cover human interaction with each other, one explains the time or the chronological dimension and one deals with environment. (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997, pp. 11-14)

Universalism versus Particularism – Cultures with a universalism point of view see that the ideas and practices are universally applicable without modification, when as a particularism nation believes that the situation dictates the right course of action and the ideas and practices are subject to change. In the business world this can easily be correlated to meetings. When a meeting is conducted in a universalism characterised country, a much more business oriented atmosphere is created. As opposed to a particularism country, more social atmosphere is created with the attendants.

Individualism versus Communitarianism – This dimension is very similar to Hofstede's Individualism versus collectivism, although the research suggested

that the cultures can change. When Hofstede found Mexico to be collectivism country, Trompenaars found that it had changed to correspond to individualism way of thinking.

Neutral versus Emotional – It determines if members are "allowed" to show emotion. In a neutral culture, relating to business life, emotions are kept in check, as it is seen to confuse the situation. Outbursts of emotions are strictly forbidden and seen as abnormal. When in an emotional culture, even during business meetings it is natural to show strong emotions and even leave the room in anger.

Specific versus Diffuse – In countries of the specific kind, the personal space of the individuals is departmentalised, as the people are different depending on the situation and company. When compared to diffuse cultures, the person is the same in all contexts. As an example, a professor from USA is known as Professor X when he is working, but by his first name when outside work, compared to professor Y in Germany, the title and authority follow the individual to all aspects of his or her life. (Luthans & Doh, 2012, pp. 126-127)

Achievement versus Ascription – This comparison is about if the individual is judged by the achievements they have recently acquired or if they are judged by the prestige of the institute. Achievement oriented culture appreciates a degree in engineering without further information, when ascription oriented would need information of the institute and if it is prestigious and known.

Sequential versus Synchronic – This dimension depicts the influence of time. Whether the society values the past or the future of individuals.

Internal versus External Control –This dimension examines whether the surroundings are affecting the individual or whether the individual affects the surroundings.

2.2.1 Criticism against Trompenaars

Since Trompenaars has a large impact on the cultural theory field, it has been extensively criticized. Even the author of the cultural dimensions, Geert Hofstede, has written an article about the flaws of "Riding the waves of culture." (Hofstede, 1996)

In Hofstede's article, he raises concerns about the methodology of Trompenaars's research and the conclusion it brings out. He also argues that the result of the database does not correlate with the conclusion. He sees the obvious inadequacy of content validity of the instrument as a major concern for the study. (Hofstede, 1996)

2.2.2 Trompenaars's theories in Practice

The theories of Trompenaars are significantly more used in business management, due to their straight correlation to business meetings and everyday cross-cultural communication. Trompenaars's research and typology has been extensively used in corporate social responsibility. (Pyszka & Pilat, 2011)

Trompenaars has been able to create the typology to consist of four separate dimensions that correlate to hierarchy and personal/task emphasis.
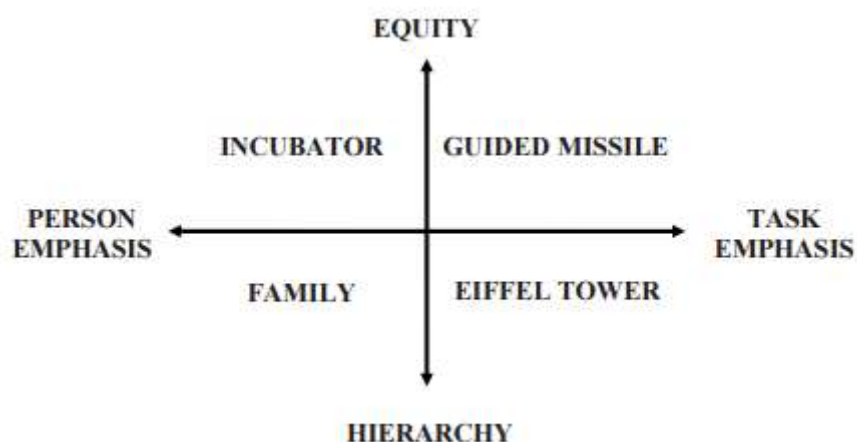
Figure 2: F. Trompenaars: Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Diversity in Global Business, Irvin Publishing, Burr Ridge IL 1994, p. 159

The context of the Figure 2 shown above is used to describe how a culture reacts to leadership and how this correlates with the either relationship or task orientation. (Trompenaars, 1994, pp. 159-165) (Pyszka & Pilat, 2011)

Incubatior, or fulfilment-oriented culture, is when the workplace is leaning towards personal or relationship emphasis as well as equity. The culture is aimed at creating a safe environment for self-fulfilment and -expression for the members.

Guided Missile culture, or task-oriented culture, can be defined with the motto "getting things done." The culture is based on strong equality and task orientation. Everything is focused on achieving the goals and the power is derived on expertise and knowledge and not from formal hierarchy.

The Family, or power-orientation, can be seen as a family. The culture has a strong relationship to their leader and are expected to fulfil their tasks. The subordinates see the leader as a parent figure, and seek guidance and approval from them.

The Eiffel tower, or role-orientated culture: The term represents the typical organisation of this culture, a strong hierarchical and tall organisation. All tasks are very clearly defined and coordinated by the leadership, which is derived from the person's position or role and not from the person as such.

As mentioned before, this typology can be used in CSR, but can be correlated to tourism industry as such. When communicating with lower level employees of a

tourism company, this gives insight to the decision making process. If the client is strong on equality, the lowest level employees usually are able to make decisions without going through their superiors.

2.3 Destination Management

Destination management can be defined as specialised marketing. It is to differentiate and make the product, a destination, desirable and, therefore, increase the incoming traffic to the destination. In this section of this thesis, the overall theory behind destination management will be explained and on a later stage be tied to Ireland as a destination.

