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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines the demographic differences of Chinese nationals' travel experience sharing though different offline and online platforms.

Design/methodology/approach: Cross-tabulation analysis was applied on a national sample of 6081 respondents in China.

Findings: The study found that Chinese women tend to share travel experience more often than Chinese men; old people in China tend to use the face-to-face approach more than online or social media to share their travel experience. 66.5% of the survey sample used WeChat Moments to share their travel experience, highlighting WeChat as the dominating social media platform in China for travel sharing. In general, people who share via online platforms (WeChat, Weibo, QQ Space) tend to be young, single or unmarried, well-educated and earning a high month income.

Originality/value: The study offers an in-depth understanding of travel experience sharing idiosyncrasies in China.

Keywords: travel experience sharing, offline sharing, social media, online sharing, China

Introduction

This study used a national sample in China to delineate the profiles of travel experience sharing in terms of the major demographics, i.e., gender, age, marital status, education and personal income. Travel experience sharing is an important form of tourist behaviour and is believed to contribute to an individual's personal identity construction, emotional wellbeing and post-trip

evaluations (Desforges, 2000; Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017). The growing applications of social media and online platforms have also greatly facilitated travel experience sharing. Surprisingly, only a very pre-mature body of literature can be found to understand tourists' travel experience sharing. And predominantly, the literature leans toward understanding online travel experience sharing rather than any forms of offline or face-to-face sharing.

In a specific cultural context, people's tendencies of sharing their travel experience in one way over another may be affected by their demographic configurations (Ip, Lee, & Law, 2012). Extant literature has also suggested that social identity functions as one of the determinants of travel experience sharing behaviour (e.g., Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006; Desforges, 2000; Kang & Schuett, 2013). As a theoretical speculation, since an individual's demographic configuration (e.g., gender, age, education) would largely contribute to one's social identity, it is reasonable to examine how demographics contribute to people travel experience sharing behaviour in different platforms (offline vs. online). Therefore, a meaningful question to probe into tourists' travel experience sharing would lie in the cross-section of sharing behaviours and human demographics. As such, this study aims to explore how Chinese people's various forms of offline and online travel experience sharing behaviours change in terms of major demographics. The study thus provides a national profile of China in Chinese nationals' travel experience sharing through different platforms.

Background literature

Sharing travel stories and experiences with others is a common type tourist behaviour (Ip et al., 2012; Kang & Schuett, 2013; Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017; Lee, Reid, & Kim, 2012; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). With the prevalence of social media in people's life nowadays, sharing tourism experiences through social media becomes more popular (e.g., Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Despite the popularity of sharing travel experience among tourists, relatively little attention has been paid to researching tourists' behaviours of sharing their travel experience. Comparing to the increasing number of studies researching travel experience sharing through social media, research on tourists' offline travel experience sharing is still sparse.

Generally, travel experience sharing forms an individual's travel biography, which according to Desforges (2000), is important in forming the individual's 'personhood' and self-identity (p. 926). The tourism literature seems to attend more to the motivations of sharing travel experience, especially in the context of using social media (e.g., Huang et al., 2010; Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017; Munar & Jacobsen). Munar and Jacobsen (2014) identified that altruistic and community-related motivations are more relevant for sharing tourism experiences though social media; people tend to seek socialisation needs and emotional support though social media sharing of travel experiences, rather than making social media as an information source for holiday decisions. This seems to be corroborated by other studies. Both Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) and Lee et al., (2014) confirmed that social and hedonic needs overwhelmed functional/information needs in determining online community members' level of participation of experience sharing.

In the emerging line of inquiry of travel experience sharing via social media, researchers also examined the psychological mechanisms, determinants and consequences of travel experience sharing. For example, Kim and Fesenmaier (2017) found that social media sharing functions as an emotional buffering process to either increase tourist positive affect or decrease negative

affect, so as to enhance post-trip evaluations. Lee et al. (2014) applied the community identification theory to understand knowledge sharing in online travel communities and found that strong identification increases an online community member's sharing intention.

Despite the fact of face-to-face communication as a common experience sharing channel, very little research has touched on face-to-face sharing of travel experience. Face-to-face sharing represents a type of human interaction with a distinctive nature from online social media or SNS sharing. As such, the adoption of such means of sharing may be differentiated by the nature of online versus offline communication, as well as the perceptions and attitudes of the users toward these sharing options. Lee and Oh (2017) applied a 2x2 between-subject experimental design to explore the effects of online SNS sharing versus offline face-to-face sharing on tourists' post-purchase happiness, self-enhancement, well-being and return intention. Face-to-face sharing consistently performed better in enabling the behavioural outcomes than SNS sharing in the scenario of experiential purchase against that of material purchase. Lee and Oh's (2017) study pioneers the need to run more comparison between online and offline travel experience sharing and their consequences.

