Research Paper

Understanding tourist attraction cooperation: An application of network analysis to the case of Shanghai, China

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study explores the profile structure of tourist attraction cooperation from the perspectives of tourists and government by using web-based text data. Targets were tourist attractions in Shanghai rated grade 3A and above. The study collected travel notes published by tourists about their travel experiences on blog communities, as well as official news released by the Chinese government. Based on frequencies of occurrence and co-occurrence of information about tourist attractions in these travel notes and official news items, levels of cooperation between tourist attractions is analyzed. The results indicate a difference in the popularity of tourist attractions as portrayed in travel notes and official news. In addition, there are significant differences between the government's and tourists' preferences for tourist attraction cooperation. The profile structure of tourist attraction cooperation from the government perspective is not consistent with real cooperation structure as seen from the tourist's perspective. A number of policy implications for tourism development emerge and are presented.

1. Introduction

A tourist attraction is a place of interest that tourists visit, typically for its inherent or exhibited natural or cultural value, historical status, or built beauty, that offers leisure, adventure, and amusement. Fragmented or continuous cooperation of related but diverse tourist attractions are fundamental structural features of the tourism industry (Baggio, 2011). Generally, cooperation is described as a process that incorporates diverse entities working or acting together for common or mutual benefit, as opposed to working in competition for selfish benefit (Gray, 1989; Jamal & Getz, 1995). Based on previous research (Parkhe, 1991; Pechlaner & Volgger, 2012; Raab & Kenis, 2009), tourist attractions depend heavily on each other, rather than their own individual characteristics, to work toward the same goals, seek market opportunities, or find common points of interest (Baggio, Scott, & Cooper, 2010; Jesus & Franco, 2016; March & Wilkinson, 2009). Leask (2010, 2016) provided a critical review of the literature on tourist attraction management and identified limitations in the existing academic research and the key challenges facing both tourist attraction practitioners and academics.

The concept of tourist attraction cooperation considers tourist attractions to be embedded in a cooperation structure: hence attractions do not act in isolation but in relation to each other. Based on this terminology, tourist attraction cooperation can be defined 'as a set of nodes and the set of ties representing some relationship' (Brass,

Galaskiewicz, Greve, & Tsai, 2004, p. 795). As the related literature shows, cooperation refers to the relationships among a set of elements (Gamm, 1981), tourist attraction cooperation depicts relationships among two or more tourist attractions in which they interact or collaborate to share information and tourists markets, as well as jointly innovate tourism products and achieve regional tourism development goals. Thus, tourist attraction cooperation manifests as the networks among tourist attractions in which individual tourist attractions work together to create a highly complex system that is greater than the sum of its parts (Borgatti & Foster, 2003).

In China, tourism is a government-dominant industry in which the government plays a leading role in tourist attraction cooperation. Government responsiveness and its policies regarding consumers are important in the political economy (Besley & Burgess, 2002): government can be held accountable by citizens and tourists for creating tourism policies that affect tourist attraction cooperation and tourism development (Bramwell, 2011). While the tourist perceives a trip to a region as an overall tourism experience of the place, the tourism product of a region consists of a series of tourist attractions. The effectiveness of government policies or measures for tourism development is determined not only by the ability to influence tourists' perceptions, but also by the approval of tourists of these policies. Compared with government agencies, tourists have direct experience with tourist attractions and related products or services, which forms the major revenue streams of tourist attractions.

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Different websites or internet platforms are used by government to release official news: official news presents policies or measurements to promote tourist attraction development, which can increase awareness of attractions and increase the likelihood of tourists visiting a specific tourism destination (Ho & Chou-Yen, 2003). The rise of Web 2.0 has, however, enabled tourists to respond actively to government policies or measures regarding tourist attractions. Any tourist with a smartphone can potentially express his or her perceptions and opinion without depending on third parties for media access (O'Reilly, 2007). Internet platforms, such as Sina.com and Ctrip.com, blog communities, and review platforms, provide sources of online travel notes. In addition, tourists are increasingly relying on online peer opinions to form their tourism decisions.

Although tourist attractions, individually and collectively, can be considered a key component of tourism products, tourist attraction cooperation remains relatively understudied. Tourist attraction cooperation can be found in travel notes and official news. Travel notes report the travel route of tourists and their reflections on tourist attractions, and portray how tourist attractions cooperate and interact with each other in tourists' memories, reflecting their perceptions. The consistency between tourist perceptions and government policies is critical for the sustainability and good governance of the tourism industry. However, related studies on government policies and tourists' perceptions are limited to their own fields.

It is difficult in some respects to separate the analysis of tourist attraction cooperation from government policies and tourists themselves. A better understanding of tourist attraction cooperation from the tourist demand perspective will enhance policymaking for tourism spatial planning. Thus, the primary aim of this study is to compare two different forms of tourist attraction cooperation, one from the perspective of government policies and the other perceived by tourists, exploring possible factors associated with spatial proximity and density in relation to cooperation among tourist attractions at Shanghai regional scales. To achieve this aim, four sub-objectives are set. First, this study identifies and depicts tourist attraction cooperation in government policies and from tourists' perceptions. Second, it identifies different forms and profiles of tourist attraction cooperation in government policies and from tourists' perceptions, giving interpretative analysis about these differences. Third, the major role of the government in tourist attraction cooperation is mapped along with tourists' perceptions of how to pursue an effective development mechanism for tourist attraction cooperation. Fourth, the study explores ways to conduct research based on web-based text data and contributes to practical applications for developing effective policies.

