EXPLORING INTERCULTURAL ONLINE MARKETING COMPETENCE AMONG TOURISM STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY FROM SLOVAKIA

Norbert BETÁK, Viktória BÍZIKOVÁ, Viktória GERGELYOVÁ

Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Faculty of Central European Studies, Department of Tourism, Tr. A. Hlinku 1, 949 74 Nitra, Slovakia

ABSTRACT

Intercultural online marketing is an essential element in today's rapidly developing and diversifying world. Many fields, including marketing, are not only increasingly aware of this social and individual need, but are incorporating it into their tools and methods. A common method for targeted and effective marketing campaigns in tourism is to ensure that potential customers receive a response that is appropriate to the cultural background of the target audience. The aim of the present study is to examine tourism students' attitudes towards intercultural online marketing in the following areas: Knowledge in the field of Intercultural Marketing; Stereotypes about potential customers; How to target potential customers as well as the students; Cross-cultural knowledge/skills. The research was conducted among students of the Department of Tourism at the Faculty of Central European Studies of the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia. The questionnaire on which the research was based was completed by 135 respondents. The results of the survey provide an answer to the research question about the knowledge and perceptions of the future representatives of the tourism sector. The results obtained indicate that the extent of experience and knowledge in the field of intercultural online marketing is not sufficient. These findings have potential implications for further research to explore strategies for enhancing education and training programs aimed at bridging the gap in intercultural online marketing proficiency among future professionals in the tourism sector. Moreover, these findings suggest a need for collaborative efforts among academia, industry stakeholders, to develop comprehensive initiatives that address the evolving demands of the tourism industry in an interconnected world.

Keywords: tourism, online marketing, interculturality, targeting, perceptions

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalised world, information and communication technologies help businesses to realise their business activities and objectives faster, more accurately and over a larger spatial and temporal scale. The Internet as a marketing tool can be used to reach thousands of people in a target group. It is a current worldwide phenomenon that reaches and significantly influences customer behaviour and decision-making.

In a competitive environment where supply exceeds demand, it is not easy for businesses to maintain a favourable market position. The aim of a business is not only to win customers, but also to retain them and ensure prosperity. Therefore, it is necessary to realise the necessity to invest time, money, and energy in the marketing activities of a business not only in the real world but also in the virtual world in the context of online marketing or digital marketing (*Beveridge*, 2021).

In the international marketing and business environment it is necessary to take into consideration, among other things, intercultural aspects. Understanding the influence of culture and cultural specificities is becoming a necessity not only in everyday life, but also in digital marketing activities. Recognizing cultural values and obtaining information within the existing differences between countries and cultures in communication and business pre-determines success in business. Cultural values, norms, attitudes, behaviours, customs, habits, artefacts, language function and perception influence how a product, service or brand is performing in a given market (*Sokolova*, 2022).

Tourism marketing professionals are becoming increasingly aware of the need to take cultural differences into consideration when communicating with potential target group customers so that they receive a response that is appropriate to their cultural background (*Lőrincz et al.*, 2020). Each culture, nation, national group, or ethnicity has their own specific communication symbolism, language and cultural customs that have historically evolved, changed and complemented each other so that its members understand each other. There is also a system of attitudes and a range of cultural stereotypes among them, which are also present in marketing as an image of the perception of society (*Végi & Csapó*, 2023).

The aim of our article is to identify some basic cultural stereotypes and attitudes in relation to Italian culture¹, to analyse their impact on the perception of students of regional tourism at the Department of Tourism and to highlight the knowledge and experience of future professionals in the tourism industry in the context of intercultural online marketing, which is a necessary professional competence in the professional equipment of successful graduates of study disciplines with a focus on tourism. Understanding intercultural online marketing is crucial for university students because it equips them with the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate and succeed in an increasingly interconnected global marketplace.

