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Research Paper

Perceived cultural distance and international destination choice: The role of destination familiarity, geographic distance, and cultural motivation

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ABSTRACT

Cultural distance is a key factor in international tourism. This study aims to use the perceptual measure of cultural distance to investigate: (1) the impact of destination familiarity and geographic distance on perceived cultural distance (PCD); and (2) the moderating effect of cultural motivation on PCD and Chinese potential outbound tourists' international destination choices. Findings reveal that while destination familiarity and geographic distance are important antecedents of PCD, PCD has no significant impact on international destination choice. When moderated by cultural motivation, however, PCD exerts a positive impact on destination choice for respondents with a higher level of cultural motivation and a negative impact on those with a lower level of cultural motivation. In closing, theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

"What sets worlds in motion is the interplay of differences, their attractions and repulsions."

—Octavio Paz (Mexican poet, writer and diplomat; 1914–1998)

Every coin has two sides, as does cultural difference. On the one hand, human beings are fascinated by cultural differences: cultural exploration is one of modern tourists' primary motivations for leisure travel (Crompton, 1979). On the other hand, cultural differences present tourists with many challenges, including miscommunication and cultural conflict. For instance, in 2010, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) reported that a British man and woman in Dubai were fined for drinking alcohol and sentenced to jail for kissing in public (BBC, 2010). Given the complex effects of cultural differences on tourism, the present study examines: (1) the factors influencing tourists' perceived cultural differences; and (2) the role of cultural difference in international destination choice.

The notion of cultural distance is one way to evaluate the effects of cultural factors in an international tourism context. Specifically, cultural distance represents the extent of cultural difference between tourists' home and destination countries (Ng, Lee, & Soutar, 2007). It has been noted that individuals' perceptions of cultural differences directly inform their behavior and decision-making (Drogendijk & Slangen, 2006), and studies across various disciplines have assessed the perceptual measure of cultural distance (e.g. Cheng & Leung, 2013; Drogendijk & Slangen, 2006; Galchenko & van de Vijver, 2007; Ng

et al., 2007). Despite the important role of perceived cultural distance (PCD) on human behavior, few studies have explored what may affect individuals' PCD. Judgement of cultural distance depends on myriad factors, such as individuals' knowledge about a destination's culture. Based on extant literature, the current study focuses on the impact of tourists' destination familiarity and geographic distance between home and destination countries on PCD.

Several studies have examined the role of cultural distance on tourist destination choice (Jackson, 2000, 2001; Ng et al., 2007; Ng, Lee, & Soutar, 2009; Vietze, 2012; Yang, Liu, & Li, 2016; Yang & Wong, 2012); however, their findings are inconsistent. Some have concluded that cultural distance negatively impacts destination choice, such that tourists are more likely to visit destinations that are culturally similar to their home countries (Jackson, 2000; Ng et al., 2007, 2009; Vietze, 2012; Yang & Wong, 2012). Other studies have found mixed results pertaining to the relationship between cultural distance and destination choice (Jackson, 2001; Yang et al., 2016). For instance, Jackson (2001) reported that people from highly individualistic countries tended to choose culturally similar destinations, whereas people from highly collectivistic countries were apt to choose those that were culturally different. Such disparities could be ascribed to the dual function of cultural distance on destination choice as an inhibitor and a motivator. To clarify these discrepancies, this study incorporates cultural motivation (i.e. tourists' interest in exploring different cultures) as a potential moderator.

To fill the abovementioned research gaps, the current study

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attempts to answer the following research questions: (1) What is the role of destination familiarity and geographic distance in shaping people's PCD? (2) What is the impact of PCD on international destination choice? and (3) Is the relationship between PCD and international destination choice moderated by cultural motivation? These questions were investigated using a regression-based quantitative approach with Chinese potential outbound tourists.

2. Literature review

2.1. Perceived cultural distance (PCD)

Cultural distance is derived from the comparison between two cultural groups. It measures the extent to which cultural norms and practices in any two cultural groups or entities differ (Kogut & Singh, 1988). With regard to international destination choice, cultural distance refers to the extent to which the culture of a tourist's home country is different from or similar to that of a destination. Individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds tend to have different attitudes and behaviors; indeed, cultural values are reflected in "patterned ways of thinking, feeling, and reacting" (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961, p. 86). As such, cultural distance creates the need for knowledge flow but also presents a barrier to cross-cultural interactions and knowledge flows between cultural groups (Barkema, Shenkar, Vermeulen, & Bell, 1997). Cultural distance has been acknowledged as a critical determinant of various organizational and personal behaviors in cross-cultural contexts, including foreign direct investment (Shenkar, 2001), multinational firm performance (Tihanyi, Griffith, & Russell, 2005), expatriate job satisfaction (Froese & Peltokorpi, 2011), acculturation and cultural adjustment (Galchenko & van de Vijver, 2007), and tourist destination choice (Ng et al., 2007).

