



# The Influence of National Culture on Digital Business Models in the Travel Industry's Digital Transformation: A Qualitative Exploration

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## ABSTRACT

The global travel industry is undergoing a profound digital transformation, reshaping traditional value chains and giving rise to innovative digital business models. Concurrently, national culture remains a critical, yet often underappreciated, determinant of consumer behavior, technological adoption, and organizational strategies in international contexts. This article qualitatively explores the multifaceted effects of national cultures on the evolution and efficacy of digital business models within the transforming travel sector. Drawing upon established cultural frameworks and insights from information systems and strategic management literature, we examine how cultural dimensions influence aspects such as trust in online platforms, preference for direct versus intermediary channels, acceptance of peer-to-peer services, and the perceived value of digital offerings. By synthesizing existing knowledge and proposing a conceptual framework for qualitative inquiry, this study highlights the imperative for digital travel businesses to develop culturally intelligent strategies that resonate with local values and norms, thereby optimizing their digital business model design and ensuring sustainable growth in diverse global markets.

## Keywords

National culture, digital transformation, digital business models, travel industry, qualitative research, cultural influence, tourism innovation, cross-cultural management, digital strategy, organizational change.

## INTRODUCTION

The travel and tourism industry stands at the forefront of digital transformation, with technological advancements profoundly reshaping its operational landscape, competitive dynamics, and consumer engagement [66, 74]. From online travel agencies (OTAs) and metasearch engines to sharing economy platforms and personalized mobile applications, digital business models have fundamentally altered how travel services are created, delivered, and consumed [5, 63, 68]. These models leverage information and communication technologies (ICT) to create value, redefine customer relationships, and establish new revenue streams, often disrupting traditional intermediaries and empowering consumers with unprecedented choice and convenience [3, 4, 16, 68, 74]. The rapid pace of this digitalization necessitates a deep understanding of its driving forces and consequences across diverse global markets [16].

However, the global nature of the travel industry means that these digital transformations do not occur in a cultural vacuum. National culture, defined as the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes members of one group or category of people from another, profoundly influences individual and organizational behavior [41, 44]. Seminal works by Hofstede [41, 42, 44], Hall [37, 38], Trompenaars [77], and the GLOBE project [45, 46] have

consistently demonstrated how cultural dimensions (e.g., individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance) shape a myriad of societal aspects, including attitudes towards technology adoption [6, 69], trust [7], communication styles [14, 78], and even strategic decision-making in organizations [67, 72].

Despite the evident impact of national culture on various business facets, its specific influence on the design, implementation, and success of digital business models within the transforming travel industry remains an area ripe for deeper qualitative exploration. While general trends in digitalization are observable globally [12], the nuanced ways in which cultural values mediate the reception and adaptation of these models by consumers and businesses are less understood. For instance, do collectivistic cultures exhibit different preferences for peer-to-peer accommodation models compared to individualistic ones [60]? How does uncertainty avoidance affect the adoption of nascent travel technologies or the preference for established brands over new digital entrants? Such questions underscore a critical research gap at the intersection of digital business, tourism management, and cross-cultural studies [21].

This article aims to address this gap by proposing a qualitative exploratory study focusing on the effects of national cultures on digital business models in the travel industry. By synthesizing existing literature, we will develop a conceptual framework to investigate how cultural dimensions influence critical components of digital business models, including value proposition, customer segments, channels, and revenue streams. This exploration seeks to provide nuanced insights into the adaptation strategies necessary for global digital travel companies, contributing to both academic understanding of cultural dynamics in digital contexts and practical guidance for international business strategists.

## METHODS

This study proposes a qualitative, exploratory research design, leveraging a comprehensive review of existing literature to construct a conceptual framework for understanding the interplay between national culture and digital business models in the travel industry. Given the nascent and complex nature of this specific intersection, a qualitative approach is favored to capture rich, in-depth insights into subjective experiences, perceptions, and the nuanced "how" and "why" behind observed phenomena, rather than solely focusing on quantitative measures [26, 39, 40]. This approach is particularly suitable for theory-building and hypothesis generation, which is characteristic of exploratory research [32].

### Theoretical Underpinnings

The study is grounded in two primary theoretical areas:

- **National Culture Frameworks:** We draw upon established models of national culture to provide a lens for analysis. Key frameworks include:
  - o **Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions:** Power Distance, Individualism vs. Collectivism, Masculinity vs. Femininity, Uncertainty Avoidance, Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation, and Indulgence vs. Restraint [41, 42, 44]. These dimensions offer a widely recognized and empirically tested framework for comparing cultural differences and their impact on various aspects of business, including IT adoption [6, 49].
  - o **GLOBE Study:** Extends Hofstede's work, providing additional dimensions and differentiating between "as is" and "should be" cultural practices [45, 46].
  - o **Hall's High-Context vs. Low-Context Cultures:** Focuses on communication styles, which are highly relevant in digital interactions [37, 38].
  - o **Trompenaars' Cultural Dimensions:** Offers another perspective on cultural variations, including universalism vs. particularism and individualism vs. communitarianism [77].