The existence of the interconnection between marketing and the Internet was the basis for the origin of a new form of marketing – digital marketing, or online marketing, also known as Internet marketing. *Chaffey and Smith* (2017) define digital marketing as the achievement of marketing objectives using digital technologies and media. These are tools such as websites, CRM systems and databases that can be used for the purpose of getting closer to the customer – being able to identify, anticipate and meet needs efficiently and effectively. In practice, it is the promotion and sale of

¹ The rationale behind our focus on this particular demographic stem from the engagement of our students with the cultural intricacies of Italy during the survey period, within the framework of a dedicated project.

products or services through digital channels such as websites, search engines, social media platforms, email and mobile apps.

It includes various techniques such as search engine optimisation (SEO), pay-perclick (PPC) advertising, content marketing, social media marketing and email marketing. The goal of online marketing is to reach a wider audience, increase brand awareness, generate leads, and ultimately increase sales and revenue for the business. It has become an essential part of any marketing strategy given the growing number of people who rely on the internet to make purchasing decisions.

In the context of the above, research and publications have been carried out by authors such as *Kingsnorth* (2022), *Manzoor* (2018), *Striš et al.*, (2009), *Koman et al.* (2020), *Janouch* (2014), *Dorčák* (2013).

Digital marketing helps marketers to sell their products and services with help of web portals according to the requirements of the customers. Consumers consider digital marketing to be a useful tool because it helps them to choose products, obtain more accurate and reliable information, and solve problems relatively easily. Today, tourism employees have to deal with multiple situations simultaneously and develop digital skills to address the ever-changing digitalised hospitality. The lack of basic digital literacy of tourism employees might hinder both the value and efficiency of tourism services and the daily operations of tourism companies (*Ivanova et al.*, 2022).

The cultural background of an individual can be an extremely strong factor in determining the consumers' behaviour and the final decision-making process. In connection with considering the culture of customers within a target market, terms such as 'cultural marketing', 'ethnic marketing', 'cross-cultural marketing' or even 'intercultural marketing' are frequently used. In many cases these terms are regarded as synonymous due to the characteristic feature that closely links them. The common fundamental basis of these forms of marketing is respect for recognition of the cultural background of customers and its incorporation into targeted marketing activities (*Beták & Sándorová*, 2022).

Digital marketing in a multicultural environment offers solutions for launching product campaigns and advertisements that target specific groups of racially, ethnically, or culturally related consumers and customers. It is, among other things, a specific way of market segmentation, which seeks to target selected groups with appropriately formulated marketing activities. While the selling entity can create the same advertising regardless of the differences in its universal target groups, it can adapt its products as well as their promotion to smaller segments – both specific and interrelated groups. Such segmentation can take place in different ways and on the basis of the different characteristics identified for the target groups (*Beták & Sándorová*, 2022).

Over the past decades, the term "intercultural" has begun to evolve and offer new forms of study and research. First of all, intercultural communication has started to be discussed in professional circles based on the interaction between customers and companies. According to *Supeková & Janáková* (2014) research in this area deals with the mediating role in quality assessment, addresses the issue of cultural differences within business relationships, as well as the moderating role of engagement in the customer-employee relationship.

Culture defines values and beliefs, and marketing defines customer needs. These are important theoretical bases for defining cross-cultural marketing, which can be seen as a specialised part of marketing, or a theoretical discipline focused on marketing tools and strategies, as well as the types of marketing communication used in culturally different environments (*Usunier & Lee*, 2013).

The international marketing environment strongly influences marketing communication towards customers, especially through culture and the latter through its components, which are language, religion, history, but also education, family, social groups, work or leisure, etc. According to *Trompenaars and Woolliams* (2003), the new marketing paradigms are based on the three Rs: Recognise, Respect, Reconciliation.

Terpstra and Sarathy (2000) defined a cultural framework for marketing managers to help assess the cultural nature of the international environment. Several Slovak and foreign authors in their research works applied the conclusions of the extensive work of Kotler, Amstrong, Keller, Levitt, Middleton, Bowen, Makens, Xu, Smith in the field of marketing and the results in the field of culture research of prominent representatives of Taylor, Kroeber, Kluckhohn, Geertz, Hall, Sekaran, Thomas, Hofstede, Schein and others.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The aim of the survey was to assess the perceptions of students towards intercultural online marketing in the following areas: knowledge of intercultural marketing, stereotypes about potential (Italian) customers, how to reach potential customers effectively, and students' intercultural knowledge/skills.

