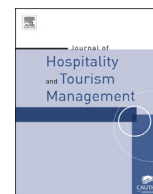




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Differentiating Asian working holiday makers from traditional backpackers on the basis of accommodation preferences

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ABSTRACT

The Australian working holiday maker (WHM) program has contributed to the international youth travel market in Australia for many years. Despite a recent increase in the number of participants from Asian countries, their travel behaviours, including accommodation preferences, have not yet been fully explored. In fact, Asian WHMs have often been treated as backpackers in previous studies. The purpose of this study was to explore whether Asian WHMs differ from traditional backpackers on the basis of accommodation preferences. The study employed a sequential mixed methods design consisting of six focus groups followed by a self-administered questionnaire survey. Analyses of both the qualitative and quantitative data revealed that similar to European WHMs, backpacker accommodation was used by many Asian WHMs. However, a sizeable proportion of this market did not stay at this type of accommodation for reasons such as concerns about cleanliness and safety, cultural and language barriers and unfamiliarity with the style of accommodation. Whereas, shared accommodation with people from similar cultural backgrounds was a preferred accommodation style. The main implication of this study is that Asian WHMs cannot be fully understood when they are simply categorised as part of the wider backpacker market. Further consideration of their unique characteristics is required to obtain a comprehensive understanding of this cohort in the current youth travel market.

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1. Introduction

Young independent travellers from overseas comprise an important market for the international tourism industry including Australia (Tourism Research Australia, 2017; World Tourism Organization, 2016). Australia's working holiday maker (WHM) program is a strong contributor to this market. The WHM program provides working holiday visas to young people from partner countries to have an extended holiday experience in Australia. During the 2015–2016 program year, more than 210,000 young people from 35 countries were issued working holiday visas to visit Australia (Department of Immigration and Border Protection [DIBP], 2016). The large number of WHMs positively contributes to the Australian economy (Steen & Peel, 2015). In fact, WHMs spend about AU\$10,000 during their stays in Australia (Tourism Australia, 2017). Traditionally, European youth have dominated

the Australian WHM market, and they were typically defined as backpackers in previous studies based on their travel style including the usage of budget accommodation such as backpacker accommodation (e.g. Cooper, O'Mahony, & Erfurt, 2004; Kain & King, 2004; Pearce, Murphy, & Brymer, 2009; Ruhanen, 2010; Slaughter, 2004). However, the proportion of WHMs from Asian countries has increased rapidly, especially in the last decade, and they now represent more than 30 per cent of the WHM market. In the 2015–2016 program year, three countries in Asia (i.e. Japan, South Korea and Taiwan) were listed among the top ten source markets for the WHM program (DIBP, 2016).

Although limited, previous studies on backpackers and independent travellers have suggested that similar to European WHMs, Asian WHMs also utilise backpacker accommodation during their stays in Australia (e.g. Bui, Wilkins, & Lee, 2013a; Kininmont, 2000; Pearce et al., 2009; Prideaux & Shiga, 2007). However, the sampling frames for these studies focussed mainly on travellers who were staying at backpacker accommodation and individuals with working holiday visas were categorised as part of the larger backpacker segment. Asian WHMs make major financial commitments when

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they pay for accommodation during their stays in the country, and their economic contributions to the tourism industry are immense (Tan, Richardson, Lester, Bai, & Sun, 2009); however, as Jarvis and Peel (2013) noted, a comprehensive understanding of their travel behaviours, including their accommodation preferences and reasons for their choices, is still lacking. Since young Asian travellers are culturally distant from young European travellers, anecdotal observations have suggested that Asian WHMs may also have different characteristics from European WHMs (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001; Reisinger, 2009). This study aims to extend the current understanding of the Asian WHM market. In particular, the study explores the unique features that distinguish them from traditional backpackers by focusing on their accommodation preferences and the underlying reasons for their preferences. The findings have methodological implications for conceptualising and researching backpackers and working holiday makers.

2. Literature review

2.1. Working holiday makers in Australia

The Australian WHM program is a temporary migration program that allows young people aged between 18 and 30 years from partner countries to participate in an extended holiday experience (up to 12 or 24 months) in Australia. Unlike other travellers on short-term tourist visas, WHMs are permitted to engage in short-term study as well as short-term employment to supplement their travel funds during their stays in Australia (Tan et al., 2009). The central aim of this program is to encourage young people to share cultural knowledge and to strengthen ties between Australia and its partner countries (DIBP, 2014). Importantly, the WHM program is based on bilateral agreements between Australia and most partner countries; thus, young Australian citizens are also eligible for working holiday or similar visas from its partner countries. In practice, the number of Asian WHMs who travel to Australia as part of this program far exceeds the number of Australians who travel to Asian partner countries. For example, 814 working holiday visas were granted by the Japanese government to young Australians in 2014, while the Australian government granted 10,579 working holiday visas to Japanese travellers during the 2013–2014 program year (DIBP, 2014; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2015).

