

Working Paper Series

**Catering for a Minority?
Ethnic Groups and the British Travel Industry**

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**CATERING FOR A MINORITY?
ETHNIC GROUPS AND THE BRITISH
TRAVEL INDUSTRY**

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the results of a research project into ethnic minorities and tourism in the UK. It is relevant to travel academics and practitioners interested in reaching and developing customers from visible minority ethnic groups in any country, particularly second and third generation immigrants. The research initially investigated the holiday tastes and choices of a survey group of people of South Asian origin in Bradford, England. The results showed that people from the Asian community in Bradford were interested in western-style holidays but that UK travel businesses were not using appropriate channels and promotional methods to reach this community.

The second stage of the research investigated the attitudes of travel agencies and tour operators to non-white ethnic customers using focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. This was supported by a survey of training provision to discover the extent of ethnic minority integration in the industry. The findings showed a highly segregated industry in the Yorkshire region and indicated a number of barriers that divide the industry on ethnic lines. Asian agencies served their own communities exclusively with flight only business. Mainstream "big name" travel companies revealed a lack of understanding of consumers from non-white ethnic groups, particularly with respect to different levels of acculturation and the impact of these on the holiday buying behaviour of ethnic minorities. Recommendations following the research suggest a number of company policies to raise awareness of ethnic minority customers, develop a more diverse workforce, and thereby attract more business from the increasing numbers of ethnic minorities in Britain.

INTRODUCTION

The tourism tastes and holiday choices of non-white ethnic minorities in society is poorly understood and under researched (Floyd 1998, Burton 2000). Ethnic groups have traditionally been seen as part of the tourism product, the exotic object of the tourist gaze, rather than regarded as purchasers of holidays for themselves. (Urry 1990) Previous research by Philip (1994) in the USA and Klemm (2000) in the UK have pointed to ethnicity as a factor in holiday choice, but the response of the industry to these growing markets has not yet been examined. This paper presents the results of a research project which has investigated the approach of travel businesses in the UK to ethnic minorities as customers and employees. In this context, the notions of acculturation and ethnic identity in relation to the purchase of travel products will be examined.

BRITAIN IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM – FROM MELTING POT TO CULTURAL MOSAIC

Britain is a multiracial society with a substantial population of non-white ethnic groups, 6 per cent nationally but around 20 per cent in some urban areas such as London, Leicester and Bradford. This is a young population - in the mid 1990s, 75 percent were under the age of 25 - so the numbers of visible ethnic minorities will continue to grow in size and purchasing power. For those of South Asian origin, (the largest ethnic group in the Yorkshire region), the percentage in higher education is greater than for the equivalent groups of the young white people. These new graduates have money for leisure and holidays, but although they may have been born and educated in Britain, and describe themselves as British, their cultural identity is still strongly rooted in their ethnic communities. (Mahood and Berthoud 1991) As Hutchinson (1998) has pointed out the link between race and identity is a complex one, and there are several studies (Hutnik 1991, Nawanko and Lindridge 1998) highlighting the fact that individuals from ethnic groups exhibit different levels of acculturation to, or acceptance of, the norms of mainstream British society. For holiday and travel businesses, different levels of acculturation need to be taken into account if they wish to sell holidays in a multicultural society.

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

A survey of consumers undertaken by Klemm in 1999 had shown that the people from the Asian community in Bradford were interested in purchasing western-style holidays, not just trips to their ethnic homeland. The numbers of

holidays they took and was similar to the UK population as a whole. However the attitudes of this community towards the mainstream "white" travel trade was quite negative, with the result that the Asian community (20% of the city's population) preferred not to use them to book holidays. A second stage of the project to investigate the supply side of the travel businesses, namely travel companies, attracted a grant from the European Social Fund

The results of this second stage of research project are reported in this article. The objective was to discover the attitudes and approaches of British travel businesses to non-white ethnic minorities, particularly the Asian community which was the largest ethnic group in the Yorkshire region. Important research questions for this stage of the project were:

- (i) were these Asian Britons regarded as customers for holidays and travel?
- (ii) what barriers prevented them from buying holidays from UK mainstream travel businesses?
- (iii) what marketing and promotion techniques existed to recognise the different cultural and religious backgrounds of this market segment?
- (iv) to what extent were ethnic minorities working, or being trained to work in the travel sector?
- (v) were there any barriers preventing them from working in the travel sector?