Research questions were as follows:

- 1. What is the extent of students' knowledge in the field of intercultural online marketing?
- 2. To what degree do students hold stereotypes about potential customers in intercultural online marketing?
- 3. What are the most effective strategies for approaching potential customers according to students?
- 4. What are the prevailing intercultural attitudes among students in relation to online marketing?

The research was carried out among students of different years of two study programmes (Regional Tourism and Regional Tourism Management). Students have previous experiences with the topic, as intercultural communication and online marketing are integral components included in the curricula of the programmes. The questionnaire on which the research was based was completed by 135 respondents. Of the 135 respondents surveyed, 52 were of Slovakian, 72 of Hungarian and 11 of other (Ukrainian, Russian) ethnicity. In terms of gender distribution, 115 women and 23 men were included in the survey. In terms of the time interval of the survey, the survey was conducted in April 2023.

The questionnaire for the research was completed by students during their university courses, so the students who participated in the survey were those who attended the courses during that week. The survey was conducted anonymously, with students completing an online google questionnaire. The questionnaire took approximately 15 minutes to complete. The research instrument for the study included an online questionnaire asking students about their views on intercultural online marketing. The online questionnaire consisted of 27 questions in total. Most of the questions were multiple-choice, in several cases the respondents had to select the option closest to their needs from the given options by simple choice. If they did not find an answer that was close to them, in most cases they were given the choice of other options. For eight questions, they were asked to express their level of agreement with a given statement on a Likert scale in tabular (matrix) format.

The questionnaire was divided into five main thematic areas. The first set of questions asked for the students' data. In the second part we measured their views on intercultural marketing. The third set of questions focused on the perceptions of stereotypes about Italians, the fourth set of questions focused on the targeting of Italian customers and the fifth set of questions focused on the assessment of intercultural knowledge and skills.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Intercultural Online Marketing Skills

In this section we tried to find out the level of students' skills and opinions on intercultural online marketing (IOM). We asked, among others, what they were thinking about IOM, whether they had come across the term ICM, whether the presented definition of intercultural marketing was true or false – over 80% chose a correct answer. Furthermore, we also asked whether they had encountered an intercultural marketing campaign ever. The *Table 1* illustrates students' answers to this question.

Academic Level of Studies	Yes	No	I do not know	Total
Bachelor (BA)	23.8%	29.8%	46.4%	100%
Master (MA)	23.5%	15.7%	60.8%	100%
Total	23.7%	24.4%	51.9%	100%

Table 1: Students' knowledge of intercultural online marketing

The results show that half of the students (51.9%) do not know whether they have encountered this concept before. Slightly less than a quarter of students (23.7%) have encountered it and the same number (24.4%) have not encountered it (*Table 1*). A quarter of students at both levels (28.8% and 23.5%) said they had already encountered the concept of intercultural online marketing. Almost a third (29.8%) of students at bachelor's level and less than a fifth (15.7%) of students at master's level said they had not yet encountered the concept. Almost half (46.4%) of students at bachelor level and almost two thirds (60.8%) of students at master level could not give a clear answer. This can be explained by the fact that, although students are taught about interculturality and online marketing in their lessons, intercultural online marketing is not specifically included as an integral part of the curriculum.

The *Table 2* shows what students consider to be the most effective tools for the online marketing campaign.

Factors	Bachelor (BA)	Master (MA)	Total
Cultural Factors	52.4%	47.1%	50.4%
Social Factors	17.9%	23.5%	20.0%
Legal Issues	1.2%	2.0%	1.5%
Demographic Conditions	7.1%	3.9%	5.9%
Political Issues	3.6%	2.0%	3.0%
Natural Facilities	3.6%	5.9%	4.4%
Infrastructure	1.2%	3.9%	2.2%
Tourist Attraction	13.1%	11.8%	12.6%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 2: Most effective tools for implementing an online marketing campaign according to respondents

The results show that there is not much difference between the two groups. At both levels, students consider cultural factors to be the most important. About half of the students (52.4% and 47.1% respectively) selected this response. Social factors were ranked as the second most important asset (17.9% and 23.5% respectively), with tourist attractions coming in third (13.1% and 11.8%).