These frameworks collectively provide a robust theoretical basis for exploring how cultural values manifest in digital business contexts [57, 70, 71].

- **Digital Business Models:** The study is informed by literature on digital business models, which extends

traditional business model concepts to the digital realm [16, 68]. Key components of a business model, as articulated by authors like Osterwalder and Pigneur [68], Amit and Zott [4], and Chesbrough and Rosenbloom [18], typically include value proposition, customer segments, channels, customer relationships, revenue streams, key activities, key resources, key partnerships, and cost structure. The "digital" aspect specifically refers to how ICT enables or enhances these components [16, 64, 74].

#### Hypothetical Data Collection Strategy

While this article is a conceptual exploration, a future empirical study following this framework would involve a qualitative data collection strategy.

- **Participants:** Target interviewees would include executives, senior managers, and product development leads within international digital travel companies (e.g., global OTAs, metasearch platforms, hospitality technology providers, peer-to-peer accommodation platforms). The focus would be on individuals with direct experience in developing, launching, or adapting digital business models across multiple national markets.
- **Sampling:** A purposive sampling strategy would be employed to ensure diversity in terms of:
  - o **Company type:** Representing different segments of the digital travel industry.
  - o **Geographic reach:** Companies operating in a wide range of national cultures.
  - o **Cultural background of interviewees:** To capture varied perspectives on cultural influence.
  - o **Number of Interviews:** While context-dependent, qualitative research often aims for theoretical saturation, typically suggesting 15-30 in-depth interviews as a sufficient range to gather rich data [65].
- **Interview Protocol:** Semi-structured interviews would be conducted to allow for both systematic coverage of predefined themes and flexibility to explore emergent insights [39, 40]. Sample questions could include:
  - o "How have cultural differences in [country X] impacted the design or uptake of your digital travel products/services?"
  - o "Can you describe specific instances where local cultural values influenced your channel strategy or customer acquisition methods?"
  - o "How do trust perceptions, shaped by national culture, affect consumer willingness to use online payment methods or peer-to-peer services in different markets?"
  - o "What strategies does your organization employ to adapt its digital business model to diverse national cultures?"

Interviews would be recorded (with consent) and transcribed for analysis.

#### Hypothetical Data Analysis

The transcribed interview data would be analyzed using a rigorous qualitative content analysis approach [59]. This would involve:

- **Familiarization:** Reading through all transcripts to gain a holistic understanding.
- **Initial Coding:** Line-by-line coding of the data, identifying concepts, ideas, and experiences related to national culture and digital business models. This open coding stage would allow emergent themes to surface [20, 32].
- **Axial Coding:** Connecting categories and themes, exploring relationships between cultural dimensions (e.g., uncertainty avoidance) and specific elements of digital business models (e.g., consumer trust in online reviews) [20].
- **Selective Coding:** Developing a core narrative that integrates the main themes and explains the phenomenon under study. This iterative process would involve constant comparison of data segments with emerging categories [20, 32].
- **Theme Development:** Synthesizing coded data into overarching themes that address the research questions regarding the influence of national culture on digital business models.

- Use of Software: Qualitative data analysis software (e.g., NVivo, ATLAS.ti) could be utilized to manage, organize, and analyze the large volume of textual data efficiently.

#### Rigor and Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, established criteria would be applied [25, 40, 65]:

- Credibility: Achieved through prolonged engagement with the data, triangulation of data sources (e.g., interviews, company documents, industry reports), member checking (validating interpretations with participants), and peer debriefing.
- Transferability: Providing rich, detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and findings, allowing readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other settings.
- Dependability: Documenting the research process thoroughly, including data collection and analysis steps, to allow for an audit trail.
- Confirmability: Ensuring that interpretations are derived from the data rather than researcher bias, potentially through an external audit of the research process and findings.

## RESULTS

Given the conceptual nature of this article, this section synthesizes key themes and patterns that would likely emerge from a qualitative exploration of the influence of national cultures on digital business models in the travel industry, drawing upon existing cross-cultural management and digital transformation literature. These are illustrative results, reflecting the insights that a rigorous qualitative study adhering to the methods outlined would aim to uncover.

#### Cultural Influence on Digital Adoption and Channel Preferences

National culture significantly shapes the pace and modalities of digital adoption within the travel industry.

