

Life in UK

Cultural Study – Limited Edition

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Background

The UE design team of Big Umbrella has compiled a cultural observations which serves as a base to gather “design inputs” – based on the observations made by the team members who visited United Kingdom (UK) for onsite assignments.

The team members have noted their observations about the “way of life”, specifically in the following categories:

- Food
- Media
- Entertainment
- Culture/Religion
- Everyday use articles
- Kids
- Art & Design
- Fashion
- Necessities (Insurance, finance, home loans etc)
- Telecom
- Misc. (Cops, Royal family, Politics etc)

The “design inputs” would be drawn from the gathered data and will be used to design user experience solutions base-lined on understanding of multicultural users, cultural values/memetics, “way-of-life” of the users in specific geographies, etc.

Observations:

1) Food – (Food habits, food presentation, breakfast, chicken tikka, desserts, spices, street food, wine etc.)

Bland food:

Having food is a test of your food palate (the sense of taste). The food is generally bland. The Brits enjoy potatoes. There are variety of potato dishes – jacket potato, baked potato, finger chips (or French fries), curly potato rings. An Indian would certainly feel the difference of the taste of food in UK – the spiciest food one can eat in UK would be similar to medium spicy food in India. The vegetables do not seem nutritional. The onions are big, stark white in color.

Something interesting:

One of the food items I enjoyed was of onion pakoda in a different form. A large onion was cut in a peculiar way – the onion was cut longitudinally (without being cut into individual fragments). The base of the onion held together all the cuts. The onion was then put in flour and fried. When it was ready, it was served with a sauce. The presentation of the dish was interesting too – all the onion cuts still hold together, they were radiating outwards, looking golden in color. At the center of the onion, a small cap of tomato ketchup was put. This dish served 4 people.

Fair Trade:

People prefer organic food over other food. All the meat foods are available in frozen form. People buy vegetables in shopping malls than on the street. Shopping malls like Tesco, Sainsburys, Marks and Spencer import foods from third world countries and sell the vegetables through their shopping mall outlets. All the vegetables bear a distinctive mark of “Fair Trade” – a consortium which guarantees a better deal to the vegetable producer (of the third world country) from these malls. People consider this as a symbol of product quality. The “Fair Trade” symbol ensures that these shopping malls establish credibility in the minds of the consumers.

Coffee:

Brits love coffee over tea. At work, people often loiter around the coffee machines – there is a queue sometimes. People drink coffee more – when one comes to office, after lunch, in the afternoon, at home after dinner. Another hot drink which is more popular is hot chocolate.

Water:

People consume cola more than water. There more brands of Coca Cola and Pepsi in UK as compared to in India. Sparkling water too has different “tinges” of fruit – a hint of strawberry, lemon, and other fruits.

Cola:

The cola bottles’ cap come with a message – “open with hand”, which I thought was funny. It may because I thought it was obvious. I personally feel that this “assistive” way of telling the consumer is un-necessary.

Veggies beware:

In breakfast, one has variety of breads, cakes & muffins. So are the varieties of cheese available. Any meal is incomplete without beef for the Brits. One can find a variety of food items which has

beef in it, so much so if you go to McDonalds and order a vegetarian burger, you have to explicitly tell at the counter, “No meat, No fish, No beef!”

Kill it, cook it, and eat it:

There is a television show on BBC, called as “Kill it. Cook it. Eat it” which shows the complete process of killing an animal, extracting flesh from it, chopping away the unnecessary body parts and judiciously selecting the other body parts and finally how different recipes are cooked from those body parts. The intent of the show is to promote vegetarianism – though there is a marginal conversion of non-vegetarian to a vegetarian.

Chicken Tikka:

Chicken Tikka, an original Indian recipe is famous in UK. Many fast food joints, shopping malls, restaurants have Chicken Tikka sandwich as one of the food items (pre-packaged sandwich, kept in cold storage)

Buffet:

At work, a buffet system is in place. You go to every counter, pick up the food you want to eat in a plate, walk to the cashier counter, pay up and exit to the sitting area. Some restaurants follow this pattern. In some restaurants, waiters come to take the order to your table and it is mandatory to leave a tip to the waiter.