Destination management, or destination branding, is to market a set destination by creating a brand. The main role of a brand is to identify the product or goods and to differentiate it from competitors. (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000, p. 7) This sentence can be broken down to two key words, *identifying* and *differentiating*. To identify the brand is to make the brand known to the customer and to differentiate the brand is to make it stand out amongst all the products.

When related to tourism, it is important to keep in mind that most what destination branding end products are intangible. The product is the experience to an extent. Destination brand is defined as a message, that both differentiates and identifies a destination as well as conveys an assurance of a memorable experience that is directly related to the destination. It should also make one remember the positive experiences of the destination. (Richie & Richie, 1998, p. 103)

A prominent part of the earlier definition is the word assurance, or other way of saying promise. For destination brands, promise is more important than many other service sectors. The travellers must be able to anticipate the future vacation experience, and if this is not achieved, the customer is left unsatisfied. Nevertheless, promise is a strong word to be used in this context. The tour operator or destination management company cannot guarantee every aspect of the vacation to be successful. (Blain, et al., 2005, pp. 328-338)

2.3.1 Destination Marketing or Management Organisations

All destination management organisations (DMO) do marketing in their everyday business. The core business for such an organisation is to market and sell their product, which in this case is a location or destination. The change to destination management company is that this sort of organisation also conducts development and other activities to make the destination more desirable.

The World Tourism Organisation defines the three levels DMO's operate as such (World Tourism Organisation, 2004):

1) National Tourism Authorities or organisations, who market and manage tourism operations on a national level
2) Regional organisations, that operate within a certain geographical area, such as state or province.
3) Local organisations, which are management and/or marketing organisations within a significantly smaller region or within a city or town

The structure of such an organisation might differ strongly from case to case. Organisations range from non-profit organisations to governmental departments. The main difference between such companies is the primary goal of the organisation. A goal for governmental organisation might be to develop a location and so forth bring more tourists, which leads to more tourism tax revenues. When other companies are purely for profit organisations. This correlates directly to funding. Example of such a governmental organisation would be Fáilte Ireland, the National tourism development board of Ireland. The organisation aims to support the tourism industry and to develop and sustain Ireland as a destination. (Fáilte Ireland, 2016)

The DMO's have a significant impact on local development, as they efficiently develop the area to match the requirements of tourists. They also indirectly direct the whole infrastructure of the destination. Morrison, Bruen and Anderson (1998) defined five main functions for Destination Management Organisations: (Morrison, et al., 1998)

Economic Driver – The organisation generates new employment, income and taxes that benefit the whole area

Community Marketer – Develops and delivers the appropriate images and attractions to the market

Industry coordinator - Leads the local industry in one direction with a clear focus and strengthens the industry by sharing the benefits of tourism

Quasi-public representative – Adds protection to group- or individual visitors as well as adds authority to the industry

Builder of community pride – Acts as the leader for residents and visitors by enhancing the quality of life

2.3.2 For-profit DMO

To differentiate from the mentioned in the previous chapter, the privately owned DMO's are almost exclusively for-profit organisations. Such organisations sell the products, or destinations. The companies develop destinations in much narrower sense than governmental organisations, but are nevertheless as important, as they arrange the final vacations.

Such organisations are likely to be supported to governmental organisations. The support can be intellectual, financial and/or contacts to domestic or international organisations. The main objective for a DMO is to promote the product. This can be done with advertising and sales and is usually the main activity DMO is involved in. (Dore & Crouch, 2003)

Comparing for-profit companies to NPOs and governmental organisations, the goals of the companies differ, even if they work the same way to achieve the goals. The privately owned or for-profit DMO is strictly aimed for revenue. This is achieved by developing the area, marketing the product and achieving good relationships with suppliers.

2.3.3 Challenges for destination management organisations

Even if the companies which conduct destination management and marketing have massive effect on the desirability of the product, they are only one aspect of the whole situation. They do not exist in a vacuum, as in if governmental policies, for example taxation, visas or customs policies, or industrial norms are not favourable, the destination management organisations have difficulties operating and can't necessarily have impact on the overall situation. Below examples of such policies, that effect directly and indirectly tourism industry. (Goeldner & Brent, 2012, pp. 330-332)

Passports and Visas – due to restrictions of visas and other documents needed to arrive to a country, the tourists might deem it too difficult to arrive to the destination, and so significantly reduce the amount of traffic to the country

Taxation – If the taxation of services and products is too high, the prices correspondingly are effected. This leads to less interest in the field by the locals and to decrease in attractiveness to tourists.

Infrastructure – If the government does not invest in a working infrastructure, the visitors might feel e.g. unsafe and decide not to travel.

National/Regional/local funding to public facilities – Do the local attractions get financial support (E.g. sports stadiums, conference centres, parks, museums or other attractions.) If they do not, this can have a drastic effect on the attractiveness of the destination

To summarize, there are multiple dimensions that are not possible for the companies to efficiently affect, such as the ones above. There are also other dimensions that the companies have more of an affect to, such as visitor satisfaction, truth-in-advertising policy and guarantees, but nevertheless all the sections have a large impact on the attractiveness and competitiveness of the product. (Goeldner & Brent, 2012, p. 332)

2.4.4 Ireland as a destination and how it is managed

This section will have more specified explanation of Irish tourism and what position it holds in international tourism market, how it has been developed and what are the main bodies responsible for such development.