Stereotypes of the Potential Customers

The next set of questions asked students about their agreement with stereotypes about Italians. Students were asked to express their agreement with different statements. The *Table 3* illustrates the students' opinions.

Agreements	True	False
Italians are regularly late.	72.6%	27.4%
Italians love good coffee.	86.7%	13.3%
Italians are obsessed with fashion.	78.5%	21.5%
Italians do not speak English well.	61.5%	38.5%
Italians are loud.	94.1%	5.9%

Table 3: Students' agreement with stereotypes about Italians

The results show that students, regardless of their level of education, overwhelmingly agree with stereotypes about Italians. Students at both levels of education had similar opinions, so only the overall results are presented.

Approach to potential customers

The third set of questions asked students how they would approach their potential customers. In one of the questions in this section, we asked respondents what they thought the main reasons were for Italians to visit Slovakia. The proportion of responses to this question is illustrated in the *Table 4*.

Factors	Bachelor (BA)	Master (MA)	Total
Castles	21.4%	19.6%	20.7%
Mountains	14.3%	7.8%	11.9%
Spas	11.9%	21.6%	15.6%
Gastronomy	7.1%	2.0%	5.2%
Culture	7.1%	2.0%	5.2%
Entertainment	2.4%	9.8%	5.2%
Visiting Central Europe	29.8%	25.5%	28.1%
Skiing	2.4%	5.9%	3.7%
Nature Walk	3.6%	5.9%	4.4%
Total	100.0%	100.0 %	100.0 %

Table 4: Attractiveness of Slovakia according to students

The results show that, regardless of their level of study, the highest proportions of students reported visiting Central Europe (28.1%), castles (20.7%) spas (15.6%) and mountains (11.9%). The reason for these responses is that these elements are in fact the most prominent in Slovak tourism and they are also the most prominent in advertising for Slovakia.

Attitude related to interculturality

The final section of the survey measured students' attitudes towards interculturalism. We asked them to what extent they consider themselves accepting of people of different cultures, religions, and ethnicities. The questionnaire included various statements, which respondents were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert scale (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest). The *Table 5* illustrates students' acceptance of people of different religions, ethnicities, and cultures.

Table 5: Students' acceptance of people of other religions, ethnicities, and cultures

Academic Level of Studies	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Bachelor (BA)	1.2%	3.6%	10.7%	42.9%	41.7%	100%
Master (MA)	0.0%	9.8%	19.6%	29.4%	41.5%	100%
Total	0.7%	5.9%	14.1%	37.8%	41.5%	100%

These results show that a very small fraction of respondents at both levels would be either totally or partially non-adopting. A proportion of students chose a neutral middle ground, but most of them, in both groups, claimed to be at least partially or fully accepting of other cultures.

In the next statement in this section, students were asked to rate how much they would like to work in a diverse workplace. The responses are illustrated in the *Table 6*.

Academic Level of Studies	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Bachelor (BA)	2.4%	6.0%	26.2%	39.3%	26.2%	100%
Master (MA)	2.0%	9.8%	13.7%	37.3%	37.3%	100%
Total	2.2%	7.4%	21.5%	38.5%	30.4%	100%

Table 6: Workplace diversity among students

The results show that almost a third of students (30.4%) would prefer to work in a diverse workplace, and more than a third (38.5%) would prefer to work in a diverse workplace. Almost a quarter of respondents (21.5%) have a neutral attitude. Only a fraction of respondents would prefer not to (7.4%) or not at all (2.2%) to work in such a place. Comparing the answers to the previous question (*Table 5*) and this question, the results show that although the highest proportion of students (41.5%) clearly stated that they are fully accepting of other cultures, less than a third (30.4%) would actually like to work in a diverse environment. For this question (*Table 6*), they preferred the partially agreed answer (38.5%).

When asked how attractive it is to work with members of other religious/ethnic/other communities, students responded as follows (*Table 7*).