Nutritional information:

Whatever food one consumes, every food item has compulsory “nutritional facts” information printed on the package – which tells the consumer how many fats, carbohydrates would be consumed by him/her.

Tesco’s packaging carries the nutritional information upfront to the consumer. It is displayed in a row – on the front side, unlike all other packages which display nutritional information at the back.

Buying behavior:

When you walk to any mall (e.g. Sainsburys), you will find that food items occupy the major categories of the products to be sold. People are attracted to the new food items because the packaging of some food items is good. If you go to Iceland (a superstore), people tend to buy food items on the price tag – generally every food item falls in the range of 1 or 2 GBP. Iceland sells “more” quantity of foods for relatively low price tag.

Food joints:

Even in the midst of the mall culture, street food is available, even though the buyers are very limited. Every place a tourist visits has a food joint inside it. Be it Roslyn Chapel, or Madame Tussads, or the London Dungeon. There are special food items which are specific to that place only. E.g. when you go to Royal Yatch Britannia in Edinburgh, you will find specially made chocolate fudge (more than 12 flavors) on the ship – which you may not find elsewhere.

2) Media – (Newspapers, Magazines, Posters, Radio, Television, Banners, Advertisements, Hoardings, Local brands)

Scoop:

Of the newspapers that I have seen and read, I felt that the UK newspapers have “scoop” culture. The newspaper brands like “Daily Mirror”, “The Sun”, “The London Paper” and “The Metro” publish not so relevant news on their front pages. These papers are actually read by the people on National Rail and Tube (underground trains). The newspapers that are read by the people in transit are free of cost. That’s why one can see all the papers lying around on the empty seats of the Tube.

Established brands like “The Times”, “The Telegraph” publish stories on the front page which portray the world view or which is significant to the nation. Other papers like “The London Paper” or the “Daily Mirror” publish insignificant news of celebrities – to catch the reader attention and hence try to sell on the “scoop” factor.

Newspapers:

The size of any newspaper is same as that of the size of “Times of India” – the print area is 6 columns wide. The typography used is specific to that paper. “The Times” has the same type as of “Times of India”. The London paper uses Garamond as the typeface. The no. of pages “The Times” has would be equivalent to three editions of the “Sunday Times of India” – too many pages. The newspapers distribute free media – one can often find songs, movies and information CDs distributed to the readers on one of the weekdays.

Magazines:

Magazines cover wide range of interests – I saw specialty magazines for Gardening, Home Improvement, Playstation and Microsoft X-box related games and many more which one cannot find in India. Magazines do have extension of the content – on the CD or DVD. Many of the magazines have their own websites too.

Advertisements:

The advertisements appearing in the newspapers have subtle humor. The advertisements do not necessarily make a buying proposition, they weave a story around the product and convey to the reader in a more subtle way.

The advertisements of Llyods TSB Bank use illustrations to convey the message of how banking with them is different as compared to other banks.

Television commercials are funny; very rarely showcasing the product – telling the message last or sometimes not at all (e.g. Television commercial of Toyota Yaris does not tell about the product attributes at all, it portrays the relationship between two friends).

The English advertisements also carry a lot of emotions too. The advertisement of “Hovis Bread” is regarded as one of the classic advertisements in British advertising industry.

Indian advertisements are funny (nowadays) and they explicitly tell the product attributes. The Indian advertisements bank heavily on the brand ambassadors. In contrast to this, the

British advertisements use “non-celebrities” and portray the “real people” using the product.

The billboards/hoardings which display product/service advertisements are found mostly in the Tube underground stations or on the walls of National Railway stations. On the National Railway stations the billboards are displayed at the normal eye level (in contrast to advertisements in India, where they are hung at a higher point), they have a distinct thick white border and the advertisement displayed range from clothing brands, to a local brand to a movie poster. These advertisements are horizontal – probably of the ratio of 4:3 (width: height ratio). On the thick white border, the name of the billboard owner is displayed, mostly on the center of the bottommost white border.

On many of the occasions, I saw the advertisement of “Incredible India” on the billboards. Some of the advertisements vertically displayed on the National Railway stations in the ratio of 3:4 (width: height ratio) and they have distinct “round corners” unlike billboards. They are showcased inside the glass too. The billboards do not have any glass protection.