Tourism is one of the main income sources for the Republic of Ireland, with 8 million visitors arriving in 2015 and bringing the revenue of 4,3 billion euros. This is a sign of global economic upturn, as well as the success destination marketing. (Failte Ireland, 2015, p. 5)

Irish tourism can be divided into two specific types, touring and city stays. Touring is when a traveller or a group of passengers travel to multiple locations and stay for more than one night, for example a touring programme can entail five different cities and last for seven days. City stays tend to be much shorter and are focused around one city, with the possibility of excursions to different locations. For example, such a programme might be a weekend stay in Dublin, with one-day long excursion to Belfast. Dublin is significantly popular destination in Ireland, as has held the primary positon the destination for international and domestic tourists, with 52% of all visitors in 2015 staying there at least one night during their stay in Ireland (Tourism Ireland, 2016)

Another way to divide the touring in Ireland is to divide it amongst the rural tourists and the urban area tourists. In addition to Dublin, the other major cities with strong attraction are Belfast, Cork and Galway. Because the cities are very popular travel destinations, tourism industry has experienced large growth. Main locations of rural tourism are the national park of Wicklow, National park of Connemara, Cliffs of Moher within the Burren region and Ring of Kerry.

Since the tourism in Ireland is a significant source of revenue, the industry is highly competitive, yet attractive for companies. The industry is overseen by the governmental tourism board of Ireland, Fáilte Ireland. The board also significantly improves the marketing and sales with financial support for trade shows and familiarisation trips. The inbound tourism organisations have also founded an In-

bound tourism operator association (ITOA) to represent their members in international context. The organisation has 32 members. (Irish Tour Operators Association, 2016)

Ireland has a special advantage with both Nordic and North American tourists. Due to the history of Ireland being strongly influenced by the Vikings, Ireland has multiple historically significant Viking heritage locations, and this has been used as an advantage. The mass emigrations to North America have influenced the number of American tourists to Ireland, as a significant amount of Americans feel they have Irish bloodlines, and wish to come visit the lands of their forefathers. This can be seen as the number of travellers to Ireland from USA with 15% of total passenger amount in 2015 (Tourism Ireland, 2016)

As previously explained, the Irish Tourism Development board, Fáilte Ireland, supports all DMC and inbound tourism companies both financially and intellectually. One of their most significant development projects is the Wild Atlantic Way. The project was launched in summer 2012 to create 2500-kilometre-long driving route along the Atlantic coast, from Donegal on the northern coast of Ireland all the way to West Cork in south-western part of Ireland. The route has been developed with 12 million Euro capital, plus additional marketing funds have been set. (Failte Ireland, 2016)

Another large scale project, Ireland's Ancient East, was launched in early 2016, to sell and market the regions in southern and eastern Ireland for possible tours. This tour was done to create competition against the traditionally popular Ring of Kerry in south-western Ireland. The area got an initial governmental investment of 18 million euros to develop the area and create and sell the area. (Failte Ireland, 2016)

2.4 Decision making process

Customer decision making process can be simplified in few simple steps: (University of Massachussetts, 2017)

Identifying the need – When a need or want arises, the customer realises the need for a change. This can be, for example, a broken computer or the need for a vacation.

Gathering information – To find all relevant information prior the purchase. This can be either asking for different quotations, finding information online or in brochures or some other way of finding relevant data

Finding alternatives – After finding the information, the customer usually has identified different options

Evaluating the possibilities – The information gathered with the alternatives create a pool of options. The client then proceeds to rank the options according to their personal feelings and opinions.

Choosing the best option – After evaluating the possible options, the person or people decide on going forward with one option, or revert back to the 3rd step of finding alternatives.

Taking action – After the correct alternative has been chosen, the customer goes forward with proceeding with that option. This can be purchasing the product or accepting a quotation

Decision done, reviewing the result – Follow up on the made decision. On the service sector this leads to either becoming a repeat customer or not purchasing with the same agent anymore.

With this model, it is important to keep in mind that this does not accurately correspond with group decisions, but works more with individual decision making.

When considering group decision making process, two main factors arise; a) factors that have an effect on the decision input, such as the group composition, group size and task type, and b) interaction among the group and management style of the group. For example, it has been found that the size of the group has a negative impact on the members' input, as well as the knowledge level of individual members affects the amount of ideas. (Hirokawa & Poole, 1996, p. 7)

2.4.1 Decision making in tourism sector

Decision making in tourism industry is different, since the product is intangible, an experience. The main points of the decision are with should the person/group travel and where they travel if they decide to do so. After this decision the tourist must decide what kind of a vacation they will have e.g. leisure holiday versus active holiday. To destination management companies all relevant questions are weighted, but the core question is about the destination. A tourist can decide on a destination, and afterwards decide on the package and what kind of a vacation they experience. (Nuaraeni, et al., 2014)

