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Barriers to offering special interest tour products to the Chinese outbound group market

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Interviewed 20 tour operators leading the Chinese outbound travel market.
- Investigated Chinese operators' familiarities with special interest tourism products.
- Identified barriers to offering SIT activities to Chinese outbound group tourists.
- Argued validity of perceived barriers from the perspective of critical social theory.

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ABSTRACT

As Chinese outbound tourists expand in numbers and diversity, they may seek more challenging special interest tourism (SIT) activities. Tourists' participation in SIT activities can be profitable to a wider range of providers, enhance destination image, and enrich tourists' experiences. This research investigated the opportunities for offering SIT products to the China outbound group market by interviewing 20 Chinese outbound tour operators to examine the extent of interest in developing the product as well as factors driving or hindering the development. Findings revealed four types of barriers that influence operators' willingness to incorporate SIT activities in their product offerings. Drawing on a critical social theory approach that focuses on 'enlightenment' and 'critique', this paper argues the validity of these perceived barriers - operators are risk-averse for institutionalised practical, social, cultural, and policy-related reasons.

1. Introduction

The concept of special interest tourism (SIT) was introduced in the 1980s and early 1990s (Hall & Weiler, 1992), along with the emergence of ‘niche’, ‘alternative’, ‘sustainable’, ‘eco’, ‘responsible’, and ‘new’ tourism, as an opposition to mass tourism, which was being discredited owing to its homogenous products and negative social and environmental impacts (e.g., Douglas, Douglas, & Derrett, 2001). SIT was used to encapsulate the underpinning of ‘serious leisure’ and tourism, which initially focused on the ‘hard’ or ‘specialised’ end of the market, including products ranging from adventure, eco, and sport tourism to cultural tourism (Hall & Weiler, 1992; Trauer, 2006). However, in response to growing consumer demand, operators have diversified their offerings to attract the ‘soft’ or ‘novice’ end of the market (Douglas et al., 2001; Morgan & Pritchard, 2005; Trauer, 2006). For instance, outdoor recreation as a component of adventure tourism has become increasingly commercialised and has evolved to be a purchasable short-term holiday experience (Buckley, 2007; 2012; Cater, 2006). As SIT activities have become more accessible, SIT's reach has extended to more novice tourism markets like China.

China has become the largest tourism source market in the world in terms of spending (UNWTO., 2014). Popular long-haul destinations include the US, European countries, Australia, and New Zealand (CTA, 2014). Chinese tourists tend to spend the most on shopping, accounting for one-third to one-half of their total expenditures. Expenditures on tickets to attractions and entertainment are less than 20% in total (CTA, 2014). Traditionally, the China outbound tourist market has been dominated by group travel, in a large part owing to visa regulations associated with early outbound tourism. Traditional Chinese tourists are sightseers who hastily tick off sight by sight and country by country. However, with the development of outbound travel, the characteristics of Chinese

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outbound tourists are changing. The new wave of Chinese outbound tourists (group or non-group) seeks more personalised experiences, opening opportunities for previously 'off the beaten track' destinations and service providers (Arlt, 2013). This research aims to explore opportunities for (SIT) activities (especially outdoor recreation) and service providers to cater to the Chinese outbound group market.

China has become one of Australia's most important tourist source markets (Tourism Australia, 2014). Chinese tourists to Australia reached 784,000 in 2014 and contributed more than $5.7 million (Australian) to the economy. In general, the Chinese visitor market to Australia can be characterised as a multi-destination group traveller (Tourism Australia, 2014), indicating that the group tour remains an important offering for Chinese outbound tourists, and the tour itinerary plays an important role in destination and activities choices.

This research investigates the attitudes of tour operators toward the inclusion of more adventurous SIT activities in the itineraries of package tours. Tour operators are front-line professionals who design itineraries, market and sell tour products to customers, and together with ground operators administer on-site operations. Given the significance of commercial package tours in Chinese outbound travel, understanding tour operators' views with respect to offering more SIT activities to their customers is important. Investigating from a critical social theory perspective and using qualitative interviews, this paper puts forward a model of the key barriers to Chinese operators' consideration of SIT products. The research questions of this study are:

1 To what extent do Chinese tour operators have personal experience with outdoor SIT activities?
2 What general attitudes do tour operators hold with respect to incorporating more outdoor SIT into their travel products?
3 What factors contribute to or hinder the provision of these activities to tourists?

