



## Research Paper

## Exploring Mainland Chinese students' motivations of re-visiting Hong Kong as a familiar place and their links to student life experiences

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## ABSTRACT

Non-local students in a study destination are likely to re-visit that destination as a familiar place in the future. However, little is known about the motivation to re-visit the study place and how this motivation may be explained by their life experiences during the time spent there. This study explores the motivation to re-visit Hong Kong as a familiar place by Mainland Chinese students. Based on 20 semi-structured personal interviews, this study identifies the major motivations to re-visit Hong Kong as *nostalgia, socializing, place mediation and interpretation, seeking in-depth experiences, and shopping*. These motivations are clearly associated with life experiences the Mainland Chinese students had while they were staying in Hong Kong as temporary residents. Marketing implications are provided to target non-local students as potential future tourists to the study destination.

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## 1. Introduction

Hong Kong, as a major outbound tourist destination for Mainland Chinese travellers (Zhang & Lam, 1999), is also one of the major study destinations for Mainland Chinese students (Li & Bray, 2007). Hong Kong is perceived as a favourable study destination by Mainland Chinese students and their parents, due to such factors as its 'social and cultural identity', 'financial support and scholarships', exchange programmes, and the close links to the Mainland in terms of its 'merger of eastern and western culture', and arguably as a 'bridge between China and the outside' (Li & Bray, 2007, p. 807). The future benefits, study costs and support are also perceived as highly favourable (Bodycott, 2009). Hong Kong may, in the meantime, provide an opportunity for the future career choice of Mainland Chinese students and a potential candidate for international mobility. It is also considered likely that after years of study life in Hong Kong, mainland Chinese students may choose to re-visit Hong Kong as tourists.

International student life and life satisfaction have been studied within the education literature (Benjamin, 1994; Keith & Schalock, 1994; Schalock, 1996). Tourism studies suggest that international students are often treated as a travel market, and their travel behaviours in the study destination have been examined (Michael, Armstrong, & King, 2003; Ryan & Zhang, 2007; Wang & Davidson, 2008). These studies have treated international students who

study in a foreign country as a current travel market to that particular destination. From the marketing perspective, it is also important to examine the intention of international students to visit their study destination in the future. In this regard, it is worthwhile exploring how aspects of their current study life can influence their intention to re-visit the study place or recommend it as a tourist destination in the future. Studying the link between the study life of international students and their motivations to re-visit the study place can offer valuable marketing insights to nurture the current students as future tourists to the study place. If specific links can be established between aspects of the student's study life and their future tourist intentions, destination marketing organizations (DMOs) can formulate better marketing strategies. Ideally, this would involve education institutions hosting international students in a collaborative way. To foster and enhance student life satisfaction within their specific study life domain would more effectively induce future visits to the destination through international students acting as active agents. Meanwhile, future visits by students to their study place, represents a specific form of tourism in which tourists will visit familiar places. According to Pearce (2012), very little research has been conducted on tourists visiting familiar places: more research is therefore needed to study this form of tourism.

Tourists' repeat visitation to a destination has been widely researched in tourism studies. Prior research has found a variety of antecedents influencing tourist re-visit intentions (Jang & Feng, 2007), including tourist satisfaction and destination image (e.g. Petrick & Morais, 2001; Um, Chon, & Ro, 2006; Yuksel, 2001). Extant empirical findings on what determines tourist re-visit intentions

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have been largely derived from studies on mass tourists who visit a certain destination for a short period. However, little has been known about repeat visiting behaviour of those who have stayed in the destination as temporary residents for a few years, such as international students within their study destination. While some studies have attempted to investigate student travel behaviour patterns during their period of study (Huang, 2006; Wang & Davidson, 2008), they did not intend to explore their future re-visit motivations to the study place.

Students have the potential to encourage future tourists and spread word-of-mouth through social channels about the study destination. Therefore, from the destination marketing perspective, students should be studied in relation to marketing the study place as a tourist destination. This current study aims to explore the relationship between Mainland Chinese student life satisfaction and their motivation to re-visit their study destination.

The study attempts to bridge the gap in the knowledge of higher education and that of tourism within destination marketing. In particular, this study has two objectives:

- (1) to investigate the motivations of Mainland Chinese students to re-visit Hong Kong as their former study place; and
- (2) to explore how their motivations to re-visit are linked to their current study life experience in Hong Kong.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Student life satisfaction

From the literature research, many studies have examined the links between life satisfaction and travel (e.g. Chen & Petrick, 2013; Milman, 1998; Neal, Uysal, & Sirgy, 2007; Neal & Gursoy, 2008; Pagan, 2014; Sirgy, 2010; Sirgy, Kruger, Lee, & Grace, 2011). Life satisfaction has been defined as 'the degree to which an individual favourably judges the overall quality of his life as a whole' (Veenhoven, 1991, cited in Pagan, 2014, p. 361). It denotes a cognitive and judgmental process and can be regarded as a component of subjective well-being (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; Pavot, Diener, Colvin, & Sandvik, 1991; Shin & Johnson, 1978). McCabe and Johnson (2013) further elaborated on the idea of quality of life domains, which can be said to include health, income, accommodation, family, employment, social life, leisure time and the spending of leisure time.