RESEARCH METHODS

Three research methods, both qualitative and quantitative, were used for the study.

- (a) Focus group discussions with travel agents and tourism trainers
- (b) A survey of numbers of ethnic minorities in training for travel and tourism
- (c) Structured individual interviews with national tour operators

For methods (a) and (b) research was concentrated on the Yorkshire region (a large region in the north of England) to comply with the objectives of the funding body. For method (c) national companies whose holiday brochures are on travel agents shelves throughout the country were interviewed.

Focus groups were used because these discussions allowed for more spontaneous comments and opinion, and for interaction between the participants. The group setting was felt to be more appropriate for discussing the sensitive issue of race and segregation. Following the advice of Bloor et al (2001) the groups were composed of people of the same level from different organisations. One focus group was composed of representatives from mainstream travel agents, another contained people running agencies serving the local Asian community, and a third was composed of those involved in tourism training. Each group was invited to give their views on a similar set of discussion topics. The discussions were videoed and transcribed and later analysed using NU*DIST software. This method generated rich qualitative data on attitudes, experiences and opinions of industry professionals.

The training survey involved an audit of ethnic minority participation in travel and tourism courses at all the further and higher education institutions in the Yorkshire region. Included in the audit were those being trained in-company or on a day release basis within the framework of the modern apprenticeship scheme. This scheme provides the means to obtain a travel industry qualification alongside working in a travel agency.

The structured interviews were conducted by the researcher with a number of senior managers for national tour operators on the company premises. This was usually the marketing manager, but in some cases the human resources manager was also consulted. The questions asked related to their company's approach to ethnic minority customers and also their efforts to recruit ethnic minority employees.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The results from the three research methods were amalgamated to produce the following findings.

A Divided Industry

The analysis revealed an industry divided on ethnic lines in the Yorkshire region. The mainstream travel agencies, located in popular shopping areas, served the majority white community with a full range of holidays and travel. Mostly they were outlets of recognised national chains of travel agencies for whom the sale of the package tours was the largest and most profitable element of their business. Their staff were trained and the agencies were bonded to the Association of British Travel Agents, (ABTA) which provides protection for the consumer.

The mainstream agents believed that the members of the Asian community only wanted to buy trips to their homeland and were not interested in western style holiday products. For flights to the Indian sub-continent the mainstream agents said they could not compete on price with the Asian agents who obtained block discount from the major airlines. If the demand for package tours from within the Asian community was acknowledged it was assumed that this would be from second or third generation Asians who, by virtue of their birth and education in Britain, would have the same wants and demands as white customers of a similar age, income and family stage.

The Asian travel agents serving their own community with flights to the Indian sub-continent represented the other side of a divided travel industry. These agencies were found in areas of Asian housing, sometimes as small shops but sometimes simply sub-sections of other retailers for the local area. These Asian agents were not equipped in terms of qualifications, product knowledge or the necessary licensing and bonding guarantees to sell package holidays. Mostly they were very small businesses whose major strength was their links with local community and family networks coupled with a healthy demand for flights to India and Pakistan. The Asian agents acknowledged that they may be missing out on the growth in demand for western style package holidays from their own community and this was a limitation on the growth of their businesses, but felt that acquiring travel qualifications and the necessary licenses and bonding was impractical or too costly.

Marketing and Cultural Awareness

The discussions and interviews revealed a lack of knowledge about ethnic minority customers for holidays. What also emerged was a lack of awareness of the significance of cultural differences in the marketing of holidays. British tour operators did not record the ethnicity of their customers, and so lacked the information needed to analyse their holiday requirements. This was for a number of reasons. In the first place they did not want to cause offence by asking about individuals' ethnic background. Secondly they were selling mass market holidays segmented on the basis of age, family stage and income which were applicable to all sections of society. Although there was some recognition of growing ethnic diversity, it was believed that second generation of people from ethnic communities, that is those born and educated in Britain, were fully assimilated and

would buy holidays on the same basis as the white population. Most companies could not offer an explanation as to why their brochures did not portray non-white people on holiday, despite this being common practice for other retailers of consumer and leisure products.