2. Literature review

Tourist attractions play a crucial role in attracting visitors to a destination. Some studies stress individual tourist attraction management more than their cooperation within a specific region (Morgan, 1996). In addition to the benefits of cooperation in tourism, Fyall, Oakley, and Weis (2000) have summarized the drawbacks of cooperation, such as unfamiliarity among partners, mutual suspicion and ill-feeling among partners, and unhealthy competition with non-cooperation tourist attractions. For these reasons, tourist attractions might be reluctant to cooperate and their cooperation seems to be rather limited in practice (Fyall, Leask, & Garrod, 2001; Leask & Goulding, 1996), with individual tourist attractions tending to regard themselves as separate from the surrounding tourism industry and related industries (Leask & Goulding, 1996).

Given these impediments to cooperation among tourist attractions, interest has grown among tourist attractions to engage in cooperative activities. Previous research has found that rather than being fearful of cooperation, tourist attractions have strong initiative to cooperate and cooperation represents a crucial strategy for tourist attractions (Bramwell & Lane, 1999; Fyall, Oakley, & Weiss, 2000; Fyall et al.,

2001). Not only has cooperation been viewed as an efficient means to collectively brand, theme, and package tourist attraction products, but it has also been regarded as a necessary survival strategy for tourist attractions (Bramwell & Lane, 1999; Fyall et al., 2001). In view of this debate in the research, this study sets out to regard cooperation as a viable and, indeed, vital strategy to be adopted by tourist attractions in their business operation. In addition, an important field of tourism literature has dealt with questions related to cooperation and partnerships (Bramwell & Lane, 2000), which are recognized as important determinants of the success and competitiveness of tourist destinations (Baggio, 2011).

As the industry is cooperation-intensive, different types of tourist attractions are bundled together to form a final tourism product, providing tourists with a much more diverse or abundant tourism experience. Cooperation can generate benefits through sharing tourism resources or innovative tourism products (Baggio et al., 2010; Christof, 2006; Korel, 2000; Ling, Guo, & Liang, 2011). Scott, Baggio, and Cooper (2008) argued that cooperation in tourism might be more important than in other sectors of the economy for many countries, while other studies have extended their focus to the evolution of cooperation (Pavlovich, 2003; Schaffer & Lawley, 2012), cooperative marketing (Pechlaner & Volgger, 2012; Wang & Xiang, 2007; Weidenfeld, 2013), and stakeholders and sustainable tourism (Albrecht, 2013; Timur & Getz, 2008).

2.1. Tourist attraction cooperation

Tourist attraction cooperation can be considered to evolve from a process of repeated cooperation among tourist attractions, built on trust and a high reciprocal level of information exchange and other resources to reduce costs or to avoid the risk of opportunism (Gulati & Gargiulo, 1999). Factors such as trust, communication, exchange, mutuality, respect, and reciprocity have been highlighted in the literature as critical dimensions of cooperation relationships (Eser, 2012; Presenza & Cipollina, 2010; Saxena, 2006; Tyler & Dinan, 2001).

The main goals of tourist attraction cooperation are to achieve common interests and benefits as well as to provide diverse experiences for tourists. Cooperation allows tourist attractions to 'think, work, interact and behave' in a cooperative way (Kumar & Banerjee, 2012, p. 408), combining different resources creatively to create a series of tourism products. Tourist attraction cooperation can, however, promote the spread of information and strengthen connections among tourist attractions, contributing to greater tourist satisfaction and to the economic success of the region where tourist attractions operate (March & Wilkinson, 2009; Saxena, Clark, Oliver, & Ilbery, 2007; Timur & Getz, 2008; Vernon, Essex, Pinder, & Curry, 2005), as well as to the achievement of strategic long-term objectives that single tourist attraction cannot get (Fyall et al., 2001; Swarbrooke, 2002; Watson & McCracken, 2002; Weidenfeld, Butler, & Williams, 2011; Weidenfeld, Williams, & Butler, 2010).

Cooperation studies in the tourism field focus on sustainable tourism development and community-based tourism planning under normal conditions (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999; Graci, 2013; Waayers, Lee, & Newsome, 2012). The possible forms of cooperation range from loose arrangements to strong cooperation (Beritelli, 2011; Czernek, 2013), or management in the case of extreme events, such as disasters (Hystad & Keller, 2008; Pennington-Gray, Cahyanto, Schroeder, & Kesper, 2014). However, the modality of cooperation and the structure of tourist attraction cooperation profiles have not been clearly defined.

Tourist attraction cooperation can be identified from the top down (e.g. government agencies, planners, and designers) or from the bottom up (e.g. cooperators and tourists) (Zhao & Timothy, 2015). The government assumes responsibility for and interest in tourism planning, even if some of the agencies are not tourism-specific institutions (Hall, 2000). Despite the tremendous efforts devoted to tourism planning or policy development, government policies and measures are often