- Digital Divide and Infrastructure: Underlying cultural tendencies, alongside economic factors, contribute to variations in digitalization levels across countries [12, 55]. Cultures with lower technological readiness or different priorities may experience slower adoption of advanced digital travel services.
- Trust in Online Channels: In cultures characterized by high uncertainty avoidance or low institutional trust, consumers may exhibit a stronger preference for traditional, face-to-face travel agencies or direct bookings with established service providers, rather than relying on less familiar online platforms or peer-to-peer models [7, 34, 60]. Conversely, cultures with higher trust propensities may be quicker to embrace novel digital channels and services [7].
- Intermediary vs. Direct Sales: Cultural norms around negotiation, personal relationships, and perceived value of intermediaries can influence the effectiveness of direct-to-consumer digital models versus those relying on OTAs. Some cultures may still prefer the personalized service and perceived security offered by human travel agents, despite the convenience and price advantages of digital platforms [63].

#### Cultural Impact on Digital Business Model Design and Value Proposition

The success of a digital business model often hinges on its alignment with cultural values, influencing its core value proposition and customer segments.

- Value of Personalization vs. Privacy: In highly individualistic cultures, personalized travel recommendations and tailor-made digital experiences may be highly valued. However, in cultures with different privacy norms or higher collectivism, the collection and use of personal data for personalization might be viewed with suspicion, requiring a different approach to value proposition [49, 61].
- Peer-to-Peer Models (e.g., Airbnb): The acceptance of peer-to-peer accommodation or transportation services is highly culturally contingent [60]. In cultures with strong emphasis on traditional hospitality, clear separation of private and public spaces, or high uncertainty avoidance, models that involve staying in private homes may face cultural barriers related to trust, privacy, and perceived safety, requiring significant adaptation in how the

service is framed and delivered.

- **Sustainability and Ethics:** The cultural salience of sustainability varies [11, 73]. Digital business models emphasizing eco-tourism or ethical travel may resonate strongly in some cultures, forming a core part of their value proposition, while requiring different marketing approaches or lower emphasis in others.
- **Customer Relationship Management:** The nature of customer relationships, whether transactional or relationship-oriented, often reflects national cultural norms [78]. Digital CRM strategies need to adapt accordingly, from highly efficient, automated interactions to more personalized, human-centric digital touchpoints, depending on the cultural context.

#### Interplay between National Culture, Organizational Culture, and Digital Transformation Strategies

The internal dynamics of digital transformation within travel companies are also mediated by cultural factors.

- **Leadership and Innovation:** National cultural dimensions, such as power distance and uncertainty avoidance, can influence leadership styles and an organization's openness to digital innovation [45, 67, 72]. Hierarchical cultures might centralize digital strategy decisions, while more egalitarian cultures might foster bottom-up innovation.
- **Organizational Adaptation:** The ability of travel enterprises to digitally transform their operations and business models is influenced by how well their organizational culture aligns with or adapts to their national cultural context [75, 76]. Companies from different cultural backgrounds may approach digitalization with varying degrees of speed, risk-taking, and strategic emphasis [16, 22].
- **Global vs. Local Standardization:** International travel companies often face a strategic tension between standardizing their digital business models globally for efficiency and localizing them to resonate with specific national cultures [9, 17, 22]. The findings would illustrate different approaches to this balance, driven by perceived cultural distances and market opportunities.

#### Overcoming Cultural Barriers and Leveraging Cultural Enablers

The qualitative exploration would highlight strategies for navigating cultural landscapes.

- **Cultural Intelligence (CQ):** Companies that demonstrate high cultural intelligence—the ability to function effectively in culturally diverse contexts—are better equipped to design and adapt digital business models [15]. This involves training employees, developing culturally sensitive marketing, and localizing interfaces and content.
- **Contextual Understanding:** A deep, qualitative understanding of local cultural norms, values, and digital habits is crucial. Generic digital solutions often fail if they don't account for specific cultural nuances, leading to low adoption rates or negative consumer reactions [21, 29].
- **Leveraging Cultural Values as Enablers:** Specific cultural traits can be leveraged. For example, a strong sense of community in collectivistic societies could be an enabler for peer-to-peer models if trust mechanisms are effectively implemented, or for loyalty programs that emphasize group benefits [49, 60].

These illustrative results underscore that national culture is not merely a background variable but an active determinant shaping both the demand for and the supply of digital travel business models. Ignoring these cultural nuances can lead to significant strategic missteps and missed market opportunities in the rapidly evolving digital travel landscape.

## DISCUSSION

The conceptual findings derived from a qualitative exploration of the interplay between national cultures and digital business models in the travel industry reveal a complex, dynamic, and often subtle relationship. It is evident that the success and widespread adoption of digitally driven innovations in travel are not solely dependent on technological sophistication or economic viability, but are profoundly mediated by the cultural contexts in which they operate [6, 34, 69].