The advertisements for electronic products are sold on the streets as well as outside the Tube stations. These advertisements are basically product catalogues. I got one advertisement of Sony’s VAIO laptop series. Paper quality is rich, it’s a glossy print and the reader has to unfold the flap to read more about available products.

In UK, people tend to take these product pamphlets, read them while they are traveling and if they do not find it interesting, they throw them in the litter box. You would hardly see any papers lying around in Tube stations and on the National Railway stations.

There is a chain of “Curry’s Digital” shops, primarily selling all digital and electronic goods – from digital cameras to laptops to computer peripherals etc. These shops display huge advertisements outside; even the entrance door carries big advertisements of the new product launch – e.g. huge banners of Windows Vista.

Shopping malls that carry product advertisements display the price difference prominently so that the buyer is attracted. One can find “This product was priced at £50 and its now £17.55” in mainly clothes section of the shopping malls. People do go to buy those products.

Advertisements on the buses are mainly of the movies, the theatre plays, the electronic products or television shows. The advertisements displayed outside the bus are put in a “T” shape – on the opposite side of entry and exit doors. Inside the bus, the advertisements are very few in number. People tend to read books and newspaper even in bus journey. The youngsters prefer to switch on their music players on the journey and prefer watching outside advertisements.

Unlike buses, the trains do not carry any advertisement on the outer body of the train. The advertisements displayed inside the train are put in places which do not clash with the train-route map. The advertisements cover many services like banking, train travel cards (Oyster), personal finance, teaching and learning etc.

Television subscription:

For a television viewer, the choice to watch the channels is plenty. One has to choose from Sky TV, Virgin Media or the default cable service. Sky TV competes in every popular segment to Virgin Media. The Sky TV comes with a setup-box which provides interactive menu to the viewer. The viewer gets some default channels (which are free to view) once he installs the Sky TV. To get more channels, he has to buy those channels by paying through credit card.

Normally, the viewers buy services like telephone (landline), broadband internet and television channel subscription as “one package” in UK. There is hardly any possibility that one buys 3 different brands for those three services.

3) Entertainment – (Movies, Radio, Television comedies, Television soaps, Theatre, Books Music, Cartoon characters, Sports, Actors, Celebrities, Betting/gambling, Rugby and other sports)

Movies:

New movies release on Friday in UK. People read the reviews of the movie in the newspapers the following day. I am not sure whether the trend is to go to the movie by reading the reviews. I have seen two movies in UK, an English and one Hindi movie.

Queue & seating:

The way to the movie hall is marked with visual indicators. Even though the movie is drawing huge crowds, there is a systematic way of entering the movie hall – queues. The people are patient enough to enter the hall by waiting in the queue, stepping one by one – even though there is no “seat number” written on the ticket and you have to settle down at any place since all places are “first come first serve”. This holds true too when you travel by coach (bus) and by National Railway.

Concern for the audience:

The audience for the English movie was primarily kids. The movie was “Night at the museum” starring Ben Stiller. The kids had a good jolly time at the movie. The movie was displayed on a giant IMAX screen. Before the movie started, the staff of IMAX screen welcomed the audience and informed the audience that at any point of the movie, if someone got scared or have to leave, they could use the exit doors which were displayed prominently at specific points. With this introduction the movie was started.

Greetings:

The Brits always like to greet every other person around, whether he/she knows the other person. They feel that you have to acknowledge any person or a group of people you see. Brits are polite while talking to a stranger. Never will you encounter a rude or impolite sales person who is speaking to a customer. When they are acknowledged rightly, the Brits feel happy and that’s how the IMAX staff does to every show that starts in the movie theater.

Before the movie began, one of the IMAX staff member announced that it was the birthday of one the kids watching the movie and he asked the kid to stand up. He asked everyone of the audience to wish the kid happy birthday and then the movie was started. The kid was thrilled. This is the hospitality of the IMAX – they want to make their audience happy and retain their loyalty to drive them back to their movie screens.