Many studies are adult focused, and some deal exclusively with senior citizens (Menec & Chipperfield, 1997; Ragheb & Griffith, 1982). Huebner (1991) noted a paucity of research on student life satisfaction. The life of a student differs to those lives of average people and adults. In the context of higher education, Schalock (1996) summarized and de-constructed student life quality and satisfaction into eight domains: emotional well-being, physical well-being, material well-being, personal development, self-determination, interpersonal relationships, social inclusion and rights. These domains embrace both objective and subjective indicators (Keith & Schalock, 1994) and refer to the subjective well-being of students. Moreover, Benjamin (1994) pin-pointed some life domains that are unique to student life experiences, on and off the campus, which include 'academic', 'university services' and 'university administration'.

Few if any academics have, however, examined how life satisfaction and quality within the place of study (or study destination) may affect the future motivation of students to re-visit that destination after graduation. In the context of general tourism, a heightened feeling of well-being may occur for a while during and shortly after the trip, with life satisfaction returning back to normal when individuals start to be fully involved in daily routines

(Cummins, 2005). However, a much longer stay at the place of study may produce life satisfaction similar to that generated in a routine life environment. How such a prolonged life experience and satisfaction can affect one's motivation to re-visit the destination remains, however, unclear. Recently, Simpson, Siguaw, and Sheng (2014) investigated how life satisfaction (of home and destination) affected tourists re-visit intentions. Their study found that migrant tourists tended to be more satisfied at the destination with an extended stay than they are at their hometown. Life satisfaction within the destination affected the likelihood that they would make a return visit and would recommend the destination to others. The present study differs in its context by putting the focus on the international student market. It investigates student motivation to re-visit the study destination in the future. Given that a large number of Mainland Chinese students are currently studying in Hong Kong, it is important to explore opportunities as to how these students are capable of working as 'agents' or 'mediators' to promote their place of study as a future tourist destination. Understandably, if they feel satisfied with different life aspects of the study place, this may influence their future behaviour in relation to making it a place to re-visit.

### 2.2. Motivation to re-visit a familiar place

Travel motivation is a well-researched concept in tourism studies. Many studies have conceptualized and empirically examined the structure of travel motivation (e.g. Cha, McCleary, & Uysal, 1995; Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1977; Li & Cai, 2012; Pearce & Lee, 2005; Pearce, 1988; Pyo, Mihalik, & Uysal, 1989), and a great number of studies have tested the influence of travel motivation on other tourist behaviour constructs like satisfaction, customer loyalty, and value (e.g. Chon, 1989; Jang, Bai, Hu, & Wu, 2009; Kim, 2008; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). However, despite the business importance of repeat visits to tourist destinations, few studies have explicitly examined the re-visit motivation to a familiar place by tourists (Lau & McKercher, 2004).

Baloglu and Erickson (1998) stated that although many international travellers may prefer to switch between destinations, some do have the potential to re-visit a destination. Furthermore, exploring tourists' revisit motivation has proven helpful in forecasting actual revisitations. Past empirical studies (Huang & Hsu, 2009; Li & Carr, 2004; Li, Cai, Lehto, & Huang, 2010) have confirmed the relationship between re-visit motivation and re-visit intention. However, these studies suggest that re-visit motivation has not been made a focal point of the investigation, resulting in the perceived structure being less specific in the context of re-visitation. For example, the three re-visit motivation constructs in Li et al. (2010) study comprise 'intellectual', 'escape' and 'belonging'. These constructs were found to have appeared in the literature concerning generic and/or first-time travel motivation. Meanwhile, Huang and Hsu (2009) have verified the effects of motivation on re-visit intentions in the context of mainland Chinese tourists re-visiting Hong Kong; however, only the motivation for shopping was found to be a predictor. Overall, most studies on tourists' repeat visitations have taken a mass tourism perspective in identifying the driving factors. This may limit the understanding of other types of future re-visiting potential by temporary residents, such as international students studying within the destination. For students that have studied in the same place for several years, they may have developed an enduring personal attachment to the place and are more likely to re-visit the study place as tourists in the future. In this case the study place can be regarded as a familiar place and therefore as a future re-visit destination (Pearce, 2012).

In his recent paper, Pearce (2012) defined travelling to 'familiar places' as "travel[ling] to the constellation of valued locations and

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