Academic Level of Studies	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Bachelor (BA)	3.6%	3.6%	36.9%	34.5%	21.4%	100%
Master (MA)	11.8%	9.8%	29.4%	31.4%	17.6%	100%
Total	6.7%	5.9%	34.1%	33.3%	20.4%	100%

Table 7: Cooperation with members of their religious/ethnic/other communities

The results suggest that students' views on this issue are mixed. Almost a quarter of students (20.0%) find it very attractive, a third of students find it rather attractive (33.3%) and a third of students also give a rather neutral answer (34.1%). A fraction of students, on the other hand, said that they were not attracted to a diverse environment (5.9%) or not at all (6.7%). Comparing this with the answers to the previous two questions, the results show that when it comes to actual cooperation, the majority of students preferred to take the neutral middle ground. While almost half of the students (41.5%) are completely accepting of other cultures at elementary level, less than a third (30.4%) would like to work in a diverse environment and less than a quarter (20.4%) would like to cooperate with people from other cultures. Compared to the previous two questions, the percentage of acceptance has also decreased, and the percentage of negative answers is much higher.

CONCLUSIONS

Our questionnaire survey based on a convenience sampling clearly shows that the extent of experience and knowledge in the field of intercultural online marketing is

not sufficient, given that only about one-fifth of the respondents, according to their affirmative answers to the question asked, have encountered an intercultural digital campaign. The remaining responses indicate a negative answer and a relatively high percentage, more than half, of the students do not know the answer.

The aspect of formal and informal education of young people in this area is very significant. It can be concluded that in terms of content analysis of education, knowledge in the field of online marketing is key in study fields with a focus on tourism and is part of the professional competences in the areas of information and communication technologies, competences towards entrepreneurship, initiative, creativity, language competences, and competencies to understand culture and express it with information and communication technology tools.

The results of the research can definitely be applied in the measures taken in the field of education and upbringing; they can also be reflected in the formulation of the educational objectives of the key teaching subjects. Furthermore, intercultural online marketing has the potential to significantly influence customer behaviour as well as customer decision-making. This is also why future directions of research could be directed towards these areas in order to learn about the preferences of customers from different cultural backgrounds, but also to improve the process of personalisation and segmentation.

To the research question to what degree students hold stereotypes about potential customers of intercultural online marketing, it can be clearly answered in our research that this represents a significant aspect. Cultural stereotypes are the result of cultural cognition and cultural literacy. They are formed and shaped by the extensive influence of factors such as enculturation, human socialisation, the influence of education in schools, and the family, peers, the media and various institutions in particular are very strong influences (*Biziková*, 2016).

It should be noted that cultural education in secondary and higher education in Slovakia is predominantly monocultural and teaching is narrowly oriented towards the home cultural environment. Despite the European Union's emphasis on the European dimensions of education and cross-cutting themes such as multicultural education, cultural tolerance and cultural diversity, these concepts are dealt with in schools without a deeper understanding, and stereotyping of other cultures or minority views persists.

The dialogue between actors in the educational environment should be more intensive. The school environment is not separate from the social environment and the stereotypes experienced. In the context of intercultural online marketing, it is desirable to think about the world and the person from different perspectives. On the positive side, despite their tendency to stereotype, respondents largely perceive themselves as culturally open and tolerant in their self-assessment, especially in relation to culturally mixed work environments.

Regarding the research question about effective customer outreach strategies from the students' perspective, the Italian customers are expected to be interested in tourism attractions such as Central Europe (destination Slovakia as part of this product), castles and spas. It is evident that Slovakia as a destination is mainly visited by foreign tourists from neighbouring countries: Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Austria. Cultural and sightseeing tourism and spa tourism are, figuratively speaking, the 'golden eggs' of tourism in Slovakia. Would an Italian tourist also be interested in the offer of our castles and spa resorts? It would be a challenge for an intercultural digital campaign to attract the attention and increase the interest of the Italian tourists in tourism products in Slovakia and motivate them to visit them. The digital campaign must definitely identify the focal components of the culture determining the values of the Italian society, on the basis of which the customer generally makes decisions when choosing goods and services or tourism products. It is precisely the cultural specificities that the creators of a digital campaign must adapt to in the context of online marketing.

