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OLDER CHINESE WOMEN'S PERCEIVED CONSTRAINTS AND NEGOTIATION STRATEGIES WITH PLEASURE TRAVEL USING THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF INTERSECTIONALITY

Jie Gao, M.S. & Deborah Kerstetter, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This study responds to a call for research based on the theoretical framework of intersectionality. By focusing on the special context of China, a burgeoning travel market, we examined (a) older women's perceived constraints to pleasure travel and (b) how they negotiated through these constraints, if at all. Results showed that eight types of constraints constrain older Chinese women's travel behavior: "limited knowledge of tourism," "health and safety concerns," "culture shock," "lack of travel partners," "low quality of service facilities," "limited availability of information," "negative reputation of tour guide," and "few employer-paid vacations." Because they want to travel, study participants discussed how they attempt to negotiate through these constraints. Specific negotiation strategies are discussed. These findings provide a glimpse into how tourism marketers can target and serve older female tourists living in China, by revealing and providing opportunities for them to negotiate through constraints.

Keywords: *Travel, Constraints, Negotiation, China*

INTRODUCTION

The research on constraints to participation in leisure activities is decades old, yet scholarship extending the conceptual framework to leisure travel remains scarce. Existing tourism literature heavily focuses on either situational inhibitors or socio-demographic related constraints (Nyaupane & Andereck, 2008), and assumes that constraints are immovable, static, and obstacles to participation (Jackson, 2005). This assumption is counterintuitive suggests Watson and Scraton (2013), who propose studying constraints using the theoretical framework of intersectionality, which focuses upon and enables analyses of specific contexts and the political, social and material consequences of gender, race, class, and aging. This study responds to their call by first focusing on the special context of China, and second by examining the perceived constraints to pleasure travel while accounting for the political, social and material consequences of age (older), gender (females), and race (Asian-Chinese).

The decision to focus on older Chinese women is multifaceted. First, China's national retirement policy requires that women retire 5 to 10 years earlier than men (Hu & Zhang, 2005); hence, older Chinese women are more likely to experience "emptiness" because of fewer responsibilities. Examining the role that travel plays in relieving such emptiness is reasonable because travel has been found to be a viable intervention that generates positive emotions (Nawijn, 2009; Mitas, 2010). Second, while older Chinese women are financially able to travel (China National Tourism Administration [CNTA], 2011) many do not. It is unclear what constrains them from traveling. Hence, this study had two objectives: (1) to identify older Chinese women's perception of constraints to pleasure travel and (2) to document how those who choose to travel for pleasure negotiate through constraints.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As a guiding theoretical framework, intersectionality focuses upon specific contexts and the political, social and material consequences of gender, race, sexuality and ageing (Davis, 2008). Intersectionality also enables analyses of specific circumstances encountered by individuals, while maintaining an explanatory and analytical perspective that retains a focus on systems and processes (Valentine, 2007, 2010). Watson and Scraton (2013), for example, highlighted the potential contributions intersectionality can make to leisure scholarship. Using intersectionality as a guiding theoretical framework is particularly important when studying leisure constraints, as past research has generally ignored their intersectionality with gender, race, aging, and in particular, culture (Chick & Dong, 2009).

In 1991, Crawford, Jackson and Godbey proposed a multi-dimensional (i.e., Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Structural) Hierarchical Constraint Model (HCM) that initiated numerous studies on perceived constraints to leisure participation, but few on perceived constraints to travel. Pennington-Gray and Kerstetter (2002) tested and confirmed the applicability of the HCM in a nature-based tourism context, but suggested that the travel industry would be well served by continuing to test the Model in other travel contexts. Nyaupane, Morais and Graefe (2004) applied the HCM to three nature-based tourism activities, and called for a re-examination of one of its dimensions. Nyaupane and Andereck (2008) also challenged the validity of the Model when they found that one of its dimensions was not inclusive of all structural (i.e., place attributes, cost, and lack of time) travel constraints. Chen, Chen, and Okumus (2012) introduced a new travel constraint model that included a destination-specific constraint dimension (i.e., unfamiliar cultural constraints) that arguably is critical to the early stages of the travel

decision-making process. Overall, however, there is a dearth of research regarding perceived travel constraints and negotiation, particularly with older, Chinese, female tourists.

METHODS

In 2013, older women, who lived in a medium sized city in China were interviewed about their level of participation in travel, their perception of constraints to travel and, if applicable, their negotiation strategies. Older Chinese women were the focus of this research because researchers have found that their interest in pleasure travel is growing (CNTA, 2011), but social, political and psychological restrictions may differentially affect their participation in travel (Livengood & Stodolska, 2004). The decision to conduct interviews (i.e., a qualitative method) was based on: (a) our need to attain an in-depth understanding of older Chinese women's travel experiences as well as their perception of constraints, and (b) the fact that the HCM's validity has been tested primarily in a Western, not an Eastern context.