Although the central aim of the program is cultural exchange, the program also makes a positive economic contribution to the Australian economy, including the tourism industry (Harding & Webster, 2002; Tan & Lester, 2012). In particular, WHMs comprise an important portion of the casual and seasonal workforce and contribute to alleviating short-term labour shortages in Australia. The majority of WHMs engage in some paid employment during their stay in a range of sectors, including picking and processing fruit and vegetables in the agriculture industry, mining, regional construction work and employment in the tourism and hospitality industries (Allon, Anderson, & Bushell, 2008; Australian Tourism Export Council [ATEC], 2012; Steen & Peel, 2015).

The WHM program first began in 1975 with three partner countries: Canada, Ireland and the United Kingdom. Although Japan joined the WHM program in 1980 and the program attracted young Japanese travellers, young European travellers initially formed the dominant group of the Australian WHM market (Harding & Webster, 2002; Nozawa, 1992). However, the program has been growing steadily since the early 2000s, as new arrangements have been made with other nations including many Asian countries. In fact, in the 2015–2016 program year, there were 39 partner countries and regions (including four countries that were signed but not yet in effect) from across the world under two visa

subclasses, the Working Holiday visa (subclass 417) and the Work and Holiday visa (subclass 462) (DIBP, 2016). The holder of a working holiday visa can obtain a second working holiday visa, which allows them to stay in Australia for another 12 months if the visa holder has worked for a minimum of three months in a specified field or industry (such as agriculture) in a designated regional area of Australia. According to the DIBP's (2016) report, 36,264 s working holiday visas were granted during the 2015–2016 program year. Since there are two types of visas issued, the term 'WHM' refers to a holder of either of these visas.

Several studies have focussed on Asian WHMs with respect to their unique culture and their perceived value and satisfaction with the WHM program (Lee & Lee, 2013; Maksay, 2007). Their motivations for participating in the WHM program have also been explored, and some studies have highlighted that an improvement in English language skills is an important motivator (Ho, Lin, & Huang, 2014; Lee & Lee, 2011; Nagai, Benckendorff, & Tkaczynski, 2018). In fact, studies reported that Asian WHMs often experience language and communication difficulties while staying in Australia and many participate in short-term language study programs (Chen, Lu, & Chang, 2009; Peng & Hebbani, 2014; Tan et al., 2009). However, very few studies have focussed on the accommodation preferences of WHMs, despite accommodation making up a significant part of their expenditure when travelling in Australia. Moreover, discussions regarding how Asian WHMs differ from European WHMs and traditional backpackers are limited.

2.2. Youth travel markets in Australia

In Australia, the terms 'backpackers' and 'WHMs' are often used interchangeably, though these terms have different definitions (Kinnaird, 1999). 'WHMs' refers specifically to holders of working holiday visas in Australia. On the other hand, although the term has been used for many decades, there is no concrete definition for 'backpackers' (Pearce et al., 2009).

The origin of the conceptual development of contemporary backpackers dates back to the early 1970s when independent youth tourism was emerging as a mass phenomenon in Western society (Cohen, 1973, 2004). To differentiate travellers from original drifters, the term backpackers was loosely used to label the youth travellers that emerged during this period (Cohen, 2004). Although limited studies on the backpacking phenomenon were conducted in the 1970s and 1980s (Cohen, 2004), the topic started to receive research attentions in the 1990s, especially after Pearce (1990) introduced a social definition of backpackers (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2004).

Pearce (1990) proposed the following five criteria to define backpackers based on the interpretation of the travel style: (1) a preference for budget accommodation; (2) an emphasis on meeting other travellers; (3) an independently organised and flexible travel schedule; (4) longer rather than very brief holidays; and (5) an emphasis on informal and participatory holiday activities. He argued that the first criterion is a necessary condition, while the other four are strong indicators of the backpacker phenomenon. This definition has been widely adopted in the tourism literature to define and study the backpacker phenomenon (Harris & Prideaux, 2011; Slaughter, 2004). However, as with many backpacker studies, this definition was developed mainly based on studies of youth travellers from Western countries and its relevance to contemporary Asian youth market may have limitations.

In addition to Pearce's (1990) social definition of backpackers, an accommodation-based definition of backpackers has also been adopted (Buchanan & Rossetto, 1997; Fischer et al., 2010; Ipalawatte, 2004). This is often done to simplify the quantification of the phenomenon of backpackers and the collection of data

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