One of the most important aspects of the decision process when considering the destination, is the common mental image and the public image of the destination. The personal beliefs do not have as much of an impact on this case. (Obenour, et al., 2005)
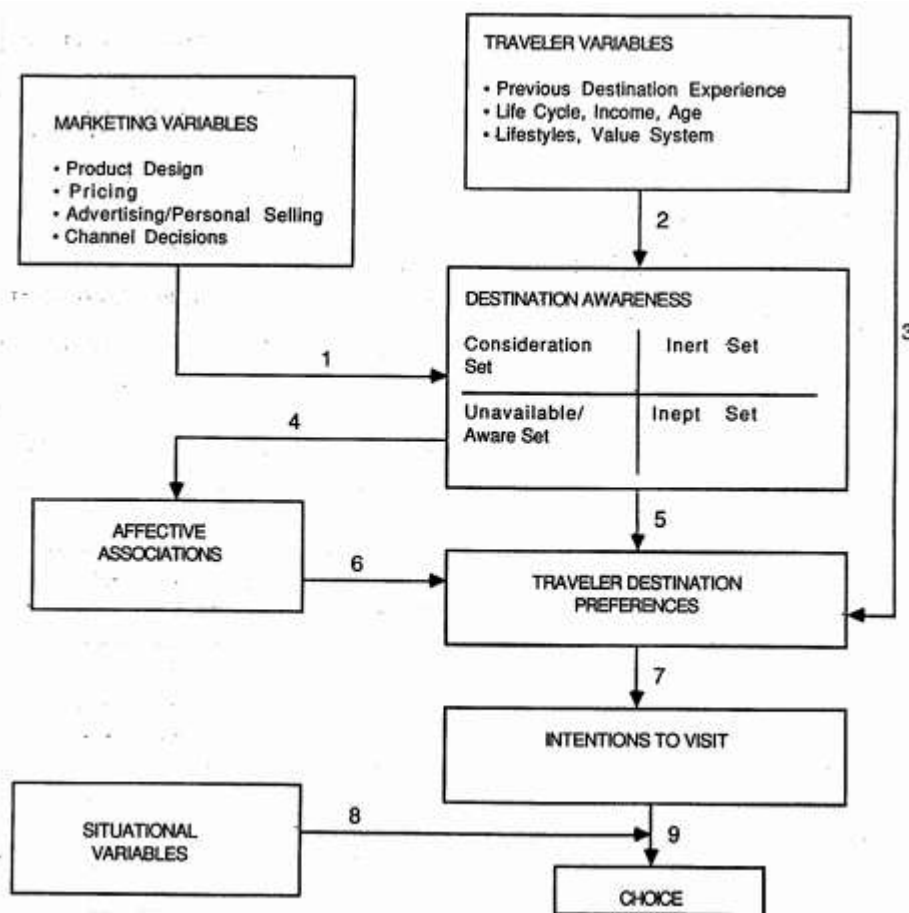
Figure 3: General Model of Traveller Leisure Destination Awareness and choice (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989, p. 9)

As shown on the above Figure 3, the decision process for a destination is very complicated and multi-dimensional. Between the initial idea of vacation and finally deciding the destination there are multiple possible variables that either enforce an initial decision or make the traveller count out a location. (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989, pp. 9-15)

The Marketing Variables (1) are effected by the destination management and marketing. The destination has to be marketed well and towards the personal preferences of the customer and the vacation is tailored towards the person or the group. For example, the customer might not know about the vacation possibilities in western Ireland, since they are not advertised as extensively.

The Traveller Variables (2) are the personal experiences and the life situation of the possible customer. If the past experiences have been successful, the client is more likely to become a repeat traveller. Lifestyle can rule out destinations, but mostly it affects the contents of the vacation. This category affects the preferences of the travellers. A wealthy pensioner couple is much less likely to go for an "only flights" package to Thailand due to indulgence preferences.

The Destination Awareness section (4 &5) is categorised into four different distinctive sections, which are influenced by both marketing and travellers own perceptions of the destination. The consideration set and unavailable/aware set are directly correlated from the two previous sections. The inept and inert sets are the conscious and unconscious emotions about the destination.

Affective Associations (6) are the emotions derived from the previous destination awareness. The associations are such as when a traveller thinks about "sun and beaches" they correlate that feeing to Thailand or Spain, and when the person thinks about whisky, they think about highlands Scotland. The associations have an impact on the preferences leading to the final decision. (Decrop, 2006, p. 31)

All the sections leading to Traveller Destination Preferences have an influence on the final decision. At this stage, the passenger has most likely narrowed his/her search to just a few samples and finally decides on one location with the intention to stay.

If the situational variables (8), such as the economic situation, the low likelihood of disasters or other force majeure, are favourable, the client finally makes the choice of travelling to the destination.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section will explain the key portions of the collected data and how it has been collected. This research is defined as "The systematic collection and interpretation of information with clear purpose" by Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill. (2016, p.726) The objective of this research was determined by the company who issued the research topic, and the thesis aims to answer the question mentioned in the introduction of this paper. (Saunders, et al., 2016, p. 726)

The primary data collected is quantitative, which aimed to gain a deeper understanding of a specific phenomenon. Another definition is "non-numerical data that has not been quantified." (Saunders, et al., 2016, p.724) As the research is aimed to answer the question "how" a qualitative method is favoured. (University of California Long Beach, 2015; Saunders, et al., 2016 p. 724)

Quantitative, supporting data was collected as secondary data from the case company database. Quantitative data is defined as "numerical or quantified data" (Saunders, et al., 2016, p. 725) This data consisted of numerical information about enquiries received, accepted quotations and the type of travel (touring group or city stay.) By gathering this quantitative data, the interview responses can be supported with the numerical data and, thus, can be interpreted more accurately. (Saunders, et al., 2016, p. 725)

3.1 The Choice of Method

The data is collected primarily from interviews, as the research question "how to conduct business with the Nordic market compared to international markets." Due to the experience of the interviewees in the subject, this was deemed to be the most valid qualitative primary data. In addition to the interviews, supporting secondary quantitative data is collected from the case company database.

The subjects for the interviews are chosen as the people closest to the department of Nordics & International markets and as comparison point the management of North America and Long-Haul department.

3.2 Data Sources

The qualitative data, as mentioned above, is collected from the interviews. The interviews followed a semi-structural questionnaire. **(Appendix 1)** and all the interviews were conducted during the 7th week of 2017 in the Dublin office of the company, and they were conducted in English. All interviews were recorded with the consent of each participant with a smartphone recording application, and later transcribed to a written form.

The interviews consists of three separate interviews with the personnel of the Tour Operator X. The interviewees represented both the employees and management of different departments.

The quantitative data is collected as secondary data from the database of the case company, which stores all correspondence, quotations and the confirms from quotations. The gathered numerical data will be used as supportive information for the primary, qualitative data. The data from the database is confidential and, therefore, will not be disclosed in detail.

Qualitative data was decided to be used as the primary data due to the experience of the recipients and the cumulated knowledge about the markets. The interviewees all had extensive experience in working with business-to-business tourism in Ireland.