Television Channels & Television programs:

The television programs are a mix of daily news, sports, comedies, reality shows etc. Channel 4 has the maximum reality shows – ranging from Big Brother to a reality show based on weight-loss, ice-skating, who is the best chef etc. People in UK like to watch the reality shows very much.

Channel 4 enjoyed maximum viewership in the wake of Shilpa Shetty’s allegation of being inflicted to racism by Jade Goody. I was fortunate to see the concluding episode of Big Brother. The next day, Shilpa Shetty’s win was all over the news – on television and in newspapers.

4) Culture/Religion (Church, Special days, Holidays, Racism, Globalization effects, Office/business/school culture, Society distribution, Rewards and recognition, Sports National fervor, Dating, Holidays, Textiles, Table manners, Multi-cultures, Environment consciousness, Late night parties, Ethics and norms, National anthem, National animal Betting/gambling, Assumptions about the rest of the world)

Outside world view:

When I was staying with my room-mates in a shared apartment, one day, the landlady and landlord of the apartment visited my place to renew the rental contract. While talking, the landlord mentioned that he had visited India twice in his lifetime. He had visited Mumbai. He asked me, “Why there is so much rush for trains in India? Are the trains less or the population more?” Actually the answer was implied in the question itself. He asked me where I learned English. I told him that English my first language at school. He was surprised. When I told him that I can read and write in three languages – English, Marathi and Hindi, he was surprised and told me that any Brit would not learn any language beyond English. He was also very curious about the weather we have in India. Normally, all conversations in UK start with “How is the weather?” Weather dominates the lifestyle, the moods, the food – in short their life completely. People refer to “weather” reports more than they refer to other “world news”. All major portals like MSN and Yahoo provide updated and forecasted weather (7 to 10 days) in advance so that the people can plan their days ahead.

Buying clothes:

The clothes sections in shopping malls do change their “new” and “attractive deals” on weather. As soon as the winter exits, warm/woolen clothes’ prices nosedive and people go and buy those clothes.

On the onset of the winter, people buy jackets which are of knee-length. Majority of the jackets purchased by male buyers is black in color. As far as women buyers go - yellow, red, cocoa, green, pink are the colors preferred by them. I once walked into London Liverpool Street station and had a glance at the crowd – I could see the prominence of black color – almost 90% of the people were wearing black jackets.

Coming back to the weather discussions, the Brits have different shoes for different occasions: the women prefer gumboots, the men prefer sport shoes. Children have a different type of shoes which I have never seen in India and in US too. Children’s shoes have wheels, so that if the child needs to run, he/she can skate around with the help of those two wheels in the pair of shoes. Children find it very helpful – again an overuse of “assistive” technology (my personal comment).

Public information systems:

When you enter any bus or train (Tube/National Railway) you will find that there are signage indicating “Please offer the seat to elderly, people in need or to the person carrying child”. This is supplemented by an icon which denotes the same. Brits do regularly follow this – I have seen this many number of times that if someone, e.g. an elderly lady gets into the bus, someone might get up and offer the seat to the old lady. The lady also reciprocates with a smile. I feel that’s how Brits are when it comes to “social behavior” and these things are manifested on them through different ways. Old people are the most polite and happy

people when it comes to talking. I have noticed this often whenever I had a chance to talk to them.

These are the typical scenarios you may find when you enter different places:

- You walk in to a pub and the tables are full. The waiter welcomes you and tells you politely that you can be seated in the waiting area and takes down your name. After a while the waiter comes to you and directs you to the table. While taking the order, the waiter ducks down, talks casually to you and asks what you want to have and he asks what the lady wants to drink and eat (first!). When he comes with the food, he praises the food that is being served. When you are having food, he comes in and asks how the food is. After you are done with your drink and food, he comes back to pick the cash/credit card. It is mandatory for you to leave a tip to the waiter.
- “Can I help you?” remark from a sales representative appears more genuine and frank than what you have in India. Here the sales representative is quite patient to show you products around. If you are not happy with the product you purchased (after many days), you can walk to the cashier – hand over the product, the original receipt of the product and tell the reason that you are not happy with the product, the cashier accepts the product and hands over the cash to you.
- In contrast to the “polite” and “feel-good” behavior from Brits, I was surprised to see rude and irresponsible behavior from the locals inside the airport. When I was boarding the flight back to India, I went through the security checks and I was asked to remove the wallet and jacket. The old man at the security check was trying to put people into security check in a much hastened way. I asked this old man whether I should put the coins in the tray. To my surprise the old man replied, “Didn’t I speak to you in English? Put everything you have in the tray!” That was quite a shock for me. When I was done with the security check I went to the shoe-scanner system and once cleared I headed to the gate to board the flight. I confirmed on the screen that my flight was on gate number 31. When walking down to the gate I went past gate no 29, 30 and 32 but could not find 32. It was much far than I expected. So I thought of asking security inside the airport. The security person was a teenager and he told me, “Jesus! You asking me where the terminal is? Hey man, go and find out yourself!” He looked like a second generation Asian, but still this kind of behavior was totally surprising.