It is postulated that demographics could function well to define the differences between offline and online travel experience sharing. Unfortunately, little research has testified such an assumption. Ip et al. (2012) tested the demographic differences of Hong Kong online travel website users for travel planning and travel experience sharing. Their study showed that age, education and income were differentiating factors for Hong Kong people to use online travel websites to share their travel experiences. This study provides sufficient evidence to show the role of demographics in online travel experience sharing. Following this line of inquiry to examine how demographics may influence travel experience sharing, the current study broaden the study scope and intended to use a nationwide dataset to examine both online and offline travel experience sharing and how these sharing behaviours differ in different demographic groups in China.

Method

We gain our data from the 2016 National Tourism and Leisure Activity Survey Project in China. The Survey was commissioned by China National Tourism Administration (CNTA) to a project team at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Dataway, a professional market survey company in China. Dataway managed the survey implication process. Applying the multi-stage stratified random sampling and population proportionate sampling, the survey sample covered four tiers of cities in all seven regions (East China, South China, Central China, North China, Southwest, Northeast, and Northwest) in China. Stratified sampling units were assigned to city proper, suburban/town and rural areas. Considering China's urbanisation and based on the experience of managing a similar national survey in 2014 regarding Chinese nationals' tourism and leisure perceptions, city proper areas were chosen to be the focused areas for the survey. In the city proper areas, both an online approach and a street intercept interview approach were administered, whilst in suburban/town and rural areas, only street intercept interviews were conducted.

The Survey database contained a total of 8149 valid cases. For the purpose of our study, we used Question No. D17 in the survey. The question asks the respondent: "During or after the tourism process, what ways did you use to share your travel experiences?". Multiple choice answer options include:

a. Shared with relatives and friends face-to-face
b. Shared via WeChat Moments
c. Used Internet to evaluate tourism and leisure services (public rating and assessment, Taobao tourism evaluation, etc)
d. Shared via open platforms like Weibo, QQ Space, facebook and Instagram
e. Shared on professional tourism websites (e.g., Qyer.com, Mafengwo)
f. Other ways of sharing
g. Did not share

As answer option c. does not closely relate to travel experience sharing, we only adopted the answer options a., b., d., and e. in our analysis. For each of these answer options, if a respondent ticked the option as "yes", we code it as "1"; otherwise, it was coded as "0" for "No".

Not all respondents in the survey responded to this question. After removing 2068 cases in which this question is left unanswered, we include a total sample of 6081 cases in our analysis. For data analysis, we used cross-tabulation analysis in SPSS to see whether the distributions of using different sharing methods vary across different demographic groups.

Results

As shown in Table 1, the sample had slightly more females (51.6%) than males (48.4%). About 44 percent of the respondents were under 40 years old. The majority of them (83.6%) were married with kid. Over 60 percent of them had a tertiary level education. In terms of occupation, most respondents were private enterprise employees (29.4%), retirees (16.3%), state-owned enterprise employees (15.4%), and public institution employees (10.5%).

Table 1 Respondent Profile (N=6081)

Characteristic	Valid n	%	Characteristic	Valid n	%
Gender			*Occupation*		
Male	2944	48.4	Party/government officials	128	2.1
Female	3137	51.6			
Age			Public institution employee	639	10.5
18-30	1329	21.9			
31-40	1357	22.3	SOE employee	934	15.4
41-50	1188	19.5	Foreign enterprise employee	702	11.5
51-60	1244	20.5			
Over 60	963	15.8	Private enterprise employee	1787	29.4
Marital status					
Single	680	11.2	Peasant worker	35	.6
Non-single unmarried	99	1.6	Individual business owner	335	5.5
Married without kid	166	2.7			
Married with kid	5086	83.6	Student	163	2.7
Divorced/widowed	50	.8	Farmer	56	.9
			Freelancer	183	3.0
			Fulltime housewife	31	.5
			Retiree	990	16.3
			Unemployed	28	.5
			Other	70	1.2

Education*			City/Region		
Below primary school	17	.3	Beijing	769	12.6
Primary school	123	2.0	Shanghai	830	13.6
Middle school	575	9.5	Guangzhou	992	16.3
High school (incl. vocational)	1449	23.9	Chengdu	347	5.7
			Wuhan	476	7.8
2-3 year college	1416	23.3	Shenyang	352	5.8
Bachelor degree	2296	37.8	Xi'an	265	4.4
Postgraduate or above	195	3.2	Nanjing	482	7.9
Personal monthly income			Jilin	168	2.8
RMB 0-2000	470	7.7	Zhuhai	625	10.3
RMB 2001-4000	1503	24.7	Lanzhou	173	2.8
RMB 4001-6000	1761	29.0	Yangzhou	247	4.1
RMB 6001-8000	950	15.6	Qiqihaer	80	1.3
RMB over 8000	1397	23.0	Lianyungang	123	2.0
			Kanfeng	79	1.3
			Zunyi	73	1.2

*The valid sample size for education is 6071; on all other characteristics, the valid sample size is 6081.

Face-to-face sharing

Due to space limitation, the detailed tables showing the results are provided in the supplementary material with this paper. Cross tabulation exercise indicated face-to-face sharing had demographic differences in terms of gender, age, and education. Specifically, females tend to resort more to face-to-face sharing than their male counterparts; people above 50 years old tend to share their travel in a face-to-face way than their younger counterparts; and people with low education levels tend to share their travel experience with others face to face more often those with high education levels. In general, half (50%) of the respondents reported they share their travel experience with others face-to-face.