3.3 Construction of questionnaire

The questionnaire is constructed around the main areas of the theoretical frame. The main sections are cultural theory, destination management and decision process of customers. The interview is built to be a non-standardized, semi-structured, one-to-one interview. With the questionnaire, the main topics are prepared, but the flow of conversation will not be disturbed and if something interesting comes up, the conversation can easily be directed to such topic. As the type of data collection is to explore and ensue the discussion, it is important to capture the follow-up answers to the initial questions. (Saunders, et al., 2016, p. 391)

The participants are given the questions two weeks before the set interview date, to give them a chance to prepare. Each interview has a meeting room reserved for 30 minutes.

3.4 Reliability and Validity

Reliability of a research refers to the findings being repeatable. Should the study be conducted again, the results need to be the same as in the first research. If they are, the research is reliable. Another definition on the subject is the extent to which the findings are accurate to the total population and consistent over time. (UC Davis, 2015; Joppe, 2000, pp. 597-607)

Validity is can be defined as "did the research measure the what it was intended to measure or how truthful the results are?" The research needs to answer the questions defined within the research. (Joppe, 2000, pp. 597-607)

The empirical interviews were conducted face-to-face and no deviation on interview structure. Due to the sample size and the interviewees being from the same company, some issues with responses might rise. Nevertheless, the respondents cooperated fully with the interviewer and provided the research with their insights to the topic. Due to the nature of the qualitative research to measure the attitudes and opinions, the definition of reliability might be difficult to fill.

Another threat to reliability on the interviews is the participant bias. Since each member interviewed has a different cultural background, there might be cultural bias on the answers. Also, the position within the company might have an influence on the interviewees, as portion of the recipients are from managerial position, as some are of executive position. Due to relatively small distortion of answers, this thesis will not consider such participant biases, which are defined by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2016, p. 203) as "Any factor which induces a false response" (Saunders, et al., 2016, p. 203)

4. EMPRIRICAL STUDY

This section of the study is committed to the empirical study of the research. The section 4.1 gives background about the company, and section 4.2. explains the findings from the interviews regarding the regions and correspondence.

4.1 Tour Operator X

The company was founded as a tour operator in Dublin, Ireland in 1978. The company initially operated under a different name and later branched out and re-branded as a part of a group. The company founded another company in Scotland in 2008 to gain access to the tourism market in Scotland and to have presence in the region. Later, in 2013, the company acquired a luxury travel company based in Ireland. With this acquisition, it gained a significant share of American travel market to the company, and additionally gained access to the luxury travel market of Ireland with the contacts and experience of the acquired company.

The latest change in the company structure was the buying of London based touring company in 2015. This brings the company to encompass the whole of the British Isles. After the latest acquisition had been concluded, the company re-branded itself as Group A, which includes all the different companies. Thus, the company streamlined the business and supplier relations due to centralised accounting procedure. (Tour operator X, 2017)

Company X specialises in Group and Individual travel, each with separate departments for key countries, such as the German speaking markets department or the French speaking markets department. The largest market for the company is the German speaking market, and this is the largest department in the company. (Tour Operator X, 2016)

4.2 Findings

This section will introduce the findings in the market under the first header, the second section will discuss the key differences between the two and the end of the chapter will consider the interaction between the Tour Operator and the agents, as well as what to avoid during the correspondence.

The findings will be introduced into subsections in accordance to the theoretical section of the thesis, and the quantitative data will be used to support the interviews.

All the respondents agreed that the industry is very positive and the negative issues are small and insignificant. The core problem with the tourism situation in Ireland is the lack of hotel space and, thus, that results in inability to provide quotations with confirmed hotels.

The key areas of the interviews regarding the Nordic market are gathered under the next heading, with emphasis on the theoretical framework already built in the first section of this thesis. The main areas are: cultural theory, destination management and decision making process.

4.2.1 Cultural Theory

All the respondents agreed that the pricing and fast responses are important. Due to the client most likely sending the same enquiry to multiple different agents, it is crucial to provide the client with the immediate acknowledgement that the company is working on the query. The pricing level must be competitive and correct, as well as the proposition needs to look professional.

Another way to win over the client is to develop a relationship with the agent. As the interviewees explained, it is built up over time, with significantly faster speed if sales trips are involved. The respondents did mention that a personal relationship might be difficult to achieve, due to the agents tending to remain distant. The relationships tend to not be personal, but more friendly than professional. The most personal manifestation of relationship the interviewees had experienced was

during a sales trip, invited to have dinner with the family of the agent they were meeting.

When asked about the main concerns and key points of attention when preparing a programme for the agents, the main concern that came up was the correct and competitive pricing on the offer. If the offer is sent to the client with mistakes, this can cause the agent to question the professionality of the operator employee. Another key concern is that the product needs to be tailored to the correct agent. The budget of the client should be enquired during the initial correspondence, as well as the needs and wants of the client. If the holiday is over the budget, but it can be justified, then the programme can be accepted. If the holiday has activities or services that were not agreed upon and thus increase the cost, the client will likely not return to the operator with amendments to the vacation.

As per conversion to quote rate, it was the common conception that Asian countries tend not to convert as much as European countries or the US. There are differences in the European area, for example the Netherlands seem to be not converting to business as much, but as comparison, the Nordic region is converting to business significantly more. This is backed by the quantitative data collected from the company system. During the last two year, the Netherlands has converted with 12,5% and the Nordic region has converted with an average of 51%.

4.2.2 Destination management

The destination management section is about the sales of Ireland, difficulties in entering Ireland and the division of countries with city stays to touring.

All the respondents emphasised the importance of a safe image of Ireland. Even with the recent terrorist activities and threats in Europe, such as Paris and Brussels, Ireland is still seen as a safe destination to travel to.

All the interviewees agreed on the importance of the local populace on incoming tours. The Irish people are stereotypically welcoming and friendly, which has a positive effect on how the country is perceived by tourists.