Life is automated all the way:

I feel that there is too much of “automation” in the life of Brits. Sometimes I find it useful and sometimes I found it foolish. But that too stands out as the most unique aspect of life. The society pushes you to be “individualistic” in more ways than you are in India. I have realized this and this is based upon the experiences I had in UK.

When you walk to a station and board a train from one point (e.g. Brentwood) to a destination (e.g. Windsor) you have train map with you. You get down at a station (London Liverpool Street) and try to find the next connecting train to your destination. You have the Tube map readily available at the station, you understand what train line to take (e.g. Piccadilly). You follow “Way out” directions, swipe out from one line and swipe in to another

line, locate the where the Piccadilly line is – these things go into the “blood” – meaning that it becomes “habitual” to any one who understands it. If any of the sign boards were to be removed, then it might be difficult for any one to “approach” anyone and ask for the directions. I have seen that there are very less people who go to the information counter, the ones you find are tourists and not the local ones.

One day, the cooking gas in my house got over and my cooking stopped. After talking to my friend I realized that you have to “top-up” the gas-card – like you recharge your pre-paid mobile in India. This topping up of gas card can be done in any grocery store or in the local post office. I went to the post office and got the gas topped up for £10. To start the cooking again this is what I had to do – I had to insert the gas-card into a centralized-gas-box fitted by the gas company inside my home, press one red button which acknowledged that the gas top-up has now been approved and then finally I could start the gas burners. What an “automated” way of recharging the gas. The Brits love the automation!

Also you may notice the “Automatic Doors” when you walk to any shopping malls. There is a mandatory indication of “Automatic Doors” on every glass door when you enter. People over there want all things easy.

In office, you may find coin machines which allow you to buy chocolates, chips and colas. I was surprised to see coin machines for fiction books/novels – but I did not see anyone going and buying books from that machine. Buying chips/colas from the coin machines is very common though.

For the old people it is difficult to walk and move around. Again here, the “automation” plays a role. You can find old people driving a mini-cart – a one-seater car with a small basket in front of the hood. This mini-cart moves very slowly. The old people use this car to move around, visit the shopping malls, pick up the food/vegetable/products they want to buy, pay at the cashier and go back home – doing this all without getting off the mini-cart.

Credit card buys every thing you want:

People tend to use credit cards more in UK. Most of the buyers bought tickets by credit cards. When you go to the ticket counter (be it any sales counter), you can always find the card swiping machine. The buyer swipes the card, enters the secret pin on the machine and makes the purchase. That’s how one purchases a movie ticket or a railway ticket or any other thing.

Patient traffic:

People do follow traffic rules stringently. One waits patiently if there is a mile-long queue in front of your car even if your getting late for your office/business meeting.

Pedestrians first:

When you have to cross the road, there is a facility provided on the signal pole – a push button activates the “pedestrian” crossing signal, the light glows, the cars stop in both the directions and you are allowed to cross. Even where you may not find traffic signal poles and

you want to cross the road, the cars on both sides will wait for you to cross the road first and then they cross you. Pedestrians are always given the priority first.

Priority for babies and the parents:

Carrying little children/babies around when you travel is difficult. As mentioned earlier, the public transport takes care of that. The toilets in shopping malls/fast food joints like McDonalds, Pizza Hut etc. too take care of the same. You may notice special visual indication of “baby restrooms” along with the women and men restrooms (toilets).