The discussions showed major differences in selling styles between the Asian and mainstream sectors. It was important to build a relationship of trust before trying to make a sale to people from south Asian background. Everyone who entered the Asian travel agents, (researchers included) was offered a cup of tea and friendly chat before the conversation moved on the travel. By contrast staff in mainstream travel agencies were increasingly trained to adopt a more direct approach to customers. People browsing in amongst the brochures are soon asked what type of holiday they are interested in, whether they would like staff to look up availability and prices together with an assurance that this company would offer the best price. These sales techniques, which seem normal to those of us accustomed to modern sales practices, were perceived as aggressive by those from an Asian background.

ETHNIC MINORITIES WORKING THE TRAVEL SECTOR

The training survey revealed a possible explanation of the travel industry's lack of awareness of customers from ethnic backgrounds, namely that they were recruiting very few people from ethnic minorities. Travel agencies UK have traditionally recruited predominantly 16 to 18 year old female school leavers who are trained on-the-job supported by some college or in company training under the auspices of the modern apprenticeship scheme. The training survey undertaken in 2001 revealed under 2 per cent of recruits to the modern apprenticeship scheme in travel were from ethnic minorities. This is in marked contrast to recruitment to other industries through the same scheme in the UK which have higher percentage of recruits from ethnic minorities - 12 per cent in the case of banking and 7 per cent in the case of general retailing. The percentage from ethnic minorities taking college courses in travel and tourism was healthier at 7 per cent, (broadly in line with their representation in the regional population as a whole), but it was not clear from this study why so few of these ended up working in the travel trade.

TABLE 1: A SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

Industry structure	Marketing and Cultural Awareness	Employment Practices and Training
Travel sector divided on ethnic lines	UK mainstream travel companies lack knowledge about ethnic minority customers.	Very few ethnic minorities employed in the mainstream travel sector in the Yorkshire region
Asian agents sell only flights to India/Pakistan	Ethnicity is not seen as a factor in customers buying behaviour	Low numbers of ethnic minority trainees in travel agencies
UK mainstream agents sell full range of holidays and travel	Very few non-whites represented in travel and tourism marketing material	Ethnic minorities being trained in college but not entering workforce
	Preferred selling styles vary with ethnic background	UK mainstream agents have trained and qualified workforce
	Tour operators do not advertise in ethnic minority languages or media	Lack of qualifications in Asian travel agencies
		Mainstream travel sector staffed by predominantly female workforce
		Travel careers not attractive to young Asians, especially females.

Both the focus groups and the tour operators were asked about how a more integrated and culturally diverse workforce could be achieved in the travel business. The findings revealed a number of barriers on both sides.

It emerged from the focus group discussions that Asian families did not see the travel business as a good career for their young people. The fun image and travel opportunities normally regarded as the perks of a career in travel were not attractive and certainly no compensation for the generally low pay offered in this industry. The modern apprenticeship scheme and the qualifications it offered were also poorly understood. The image of the industry and nature of the job requiring a company uniform raises a number of problems for young women from a Muslim background. As the industry relies on female recruits this is particularly relevant and could explain why some companies who had made efforts to recruit trainees from ethnic minorities had had little success.

The Asian travel agencies were for the most part unable to take on trainees because of their own lack of qualifications, and the limited experience they could offer to the trainee. However, they did report on the difficulty of finding the staff with the right skills to help in their businesses.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the travel industry is divided on ethnic lines in the Yorkshire region of the UK and has shed some light on the nature of the barriers which divide it. Some of the barriers arise because of the mainstream travel companies' failure to recognise the persistence of cultural identity through the generations and the impact of these differences on buying behaviour. Travel companies, alongside many others, have underestimated the potential size of the market from the second generation of British Asians and therefore not turned their attention to marketing to this sector. Some British travel companies have realised the importance of employing people from ethnic minorities in order to sell holidays to these communities but have not been successful in recruiting them. Significant barriers to employment exist because of negative attitudes in the Asian community towards training to work in the mainstream travel sector, and also because of the unwillingness of those Asian in the sector to undertake training to raise their professional standards and enable them to expand their businesses. The businesses in the Asian travel sector are, as Jamal and Chapman (2000) have

observed, also held back by an attitude of competition and mistrust amongst themselves.