Sharing via WeChat Moments

WeChat emerges as a major social media platform for people to share their travel experience in China. Two-thirds (66.5%) of the respondents reported they shared their travel experience during or after the trip via WeChat Moments. The demographic differences on sharing travel experiences via WeChat Moments were significant in all the demographic variables. Specifically, females appeared to share via WeChat Moments more than their male counterparts; young people tended to share their travel experience via WeChat Moments more frequently than their old counterparts; people with high education tended to share via WeChat Moments more than those with low education levels. And people with high income tended to share more via WeChat Moments.

Sharing through other open Internet platforms (Weibo, QQ Space, Facebook, Instagram)

Comparing to WeChat, other open Internet platforms such as Weibo, QQ Space, Facebook and Instagram can also be the tools for Chinese citizens to share their travel experience. 37.3% of the respondents chose these open Internet platforms to share their travel experience. Cross-tab Chi-square test results show that women tended to share more through these open platforms than men. Young people under 30 years old tended to use these platforms more than other age

groups; middle age people between 40 to 50 years old were the age group that would not use these platforms. Single and non-single unmarried people seem to use these platforms more often than people with other marital status. This may somehow correspond to the age distribution pattern. Highly educated people tended to use these platform, and so did people with high monthly income (above RMB 6000).

Sharing through professional travel websites like Qyer.com and Mafengwo

In China, some online travel companies provide web functions for people to share their travel experience. 19.1% of the respondents used professional travel websites to share their travel experience. However, this type of sharing behaviour did not seem to have any difference between males and females. The age groups of 31-40 and over 60 appeared to use professional websites to share more than other age groups. Interestingly, married people with kid and those non-single unmarried people also tended to use professional websites more often than people in other marital status. Once again, highly educated people tended to use this way to share more than people with low education levels; and those earning a monthly income above RMB 6000 tended to share through professional travel websites more than low income-earners.

In summary, sharing travel experience seems to be a common practice among the respondents. Half of the respondents shared travel experiences face-to-face with others. Two thirds of them shared via WeChat Moments. This shows that WeChat has been a very dominant travel experience sharing platform in China. People do share their travel experience online in other ways. Nearly two fifths of the respondents shared travel experience through other online open platforms like Weibo and QQ Space; and one in five of them used professional travel websites like Qyer.com and Mafengwo to share their travel experience.

We also identified quite some significant demographic differences with regard to the different types of offline and online travel experience sharing. In general, it appears women tend to share more often than men. Old people tend to share offline while young people share more online. People with low education levels tend to share offline; in contrast, highly educated people tend to share online. Neither marital status nor personal monthly income makes any difference for people to share offline. However, single people or non-single unmarried tend to share more via WeChat and other open platforms; interestingly married people with kid used professional travel websites more often. People with high income (above RMB 6000) tend to share online more often.

Discussion and conclusion

This study examines Chinese nationals' travel experience sharing behaviours alongside their major demographic characteristics. Using a large national survey sample, the study identified a series of interesting findings. In general, females were found to share their travel experiences through both face-to-face and online methods more often than their male counterparts. This finding contradicts to Ip et al.'s (2012) study with Hong Kong online users. Ip et al found no gender difference on Hong Kong online users' usage of travel websites for travel planning. The difference may be explained by the fact that Ip et al.'s study focussed on online travel website use rather than online sharing of travel experience. In our study, we also found that when using professional travel website to share travel experience, there was no gender difference. However, gender differences were quite prominent when people use social media platforms (e.g., WeChat Moments, QQ Space) to share their travel experiences.

Our study found that older generations tend to resort to offline forms to share their travel experience, while young people tend to share online. Our findings are largely consistent with Ip et al's (2012) in that online experience sharers tend to be young, highly educated, and relatively wealthy. Comparatively, marital status does not seem to be a strong differentiator for people to share offline; so does personal income. However, singles and non-single unmarried people tend to share more on social media. A plausible explanation may be that these people may enjoy more free time and less household obligations than people in other marital status.

This study contributes to the knowledge of travel experience sharing. Specifically, it demonstrates that travel experience sharing behaviours did differ across different demographic groups. In this regard, gender, age, and education are more salient demographic determinants of differences in travel experience sharing than personal income and marital status. The study provides empirical evidence to support that social identity is one of the major determinants of travel experience sharing (Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006; Desforges, 2000; Kang & Schuett, 2013).

The findings of this study offer practical implications to relevant tourism organisations. Destination marketing organisations may use online platform or social media to target the younger generation travellers in China. Online travel companies should see their audience and potential customers as young, well-educated, and enjoying high income when formulating their business growth strategies. For tourism businesses that serve the senior market, they may need to seek more off-line traditional way of word-of-mouth in expanding their businesses.

The scope of this study is confined to the secondary data structure and availability. Future studies could further examine more psychological variables (e.g., personality traits, personal norms/values) together with demographics in understanding travel experience sharing.

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