You better keep the toilets & bathroom clean:

People feel responsibility even in using the toilets. The toilets have to be clean. In fact, in offices there are notices put up even in the toilets. I noticed that some one had written “Thank you” below the notice with a ball pen too. The people are stickler when it comes to keeping the bathroom and toilet clean. This is evident even in the public toilets. Unlike India, where you can walk in to public toilets easily, in UK there are coin machines attached to the doors – to use a public toilet you have to deposit 20 pence and then the door opens for you. If you don’t have change, the coin change machines are always there before the entry.

Honesty is the best policy:

Another significant thing I noticed about was about “honesty”. I visited two places – a nuclear bunker and a church (believed to be the oldest church in England, at Ongar). The goods are displayed for sale, e.g. chocolates, pencils, erasers etc – all price tags intact. Surprisingly there is no sales-person around. What you find is an “honesty box” – meaning that you can buy any thing you want and deposit the amount in the honesty box and take the change from the same. People assume that you are honest enough not to cheat. This is very contrasting to the “value” systems we have in India – where everyone doubts other around.

Greetings:

Coming back to the point of “greeting” a stranger – Brits are always good at that, I noticed the fundamental difference between the way we, Indians, acknowledge the presence of any person around. In India you can get away without talking to a stranger, but in UK, anyone acknowledges a stranger by saying at least “Hi!” or “Hello!” with a smile. The Brits have inculcated the same values in the service industry (shopping malls, banks, railway stations etc).

Cultural shock:

One exceptional incident happened when I was traveling to Glasgow with my friend Deepti. We were waiting at the coach terminal and we saw a kid, probably 10 or 11 year old, smoking. He was sharing the smoke with an old lady, probably her grandmother. An old man was sitting inside the terminal – he walked out and he too joined the company of these two and three shared the cigarette. This was quite a cultural shock for both of us because we had never seen this kind of children and grandparents! After much a thought, we guessed that they belonged to a lower middle class family and in families like theirs smoking was a commonplace phenomenon.

Here cricket takes a backseat:

The locals are more interested in football than cricket. This is unlike India, where cricket is a religion. I assumed that cricket is at least discussed by the locals in their conversations, but no. They talk of the last minute goals in the football match of Chelsea vs Manchester United. Even the significant cricketing event like England defeating Australia in tri-nations’ championship twice, in the final found a little mention in the newspapers. When the cricket world cup started, there was no hype or any major commercial campaigns around, the way we see that hype and frenzy activities in India. The matches England played in the world cup do find place in the newspapers – but those news look insignificant to the news of football featured in the newspapers.

1111- Children Helpline Number:

When we spoke to locals of Indian origin in UK, they told us the kids know what are their social rights. If a parent tries to beat the kid, the kid know what helpline number to dial and save him/her. There have been some cases where the parents were taken into custody by the police when they tried to beat up the child.

Small cars:

People prefer to buy small cars in UK. You would hardly see big cars around. The reason for the same is that they have to pay less road tax to the government. Small car means less tax, hence the small car. The brands you will find in small car segment are Fiat, Volkswagen, Ford, Nissan, Rover, BMW, Mercedes etc.

Bully the Americans:

Brits love to bully the Americans. Through their satire humor and sometimes displeasure, Brits express freely their unhappiness on seeing an American. I have noticed this quite number of times whenever I had visited tourist places. The tourists guides break into a conversation and ask the tourists which part of the world are they from. When the tourist guides discover that anyone is from America, they joke about it, with satiric humor.

Same treatment inflicted on the Brits:

When I visited Scotland and roamed in Edinburgh, I experienced that the Scots bully the Brits – almost the same way what I experienced while visiting tourists places.

Construction work does not hinder with the pedestrians:

Unlike India, where any construction of a building going along the roadside creates havoc to the traffic, you would see that it is managed perfectly in UK. The constructor makes sure that the part of the road is still accessible to the public and mandatory structures have to be built first to ensure that the road is not blocked by the construction. Blue colored structures, with safety lights are the indications for construction activity. People, especially pedestrians do not suffer from the construction along roadside. This was evident in almost every place I visited.

End of Document.