The prevailing intercultural attitudes of students in relation to intercultural marketing, according to our research, are characterised by a significant influence of cultural stereotypes. Yet, paradoxically, within self-reflection, students declare acceptance of cultural diversity. What needs to be developed in students is that no culture is inferior or superior, but simply different, and needs to be accepted on a rational and emotional level as well. Of course, it is quite difficult to step out of "one's" culture and view the other one objectively and without any positive and negative stereotypes (prejudices).

Although this paper had a case study to contribute to a deeper understanding of intercultural digital marketing competencies, it is important to note the limitations of this research. It is not a representative survey. The results obtained are of an illustrative, indicative character. In a future survey with this focus, it is necessary to increase the sample size to obtain valuable data, to complement it with Italian students in order to increase the reliability and validity of the results in the survey.

REFERENCES

- Beták, N., & Sándorová, Z. (2022). Intercultural Communication and Digital Marketing in a Tourism Context. Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra.
- Beveridge, I. (2021). Intercultural Marketing: Theory and Practice. Taylor & Francis Group.
- Bíziková, V. (2016). Kontexty kultúry a edukácie. Motus in Verbo, 5(1), 14-20.
- Dorčák, P. (2013). eMarketing : ako osloviť zákazníka na internete. EZO.sk.
- Chaffey, D., & Smith, P. R. (2017). Digital marketing excellence: planning, optimizing and integrating online marketing. Routledge.
- Ivanova, M., Ivanov, S., & Petkova, I. (2022). Digital skills gaps in the Bulgarian tourism industry. *Acta Turistica*, 34(2), 113-129. https://doi.org/10.22598/at/2022.34.2.113
- Janouch. V. (2014). Internetový marketing : přilákejte návštěvníky a maximalizujte zisk. Computer Press.
- Kingsnorth, D. (2022). Digital marketing Strategy. An Integrated Approach to Online Marketing. Kogan Page Ltd.
- Koman, G., Holubčík, M., & Kubina, M. (2020). Digitálny marketing. Vybrané nástroje prezentácie podniku v online priestore. Žilinská univerzita v Žiline.
- Lőrincz, K., Banász, Zs., & Csapó, J. (2020). Customer Involvement in Sustainable Tourism Planning at Lake Balaton, Hungary – Analysis of the Consumer Preferences of the Active Cycling Tourists. *Sustainability* 12(12), 5174. https://doi.org/10.3390/su12125174

Manzoor, A. (2018). E-commerce 2018. Amir Manzoor.

- Sokolova, H. (2022). Cross-Cultural Marketing Research as a Tool in Studying Consumer Psychology Across Borders. *Proceedings of University of Ruse*, 61(5.1) 143-148. https://conf.uni-ruse.bg/bg/docs/cp22/5.1/5.1-21.pdf
- Striš, J., Vodák, J., Kubina, M., Jankal, R., & Soviar, J., (2009). Marketingové riadenie. Žilinská univerzita in Žilina.
- Supeková, S., & Janáková, H. (2014). Interkultúrne aspekty medzinárodného marketingu. Uplatnenie v zmiešaných spoločnostiach. Wolters Kluwer.
- Terpstra, V., & Sarathy, R. (2000). International Marketing. Dryden Press.
- Trompenaars, F., & Woolliams, P. (2003). A new framework for managing change across cultures. *Journal of Change Management.* 3(4), 361-375.
- Usunier, J. C., & Lee, J. A. (2013). Marketing Across Cultures. Pearson Education.
- Végi, Sz., & Csapó, J. (2023). Towards A Better Understanding Of The Dynamics And Impacts Of Consumer Behaviour And Travel Decisions In Response To Crises – An SLR Based Analysis. *Acta Turistica*, 35(1), 79-111. https://doi.org/10.22598/at/2022.35.1.79

Corresponding author:

Norbert BETÁK

Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra Faculty of Central European Studies Department of Tourism Tr. A. Hlinku 1, 949 74 Nitra, Slovakia Tel.: +421 37/6408837 e-mail: nbetak@ukf.sk

© Copyright 2023 by the authors.

This is an open access article under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons attribution (CC-BY-NC-ND) license 4.0.