Air access was mentioned as a definite plus for the travellers. As the home airport of Ryanair and Aer Lingus are located in Dublin, both low cost airlines fly from most European destinations to Dublin. Another mentioned air route was the newly established route from Stockholm to Shannon, which was launched with a special deal including events in the region. Another important route is from the US to Shannon and Dublin airports.

If the operators from the tour operator were to meet new possible clients, the sales speech is based on the client's preferences. All the sales operations are tailored to the agents. The key characteristics are still the same. The highlights of Ireland are safety, great air access and famous locations, such as Cliffs of Moher and Ring of Kerry. As mentioned before, the sales situations would be tailored towards client's prior trips.

Due to Ireland being a part of the European Union, as well as the special relationship with the US, there are no significant entry barriers with Europeans or North Americans. Some countries still require a visa, but during the time the interviewees have been in the company, no visa has been declined from the visitors. The most the tour operator does, is provide the agent with letter on invitation, which states the duration and location of the stay. United States and Ireland have a special customs agreement, as travellers from the United States of America are able to pre-clear customs when departing from Ireland. This cuts the waiting time at the American airport significantly, as travellers do not need to queue for customs upon arrival.

Another important aspect for the future is the impact of Great Britain leaving the European Union. As the situation is still unclear and raises many questions, mostly with the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland becoming the outer border of the European Union. If the border does become the outer border, this will increase the tension in Northern Ireland, as well as makes the border crossing difficult.

As for the division between City Stays and Touring-groups in the regions, the interviewees responded clearly with the Nordic region being more City stays, with

few touring groups each year. The non-English groups are significantly more touring with occasional city stay and North American and Australia/New Zealand are groups purely touring, as the distance from Ireland does not allow short stays. The minimum stay is roughly five days stay, as stated by one of the managers.

4.2.3 Decision Process

As the decision making process, the interviewees were asked questions about the time of positive or negative replies once the offer has been sent to the client, and marketing of Ireland to their customers.

Once the quotation has been sent to the agent, the time of the response depends on the client, and the type of a vacation. This cannot be relayed to regions as such, as this is more about the individual client and their codes of conduct. If the quotation is a city stay, the hotel space has to be found, but not confirmed yet. When sending such an offer to the client, an option of two weeks is given to either confirm the hotels or not. In cases like this, the confirmation has to come within two weeks. When considering touring programmes, it is rare to get a confirmation with the first quote. The program suggestion has to be amended multiple times before a confirmation is acquired. This is not necessarily because the client does not agree with the programme, but has acquired some new knowledge of the locations or wishes to add or deduct something from the trip. Due to this, the confirmation for the touring programmes might take long.

The marketing done by Tourism Ireland, the marketing body of Irish tourism, is considered highly successful, even if the funding for the marketing activities is deemed insufficient. The respondents do, however, agree that the funding could always be better and an equibrillium might be nearly impossible to achieve. Otherwise the marketing activities have been a success, but some of the interviewees deemed the activities being too much towards business travel. As an example, one of the interviewees explained that in her home country Tourism Ireland does not promote Ireland towards the populace, but companies.

When discussing the marketing aspect towards their regions of expertise, most agreed that constant communication should be improved, for example, in sending the clients campaigns on regular basis and sending best wishes during national festivities. The client must be kept constantly curious about travelling to Ireland. The campaigns do not have to be significant and complicated, but simple and curious. For example, such a campaign can be a two night stay in Newcastle with airport transportation.

4.2.4 Comparison of Nordics versus International markets

The main points from the interviews regarding the differences between the markets are gathered under this section. The sections about the contrasting characteristics between the Nordic markets and the International markets can be divided into four different sections; financial, type of vacation, entry barriers and quality of hotels. The comparisons are supported by the cultural theory of Geert Hofstede, as indulgence versus restraint can be used to explain the financial section, as well as the quality of hotels section. The regions have been averaged below. Due to strong cultural similarities among the averaged countries, it is possible to make a crude average of the countries.

For the price consciousness and budgeting, the Nordics were considered as a higher budget community, with more spending money and higher quality of vacation. Another such community was seen to be the United States. The core concept with this was the quality of hotels and acceptance of additional services. On contrast, non-English communities were seen as significantly lower budget, as relayed by the quality and location of hotels and the overall service amount. The quotes made to non-English agents tend to be more "skeletal," as they tend to have less services and just the core activities and services, such as transportation and hotels.

The holiday type for the countries was clear, but it falls to agents more than countries. Each country has specific agents for touring, as well as city stays. But overall quotations for certain vacation types could be divided to regions, which is also visible from the quantitative data. The Nordic countries tend to do significantly

more city stays, as mentioned by several interviewees and supported by quantitative data. Of all the quotations, 57,1% are city stays. When comparing to non-English and English markets, only 34,0% are city stays. This can be attributed to the distance from Ireland. For North Americans, the city stays are almost impossible, the same as with some Asian countries and Australia.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the entry barrier in Ireland are small. In European Union member countries, such as the Nordic countries, no visa is needed. However, when considering the non-English countries and English countries further away, a visa is required to travel. As Ireland is relatively liberal, it is rare not to have a visa accepted. As for other significant entry barrier, the travel time might prove to be an obstacle for travelling from Far-East Asia, as well as from Oceania.