One of the most salient discussions revolves around the concept of trust in the digital realm. In many cultures, trust

is built through long-standing personal relationships and tangible interactions. This contrasts sharply with the often anonymous and transactional nature of online platforms. In high uncertainty avoidance cultures, where there's a strong need for rules, stability, and predictability [41, 44], consumers may be more hesitant to engage with novel digital business models, especially those involving peer-to-peer interactions (e.g., Airbnb, local tour guides via apps). The perceived risk associated with the unknown or lack of established protocols can be a significant deterrent. Conversely, cultures with lower uncertainty avoidance might be more experimental and quicker to adopt new digital services, even if they lack extensive regulatory frameworks. This directly impacts the design of trust-building mechanisms within digital business models, requiring transparent review systems, robust customer support, and localized assurance mechanisms to bridge this cultural gap [60].

The findings also highlight the impact of individualism versus collectivism on channel preferences and the value proposition. In highly individualistic societies, the emphasis on personal freedom, choice, and self-reliance [41, 44] often translates into a preference for self-service digital channels, direct bookings, and personalized recommendations. Digital business models that empower individual customization and independent decision-making are likely to thrive. Conversely, in collectivistic cultures, where group harmony, social networks, and community ties are paramount [41, 44, 49], there might be a stronger reliance on group travel, recommendations from trusted social circles, or even a preference for travel agencies that facilitate group bookings and offer communal experiences. Peer-to-peer models in such contexts might need to emphasize community aspects or local host authenticity rather than just transactional efficiency [60].

Furthermore, power distance (the extent to which less powerful members accept and expect that power is distributed unequally) [41, 44] can influence decision-making processes regarding digital transformation within organizations. In high power distance cultures, top-down approaches to implementing new digital strategies might be more effective, while in low power distance cultures, a more collaborative, inclusive approach to digitalization might be preferred [45]. This impacts internal resistance to change and the speed of digital adoption within travel companies themselves [53, 64].

The implications for practitioners in the digital travel industry are profound. A one-size-fits-all digital business model strategy is inherently flawed in a culturally diverse global market. Companies must cultivate cultural intelligence (CQ) [15], moving beyond superficial adaptations (e.g., language translation) to deep cultural insights that inform every aspect of their digital offerings. This involves:

- **Localized Business Model Design:** Adapting not just marketing messages, but the very core components of the business model—how value is created, delivered, and captured—to resonate with specific cultural values and consumer behaviors.
- **Building Culturally Relevant Trust Mechanisms:** Tailoring security features, customer support, and review systems to address culturally specific trust perceptions.
- **Flexible Channel Strategies:** Recognizing that while digital channels are growing globally, traditional channels may retain significant importance in certain cultural contexts, necessitating hybrid approaches.
- **Investment in Human-Centric Digital Experiences:** For cultures valuing personal interaction, embedding human touchpoints within digital processes (e.g., chatbot assistance, personalized virtual agents) can enhance acceptance.

This conceptual study, while qualitative and exploratory, underscores the limitations of assuming universal applicability for digital business models. It advocates for a nuanced, culturally informed approach, aligning with broader calls for cultural understanding in international management research [13, 21, 57, 70, 71].

Future research should empirically validate these conceptual themes through rigorous qualitative methodologies, such as comparative case studies of digital travel companies operating in culturally distinct markets. Longitudinal studies could track the evolution of digital business models as cultures adapt to technological change [13, 28].



Mixed-methods research, combining qualitative insights with quantitative data on digital adoption rates and business performance, could offer a more holistic understanding [65]. Furthermore, research into the role of subcultures, generation gaps, and the influence of a nascent "global digital culture" on these dynamics would add further layers of complexity [13, 28, 48]. Ultimately, understanding and strategically responding to the cultural currents of digital transformation will be paramount for competitive advantage in the global travel industry [64, 66].

## CONCLUSION

The digital transformation of the travel industry is undeniably global, yet its manifestations and successes are intricately tied to national cultural contexts. This qualitative exploration has highlighted that national culture is a powerful, yet often subtle, influencer on the design, adoption, and effectiveness of digital business models in this sector. Key cultural dimensions, such as individualism-collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance, profoundly shape consumer trust in online platforms, preferences for various distribution channels, acceptance of novel service paradigms like peer-to-peer models, and expectations regarding privacy and personalization.

The synthesis of literature underscores that successful digital travel businesses cannot afford a culturally agnostic approach. Instead, they must cultivate deep cultural intelligence and implement highly localized strategies that adapt their core business model components to resonate with distinct cultural values and behavioral norms. This involves building culturally relevant trust mechanisms, developing flexible channel strategies, and designing digital experiences that align with local preferences for interaction and relationship-building. By embracing the nuanced interplay between national cultures and digital innovation, businesses in the travel industry can navigate the complexities of globalization, unlock new market opportunities, and ensure sustainable growth in an increasingly digitized and interconnected world. This culturally informed strategic approach is not merely an advantage but an imperative for long-term success.

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