The paper investigates the trade or operator perspective on designing travel products for tourists. By understanding the perception of tour operators, destination marketers could develop a campaign to influence attitudes and potentially tap into new markets, enlarge economic gains to a wider range of suppliers, increase economic impact, and promote or renew destination image. By including outdoor SIT activities, Chinese tourists may enrich their experiences and allocate their expenditures differently, resulting in changes to the value system of Chinese outbound tourists.

2. Literature review

2.1. Special interest tourism – conceptualization, commercialisation, and market segmentation

Special interest tourism was initially used as a tool to define market segments. That is, travellers' motivation and decision-making to visit a destination could focus on where to go (destination), what activities to pursue (interest), or a trade-off of the two (Hall & Weiler, 1992). This primary motivational focus suggested a difference among general interest tourism (GIT), mixed interest tourism (MIT), and special interest tourism (SIT) (Brotherton & Himmetoglu, 1997). GIT is motivated by destination attributes (where to go), whereas SIT is motivated by a desire to participate in an existing leisure interest or to develop a new interest in a particular destination (what to do). In SIT, participating in special interest activities acts as a primary motivating factor in the choice of destinations, although MIT and SIT to some extent overlap.

As a motivator for travel and a determining factor for destination choice, SIT has been connected with 'serious leisure' and 'enduring involvement'. If participants systematically pursue an activity despite the costs, so much so that they find a career in the acquisition of its special skills and expression of knowledge, the activity becomes their serious leisure (Stebbins, 1982). SIT tourists have been regarded as being 'serious leisure participants' from the 'hard' or 'specialised' end of the market (Hall & Weiler, 1992; Stebbins, 1982). However, the increase of commercialised SIT products has induced a shift of SIT from being connected solely with serious leisure and enduring involvement to being linked to 'casual leisure' and 'situational involvement' (Trauer, 2006). Casual leisure is relatively short-lived pleasurable activity that requires little or no special training and is immediately and intrinsically rewarding (Stebbins, 1997). Responding to a market comprising individuals who are time-poor but 'experience-hungry' in the post-Fordism era (Opaschowski, 2001; cited in Trauer, 2006), SIT providers have expanded offerings to attract tourists in the 'soft and novice' end of the market who can take part in casual leisure activities (Buckley, 2007).

As an example, adventure tourism, which relies on features of the natural terrain and generally requires specialised equipment, is increasingly taking the form of guided commercial tours (Buckley, 2007). A gradually acquired lifetime skill is no longer essential for participation in some adventure (outdoor recreational) activities, as they have become commercialised, purchasable short-term holiday experiences (Buckley, 2007; Cater, 2006). Surfing, for instance, is generally associated with serious leisure qualities (Barbieri & Sotomayor, 2013). However, with increasing commercialisation of surfing products, many destinations are now offering short-term surf training or simulation surfing to engage the casual and soft end of the market. In 2007, 112 countries offered some sort of surfing tours or had available surfing-related information for tourists (Ponting, 2008). In some destinations, surf tourism is likely to lead to a high-volume model and potentially lower the entry barriers for local entrepreneurs (Ponting & McDonald, 2013).

Within commercialised leisure activities and tours, service providers are responsible for providing safe, pleasurable, sensational, and satisfying experiences to a wide array of customers who range from novices to experts. Tourists are major patrons of these exciting experiences, and regardless of their level of skills, demographics, emotions, expectations, and experiences, they all participate in the same offering (Buckley, 2007; 2012).

Academics have tried to use involvement profiles (i.e., importance, self-expression, pleasure, risk probability, and risk consequence) and involvement kind (i.e., enduring or situational) to segment tourists who participate in SIT activities (e.g., Hall &Weiler, 1992; Brotherton & Himmetoglu, 1997). Brotherton and Himmetoglu (1997) theorised a continuum of dabbler, enthusiast, expert, and fanatic. Trauer (2006) classified participants as novice, collector, and specialist, and conceived zones of exploration, comfort, risk, and high-challenge for these groups. Similar segmentation studies revealed other tourism sectors. For example, McKercher and du Cros (2003) characterised cultural tourists as serendipitous, purposeful, incidental, casual, and sightseeing on the basis of two variables – the importance of cultural tourism in the decision to visit a destination and experiences sought. Mackellar (2014) divided event audiences into mass event audiences, special interest audiences, incidental audiences, and media audiences.

Definitions of SIT vary, as do assessments of the scale and scope of the market. Despite the origin of the concept and its connection with travel motivation and serious leisure in earlier studies, researchers have increasingly considered SIT as encapsulating a wide range of tourism activities, including adventure, nature-based, religious, culinary, eco, culture and heritage, wildlife-watching,