The final core difference between the markets is the quality and location of the hotel the group stays in. As mentioned in the interviews, the core hotel quality can be defined by country, but there are some agents who offer higher or lower quality hotels to provide luxury travel or to cut costs for the tour. The quality level can be determined for each country; Nordic countries tend to move forward on city centre 3-star hotels, when non-English groups prefer decentral 3-star locations. This is related to the budget of the groups. As for the English market, most operators prefer more luxurious locations, such as four or five star central locations, as their clients are usually more high end.
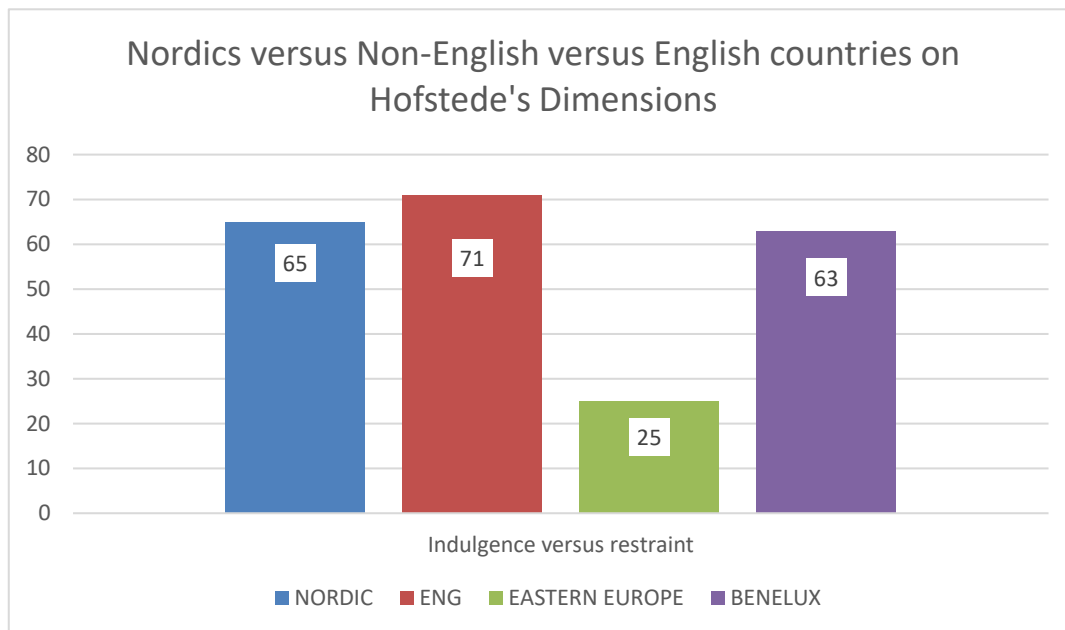
Figure 4: Hofstede's dimensions

As visible from Figure 4, the main difference between the key markets of the research is on Indulgence versus restraint. For the Nordic section, the considered countries are Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland. The English market consists of USA, Australia and New Zealand. Benelux countries are composed of Belgium and the Netherlands, but due to the lack of travellers from Luxemburg, the country has not been included. Eastern European countries consist of Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic and Russia. Due to the similarity of the regions on this dimension, it is possible to gather the countries under one, larger section.

The indulgence versus restraint depicts how free the members of the society are to appease the needs and wants. When considering this section, it is related to the budget and luxury-level of the vacation. As mentioned in the theoretical section, the countries depicted to have higher indulgence level tend to have more budget and higher level of expected service quality for the vacation.

4.2.5 Interaction between Tour operator and agents

One of the most important points mentioned in the interviews was the communication between the operator and agents. This was mentioned to be one of the key reasons to lose a quote, or in contrast, to win a quote.

The first step when an enquiry arrives is to acknowledge the client, to let the agent know that the operator has received the enquiry and has started to work on it. This acknowledgement must be immediate and polite. It was mentioned several times that the clients expect professional and courteous replies from the operators.

As mentioned during the interviews, the Nordics department lost contact with the agents in Scandinavia due to lack of presence in the markets due to changes in the department. This could have been mitigated with continuous communication with the agents. The agents should be kept continuously curious about travelling to Ireland and the operator needs to keep in contact, even with just seasonal greetings. The best possible outcome from the communication is to attract travellers to the campaigns.

The campaigns are, for example, short weekend vacations, such as a weekend in Dublin or Galway. These campaigns are either sent via email to certain clients or sent with sent via mass email to all agents. This might lead to increased sales and new groups travelling, but mostly it is used to keep in contact with the agents. The same campaigns are used as sales materials when conducting sales trips to targeted markets. The campaigns are directed to different markets, as the campaigns towards the Nordics consist of two hotel nights and transportation from the airport to the hotel and back. The ones targeted towards the English markets are more consisting of a whole quotation targeted to specific clients.

Another campaign is for the FIT (Free Independent Travelling), which means individuals or very small groups travelling. The campaigns included in this section cover the whole visit, so it can include the accommodation, transportation and visits to specific locations. One of the most sold campaign is the "self-drive" package, which included the car rental, hotel nights and visits to certain locations. The

package gives an outline of the travel route and times the visits. (Tour Operator X, 2017)

As for the correspondence, each region has its own distinct way of conversing. As for the Nordic region, the conversations tend to be short, and straight to the point. The correspondence tends to be more professional and formal, even if the agent is familiar with the tour operator. The same depiction works for Asian countries. When contrasting this with the English markets (USA, Australia and New Zealand) the agents are informal immediately, although courteous. The Non-English regions are in the middle ground, some more informal and others formal. The main difference with the Nordics and non-English markets is that the Nordic agents tend to not change from formal to informal, but the non-English tend to start formal and after some time, move towards more informal way of corresponding.

The plausible pitfalls in handling the agents were asked from each interviewee. The main aspect all the respondents emphasised is the importance of communication. They especially pointed out the need for speed when preparing the quotation. Due to the lack of loyalty in the Nordic market, the agents are bound to send the enquiry to multiple different operators. If the quotation is done in a prompt pace and without any mistakes, the client is more likely to convert, or continue the correspondence. Another pitfall mentioned by majority of the interviewees was the importance of hotels. The Nordics do not accept decentral locations in most cases, and the American markets do not accept standard quality hotels. It was emphasised that experience comes from working and it develops over time. However, it is important not to make the mistakes twice, as the clients are not likely to give a second chance.