So, does it matter that the UK travel industry is divided on ethnic lines? The researchers would argue that it does matter for several reasons. From the travel companies standpoint they will continue to lose business if they fail to address ethnic minorities as customers and recognise their differences. From an employment perspective the travel industry is a growth sector showing a 57 per cent increase in numbers of employees between 1996 and 2000 for the Yorkshire region. The industry therefore has the potential to absorb young people from the Asian communities of West Yorkshire where there are high levels of unemployment. Finally the integration of the travel industry is important for reasons of wider social cohesion. The industry needs to reflect society as a whole if Britain is to attain the ideal of a multicultural society, and to avoid the unrest produced by a climate of increasing segregation (Ouseley 2001)

DISCUSSION

The results of the project bear out the observations made in recent literature on marketing to ethnic minorities in the UK. On the issue of lack of awareness towards ethnic minorities, Nawanko and Lindridge's (1998) comment that

"Efforts at marketing to ethnic minorities in Britain are currently at an embryonic stage. It is hard to find large British companies with a well-developed marketing plan"

suggests that, in this respect, travel companies are not dissimilar to those in other sectors. The authors say that the reason why British companies are not enthusiastic about ethnic marketing is that they *"fear getting involved in a racial furore with all the attendant bad publicity"*. In conducting this research we came across fear and sensitivity questions of race, making it difficult to get companies to talk about the issues central to the research.

As Burton (2000) has indicated there is a failure on the part of marketing professionals and practitioners in the UK to recognise the impact of cultural differences on purchasing behaviour, although more research has been done on this in the USA. For example Kaufman-Scarborough (2000) noted that Asian-Americans *"do business with people, not product attributes"* This observation is completely in line with the findings of our study of British Asians, for whom a good

relationship with the seller is paramount. Rarely do they buy something from someone who is not known, if not directly, at least to someone in their circle of family or trusted friends.

On the basis of the results from this two-stage project we would agree with previous authors quoted above that British Asians do not constitute a separate segment for the travel, in fact to segment the market on the basis of ethnic origin may be divisive and counter-productive. A more appropriate response is to develop in all staff an awareness of ethnic and cultural differences, particularly on matters such as religion, personal relations, diet, dress and selling styles. Creating a more culturally diverse workforce will inevitably speed up this process.

APPLICATION OF THE RESULTS – OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS

Recommendations from the research are based around two main themes: marketing and cultural awareness and employment practices and training. The application of these recommendations should lead to changes in industry structure leading to a less divided industry.

Marketing and cultural awareness

- Companies and tourism associations to commission research into consumers about ethnic minority groups
- Include an ethnicity question on holiday evaluation questionnaires to provide a baseline of existing ethnic minority customers
- Travel companies to distribute information to staff on the size and ethnic composition of ethnic minorities in their towns/regions (available from census)
- Information for travel agency staff about cultural differences and selling styles (already provided by some major retailers in UK)
- Advertise in ethnic minority media - radio, press, cinemas etc.
- Use community contacts/leaders

Employment practices and training

- Tourism industry and careers service initiative within schools for parents and pupils to raise awareness of job opportunities and career progression in travel industry

- Campaign to encourage existing travel and tourism students from ethnic minorities to take up jobs in the sector
- Roadshow to promote careers in travel in ethnic minority community centres
- Review of pay and perks in travel and tourism in comparison to other careers open to school leavers such as retail and banking
- Mentoring scheme to support ethnic minority entrants into the travel business
- An adaptation of the company uniform for Asian female staff

The findings and recommendations from this research relate to a specific ethnic group in a particular region of Britain, but should have some relevance for the travel and tourism industry in any society with more than one ethnic group. The message is that ignoring cultural differences is a mistake if we want to live and for businesses to prosper in an integrated society.

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