Since the early 1980s, many quantitative methods for measuring cultural distance have been developed (Ng et al., 2007), such as the cultural index (Kogut and Singh, 1988), the cultural diversity index (Jackson, 2001), linguistic distance (West & Graham, 2004), cultural clusters (Clark & Pugh, 2001), and commonality in religion (Guiso, Sapienza, & Zingales, 2009). However, these quantitative measures suffer from several limitations. First, culture evolves continually and is shaped by changing political, social, economic, and technological forces (Samuel Craig & Douglas, 2006; Shenkar, 2001). However, quantitative measures of cultural distance rarely reflect temporal cultural changes. For example, Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions were developed nearly 40 years ago and have since been called outdated and static (Drogendijk & Slangen, 2006; Soares, Farhangmehr, & Shoham, 2007). Similarly, language and religion reflect institutional traditions and remain relatively stable over time (Tang & Koveos, 2008). Second, existing quantitative measures of cultural distance assume it is symmetric; that is, the cultural distance from Country A to Country B is the same as that from Country B to Country A (Shenkar, 2001). However, individuals in Country A do not necessarily consider Country B to have the same cultural distance as individuals in Country B perceive Country A. Making this problematic assumption could lead to inaccurate estimates of the impact of cultural distance on tourist destination choice. Third, and most importantly, quantitative measures generally assess cultural distance at the group or country level, which is not analogous to individual behaviors. Yet many studies have used cultural distance based on Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions to explain the behaviors of firms or individuals (e.g. Crotts, 2004; Morosini, Shane, & Singh, 1998). Hofstede (2001) himself even argued that his framework should be used at the country level rather than at an individual level.

PCD overcomes these weaknesses. Using interviews or questionnaires, PCD reflects temporal changes in personal cultural values and captures value heterogeneity among individuals within the same country. Due to this individual heterogeneity, people with different cultural backgrounds may have different cultural distance perceptions, and hence, the proposition that cultural distance is symmetric is no

longer supported. Empirical studies have reported that that hosts and guests have significantly different ratings on cultural similarity between the destination country and origin country (Boylu, Tasci, & Gartner, 2009; Tasci & Severt, 2017). Moreover, PCD is well suited to predicting individuals' destination choices because personal attitudes and perceptions directly drive tourists' behavioral decisions (Drogendijk & Slangen, 2006). Using five cultural distance measures (quantitative and perceptual), Ng et al. (2007) found PCD to be most significantly correlated with tourists' intentions to visit holiday destinations (the dependent variable) compared to four other quantitative measures. The current study therefore adopts the concept of PCD, defined in the context of international destination choice, as the extent to which tourists perceive their home country's culture to be different or similar to that of a destination country.

2.2. Impacts of destination familiarity and geographic distance on PCD

Although an increasing number of studies have emphasized the importance of PCD (Drogendijk & Slangen, 2006; Ng et al., 2007), almost none have tapped into the factors affecting individuals' perceptions of cultural distance. Based on extant literature, this study examines two potential antecedents of PCD: destination familiarity and geographic distance.

2.2.1. Destination familiarity

Familiarity refers to the number of product-related experiences or the amount of product-related information (Toyama & Yamada, 2012). In tourism research, destination familiarity is divided into several dimensions, including self-rated familiarity, informational familiarity, and experiential familiarity (Baloglu, 2001; Hu & Ritchie, 1993; Prentice, 2004). Self-rated familiarity reflects one's overall level of familiarity with a destination (Prentice, 2004). Informational familiarity refers to the amount of destination-related information to which individuals are exposed via various sources (Baloglu, 2001). Experiential familiarity captures one's previous experiences visiting a destination (Baloglu, 2001).

Generally, destination familiarity may decrease PCD. In the marketing literature, product familiarity is considered an important component of consumer knowledge, which refers to the amount of information consumers possess about a product (Biswas, Biswas, & Das, 2006; Park, Mothersbaugh, & Feick, 1994). Hence, destination familiarity is positively associated with tourists' cultural knowledge of a destination, which further decreases PCD between tourists' home country and the destination country. On the contrary, little familiarity and cultural knowledge about a destination could lead to greater uncertainty and increased PCD. Furthermore, according to mere exposure theory in social psychology, familiarity can lead to increased liking and affinity (i.e. social closeness) and may increase perceived similarity and decrease psychological distance (Moreland & Beach, 1992; Zajonc, 1968). Empirical studies have supported these assertions. For instance, Moreland and Zajonc (1982) reported that familiarity has a positive effect on perceived similarity through attraction. Therefore, it can be argued that higher destination familiarity could lead to greater perceived cultural closeness and similarity between home and destination countries. Based on these revelations, the authors predict that destination familiarity will be negatively associated with PCD between tourists' home and destination countries. Given the three dimensions of destination familiarity, the following sub-hypotheses are proposed:

H1a : Self-rated familiarity has a negative impact on PCD.

H1b : Informational familiarity has a negative impact on PCD.

H1c : Experiential familiarity has a negative impact on PCD.

2.2.2. Geographic distance

Geographic distance measures the distance between two geographic points on the surface of the Earth (in this study, tourists' home and destination countries). The impact of spatial distance on human

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