The main points for correspondence with the Nordic region is that, it must be professional, direct and with specified hotels. In order to ensure the quotation to be successful, it has to have central, standard hotels and be delivered to the agents in a timely manner. With international markets, the same aspects are valid, with the difference of hotel location and quality. With every market, the quotation needs to

be professional and without mistakes, as well as the client needs to be notified immediately when the task has been picked up by a member of the organisation.

Some of the agents are not quoted with specific hotels, unlike the Nordic region which expects to have named hotels, but with generic rates, which are the general price level and guarantee to find some hotels with the price. Such agents are from the Netherlands, Turkey and Poland and have been deemed such due to the low conversion rate as The Netherlands converts to business with 12,5%, Turkey with 31% and Poland with 11%. This shortens the time the operator works with the client, keeping the conversion rate in mind.

5. CONCLUSION

The aim of this research was to determine if the department of Nordics and International markets would be able to improve their business transactions with the Nordic market by adjusting their offers and behaviour, or if some aspect can be improved to gain more converted business.

The theoretical framework focused on cultural theory, destination management and customer decision process. Cultural theory was based on the works of well-known theorists, Gert Hofstede and Fons Trompenaars, as they are critically acclaimed authors on the field. The destination management section explains the core activities of a destination management organisation and the challenges for tourists when arriving. The part concludes on Ireland's destination management. The final theoretical section discusses the customer's decision making process and more in depth the group decision making process and tourism sector.

The empirical section explains the research methodology and the choices of research tools. This research is based on qualitative research interviews as primary data, and those interviews are supported by the secondary quantitative data collected from the company database.

The interviews are discussed under the findings section of the empirical research, and are divided under each section of the interview, each subheading is determined by the theoretical section the questions are based on.

The main findings for the research are that the Nordic region is significantly more disloyal and, thus, the member of Tour Operator X must "win" the client each time a quotation is made. This is done primarily by correct communication, which should be professional, courteous and done promptly. Compared to the international markets, the product needs to be more specified and the correspondence must be much less personal. As found in the research, personal relationships are much harder to establish in the Nordic market. Most the clients develop with the operator is a friendly, professional relationships, when with international markets the relationships tend to develop to personal ones.

For destination management perspective, the Tourism Ireland, a non-profit organisation, is seen as succeeding in the task of promoting Ireland overseas. The promotion the organisation has done encompasses the marketing and creating special itineraries for the tour operators and destination management organisations in Ireland. Some disagreement rose in the primary advertising target, as Tourism Ireland aims for business related travel, and number of the interviewees mentioned this to be dissatisfactory, since they see traditional tourism bringing in more revenue. Another point raised was the funding of the organisation. Initially it was deemed to be too low, but the respondent also mentioned that additional funding would be difficult to achieve and would not necessarily lead to better results.

5.1 Guidelines for correspondence with the markets

As agreed with the company, some guidelines should be established as result of this research. The main propositions for future correspondence with the Nordic clients can be summarised as:

The initial response to the client after a received enquiry needs to be prompt, fast and professional, yet the operator needs to find all the available information from the agent and establish good communication channel with them.

When preparing the quotation, the hotels should be on option, since the agents expect exact hotel names. Nothing more or nothing less than the client has asked for should be inserted in to the programme, such as dinners or lunches. The Nordics do have more money to use during their vacations, but the region can still be considered as price conscious and, thus, the price needs to be kept low or within the budget initially given if no changes happen. The proposition needs to be without any mistakes and be correct in all aspects.

After the vacation proposal has been delivered to the agent, the communication has be upheld until a definite answer is received. The agent is more likely to convert to business, if the first proposal is intriguing and needs only few modifications to finalise.

As for international markets, the same aspects work. The core differences between the two markets are more underlying with the product offer. Both markets expect fast and professional responses, but international markets are not as interested in named hotels and are usually more relaxed on the timeframe. When the Nordic agents expect finished quotes within 48 hours, most of the international agents can wait for a week at the most, even if a speedy quotation is valued and, thus, should be strived for.

The correspondence with agents from international setting is usually allowed to be more personal and familiar, given that the agent is familiar with the operator and has been quoted already a few times and a relationship has been formed.

5.2 Future Research Suggestions

This research does not consider the cultural backgrounds of the employees of the tour operator. The differences between cultures on personal level might affect the correspondence between the agent and the operator. This could be a possible research subject for the future.

The management might have differing views on the interview questions about the cultural differences than the employees, and, thus, have a bias. The bias should be insignificant on the result, but nevertheless could be worth researching in the future.

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7. APPENDICES

7.1 Appendix 1 – Interview questions

Name:

Position:

Nationality:

How long have you been in the company/ industry?

Main tasks within the company:

Do you do sales trips, if so where:

Cultural theory

Have you had any specifically positive or negative dealings with agents?

Have you ever won a quote due to your actions?

Have you ever lost a quote due to your actions?

Would you describe some professional relationships as personal relationships?

When considering the countries, you are responsible with, what would be the main concern when doing a quotation?

Country wise, what would be the usual confirm/quote lost ratio in your experience?

Would you have any advice when working with certain countries? (Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Russia, Belgium, USA)

Would you say there are pitfalls in dealing with specific countries?

Destination management

What would you see as Ireland's strongest competitive advantage worldwide?

How would you describe Ireland as a product to a new agent you are trying to win?

Are there any difficulties in entering Ireland with your area of expertise?

Would you be able to divide the countries in city stays and touring focused areas?

Decision process

When a group is deciding after the quote is done, what would be the usual time they take considering?

How do you feel about the marketing of Ireland as a product?

Would you direct a certain marketing style/ certain region of Ireland to your clients?