

Does Contact Lessen Perceived Cultural Distance?: Evidence from Tourist-Host Social

Contact

Social contact and cultural distance are well recognized domains in understanding the intergroup relationship, travel experience and attitudes of tourists. Intergroup contact can enhance the understanding of other groups, undermine bias and stereotypes, and further improve the intergroup relations (Allport, 1979; Kirillova, Lehto, & Cai, 2015). Meanwhile, cultural distance is argued to negatively affect tourists' willingness to travel to a certain region (Cohen, 1979; Ng, Lee & Soutar, 2007; Goeldner & Ritchie, 2008). Social contact in cross-cultural context is defined as the face-to-face contacts between people from different cultural backgrounds (Cusher & Brislin, 1996; Yu & Lee, 2014). In the field of tourism research, cultural distance refers to the extent to which the culture of the origin region differs from the culture of the host region (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2008).

Although there is an extensive coverage on the subjects of social contact and cultural distance, some concerns have been noticed. First, considering the large body of literature in the sociological and psychological realms, there are limited efforts made to investigate the contact effects on cultural distance in particular. The relationship between social contact and cultural distance remains a mystery. Second, among the limited literature exploring the relationship between social contact and cultural distance (Allports, 1979; Kirillova et al., 2015), few of them set tourism as the research context. Third, sufficient research applied social contact as their measurement instruments, however, the applicability and appropriateness of the diverse instruments have been challenged by some scholars (Rothman, 1978; Ng et al., 2007; Huang & Hsu, 2010). Therefore, a rigorous measurement of social contact should be developed to avoid

any of the past ambiguity or bias. Additionally, most of the existing literature of social contact emphasized its positive or negative effects on the hosts, however, limited studies investigated the effects of social contact on tourists. Taken those issues into consideration, the present study aims to: develop and validate measurement instruments of social contact and perceived cultural distance in the context of tourism; explore the effects of social contact on perceived cultural distance; and provide implications to government, tourism operators and local communities.

To achieve the aforementioned research objectives, the current study followed both qualitative and quantitative approaches. To generate primary and rich data for developing social contact and perceived cultural distance items, in-depth interviews were implemented. During the interviews, informants were asked about their travel experiences to mainland China, any memories of perceived cultural distance they may have encountered during their travel, and their interactions they had with their hosts. As a result, 23 qualified informants were interviewed. To assess the content validity, an expert panel review, consisting of 6 research faculty members with expertise in cross-cultural studies were invited to evaluate the items either newly developed from the interviews or adopted from the literature. Based on the results, a survey was conducted with Hong Kong tourists traveling to mainland China. Following the quota sampling, data was collected in Shanghai, Beijing and Hangzhou and 522 questionnaires were completed. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were performed to explore and confirm the structure and dimensions of the constructs. The relationship between social contact and perceived cultural distance was tested by structural equation modeling (SEM).

As a result, the measurements of perceived cultural distance and social contact were developed and validated. Three factors of perceived cultural distance were identified, which covered culture retention, behavioral characteristics, and social characteristics. The social contact

was represented by both the quantity and quality aspects. Based on the rigorous research method, the current study supported that both quality and quantity aspects of social contact have associations with the tourists' perceived cultural distance.

In particular, quality of contact was revealed to have a negative effect on the perceived cultural distance. Interestingly, as argued in previous literature, quantity of contact has long been treated as an insignificant element in social contact studies (Nash, 1989). The significant effect obtained in this study may result from the improvement of the social contact measurement. In the current study, items of quantity of social contact were categorized into two sub-dimensions, namely, social oriented aspect and service oriented aspect. Social oriented contacts represent the interactions with social purposes, for instance, making friends, visiting locals' homes, exploring the locals' daily life and traveling together. Due to the nature of social purposes, those activities are considered to be more interactive and intense, as they involve more commitment to each other. According to the contact theory (Allport, 1979), contacts can positively influence individuals' perceptions of other groups if such contacts involve personal and informal interactions. In that case, social oriented contacts may reduce the perceived cultural distance between tourists and hosts. In contrast, service oriented social contacts are stated to have a positive relationship with the perceived cultural distance. Such kinds of contacts include the contacts with service personnel during service encounters, such as in dining, shopping, transportation, accommodation and touring occasions. They normally require a quite short communication time and limited interaction. Therefore, those contacts tend to be superficial and standardized. Due to the shallow nature, service oriented contacts are hardly possible ways for tourists to achieve the aforementioned conditions. Each time the tourists contact with the hosts in such situations, they will experience the cultural shock induced by the actual cultural distance

between the two parties. The extensive and repeated shallow experiences collectively reinforce tourists' with the differences between the two parties and increase the perceived cultural distance accordingly.

Theoretically, a new measurement technique for tourist-host social contact was developed, which could facilitate further empirical research to investigate its antecedents and consequences. This study also filled in the research gap by empirically examining the relationship between tourist-host social contact and perceived cultural distance. It focused on the growing awareness of the effects of social contact on tourists. Results supported that both quantity and quality aspects of social contact have associations with the tourists' perceived cultural distance. As one of the most important findings of the current study, quantity of social contact was further divided into social oriented and service oriented contacts, and they were found to have opposite effects on the perceived cultural distance. The findings may facilitate understanding how different types of contact may affect individuals' perceptions through tourism activities.

Building on those theoretical contributions, this study also provides implications for government, tourism operators and local communities. First, government officials from ethnically similar but ideologically different regions may consider to promote more personal and favorable contacts between tourists and hosts in order to engender a sense of cultural similarity and national identity, and to reduce the tension and prejudices in the long run. Second, tourism operators and product planners could purposely design some itineraries which involve intense and social activities with the locals, for instance, visiting the local communities (non-tourism areas), providing resident volunteer centers for tourism enquiry or promoting contact-intensive tourism, such as farm tourism and voluntourism. The engagement in positive and favorable

intergroup relationships from those types of contact may ultimately foster favorable travel experience and high service satisfaction through the influence of positive customer emotions. Last but not least, local residents can also contribute to the local tourism industry by proactively interacting with tourists to build up a hospitable destination image in the long run.

Further research based on this output will seek to develop a monitoring link between the data collected and the end-users, the communities and regulatory authorities. This study can be replicated elsewhere to further test the validity of the methodological approach and, with changes to the questions as necessary and appropriate, to facilitate the focus of the enquiry. Continuing exploration of the tourist-host contact using quantitative techniques would help provide more rigor to this area of analysis.

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