Using snowball sampling (i.e., each interviewee provided contact information for another potential interviewee), a total of 16 older Chinese women, ranging in age from 45 to 60, were invited to participate in an in-depth, semi-structured interview. The decision to stop after the 16th interview was because saturation had been reached (Bowen, 2008). During the interview participants were asked questions including "What does traveling mean to you?" and "Did you travel when you were a child/in your 20s and 30s/in the past 10 years/in the last year?" The interviews lasted from 30 to 60 minutes, and were digitally recorded. Each interview was transcribed verbatim first into Mandarin Chinese and then translated into English. A second individual fluent in both languages back translated the interviews. Coding and analysis were also a part of the iterative process in that the themes emerged along with data collection, reduction and display (Dey, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

RESULTS

While we did not use the HCM as a guiding framework in this study, it is the leading framework guiding the majority of leisure constraints research. Thus, in an effort to maximize the value of our findings, we chose to organize them according to the three dimensions (i.e., Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Structural) of the Model. Intrapersonal constraints for older Chinese women included *limited knowledge of tourism*, *health and safety concerns*, and *culture shock*. For instance, one woman was confused about the meaning of travel and/or tourism. She said that "[she] didn't understand the concept of tourism [in the past]..." She regarded a trip to her father's hometown that was far from where she lived as visiting family, not "tourism." *Health and safety concerns*, included being "very concerned about safety... [due to the likelihood that one would] encounter terrorists while traveling," while *culture shock*, was linked to lifestyles of the Other. For example, one woman who had traveled to inner Mongolia indicated that she "...was invited to have raw beef and fresh goat milk... [she] didn't want to refuse the warmhearted herdsman but still felt surprised and disgusted by having to smell raw beef and goats milk..." Another woman who had traveled to Brazil indicated that while her trip was memorable, it was hard for her to appreciate the destination because of the "... [amount of] graffiti on the street walls..." For her, the graffiti was like street advertising in China, which she felt ruined the architecture; her Brazilian friends told her that the graffiti was "art." Interpersonal constraints, the second dimension of the HCM, was represented by the constraint, *lack of travel partners*. Many respondents' husbands still work and/or their children study in another city. One woman said, "Although traveling abroad has been my wish for a

long time, I don't want to travel alone. My husband is still working... [but] when he retires... I want to travel with him and other families." Another woman indicated that she "...won't travel if [she is] alone... It might be something particular to women [her] age..." Study participants cited four different structural constraints, including the *low quality of service facilities*. For example, one woman reflected on her experience in Tibet, saying "...the people there were very warmhearted, dancing and singing. But the hygiene and service quality was too bad... I will definitely choose some tourism destinations with high service quality in [the] future." Another woman wanted to travel abroad, but there was *limited availability of information*, particularly how to apply for a visa. The third structural constraint, *negative reputation of tour guide*, was also highlighted as a constraint to pleasure travel: "... The tour guide immediately asked for extra money or a raise in his fees... when [I] got to a tourism attraction..." And the fourth structural constraint was *few employer-paid vacations*. Most of the women indicated that vacations used to be one of their job-associated benefits: "Most... trips were organized and financially supported by [my] employer..." Today there are fewer employer-paid vacations, resulting in a constraint for older Chinese women who want to travel for pleasure. As one woman suggested, "... for [my] generation, the idea that [we have to] pay for our own trips has not yet rooted in [my] mind."

Older Chinese women have developed strategies for negotiating through these constraints. For example, being open to word-of-mouth advertising from friends and/or colleagues their age helped study participants to convert *culture shock* into motivation to travel to experience something different. Tasting organic food and a breath of fresh air at an eco-friendly destination were also cited as benefits that have enticed older women to negotiate through structural constraints. Specific to the context of China, where women retire 5 to 10 years earlier than men, signing up for group travel with retired women was also cited as a way women are negotiating through interpersonal constraints. Traveling with what are referred to as "donkey" friends (i.e., travel partners identified on the Internet and who organize weekly or monthly trips voluntarily) was also suggested as a new way for older Chinese women to find travel partners. One woman enjoyed traveling with "donkey" friends because "... they are ... nice... [and] ... help each other... [and] they don't make money, just looking for more travel partners..." She appreciated this "... emerging form of tourism... [because] it is convenient. [I] only need to sign up [online and my] donkey friends assign [me] to a certain car... [I] only need to share the costs afterwards."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We studied constraints to pleasure travel using the theoretical framework of intersectionality. We focused on the special context of China, and examined older Chinese women's perception of travel constraints as well as their negotiation strategies. The results allowed us to extend leisure constraints and negotiation research to the context of travel by revealing multiple constraints and negotiation strategies unique to older Chinese female tourists. The results also provided preliminary evidence that older Chinese women who successfully negotiate through their constraints to pleasure travel may be experiencing enhanced psychological well-being. This finding supports Mannell and Snelgorve's (2011) work, which suggests that leisure participation is associated with a higher level of psychological well-being amongst older people. In terms of applications, these findings provide a glimpse into how tourism marketers can target, attract and serve older Chinese women who travel for pleasure; a group that is increasing in size and influence.

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