



Assessing tourists' perceptions and behaviour through photographic and blog analysis: The case of Chinese bloggers and New Zealand holidays[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This study used thematic analysis to identify the perceived destination image held by Chinese tourists to New Zealand. By analysing 6968 photographs from 384 blog entries posted by Chinese visitors, ten themes of New Zealand as a tourism destination were identified. The findings indicate a reinforcement of New Zealand's branding based on natural landscapes but subsidiary purposes are of interest. These include the role of tourist bloggers as sources of information to their readers. Additionally the results indicate that content analysis of visual materials in blogs, when read with accompanying text, provide rich information about perceived destination image. It is suggested that online photographs and blogs are not only valuable information sources for potential visitors, but also an effective way to understand the Chinese market. Based on the results, implications for destination marketing are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Many marketers and researchers are attracted to the Chinese market because China is a fast growing market with numerous business opportunities (Barboza, 2008; Johanson, 2008; Li, Harrill, Uysal, Burnett, & Zhan, 2010; Pan & Laws, 2002). However, Chinese outbound tourism is a multi-faceted phenomenon due to the diversity and complexity of Chinese market (Arlt, 2006). This implies that more research is needed to better understand the motivation and behaviour of Chinese visitors, and the role played by their cultural values. Yet, thus far, comparatively little research has been undertaken to explore photographs posted by Chinese tourists on their blogs and social media and any implications this may have for the structure of the tourism industry, both generally and with specific reference to New Zealand. Given that there were 437 million bloggers existing in China by the end of 2013 (CNNIC, 2014), an analysis of the photographs taken by Chinese bloggers and their accompanying text has potential for the better understanding of the Chinese market. A number of reasons dictate this importance. First bloggers have reasons for the taking of the photographs and the selective process. This selective process is two-fold – first there are the reasons that dictate the taking of the photograph itself – i.e. why was the photograph thought to possess importance? Second, a further selective

process is then involved: namely the actual selection of the photograph to be used in the blog. The context of place of photograph taking and then the second context of description of place come together in the focus of photograph selection and blog writing.

The next reason for the importance of the study lies in the potential importance that the photographs may have on the image creation of place on the part of the readers of the blog – the pictures come to be a selected representation of the country. In the context of this study these selections are based upon bloggers and readers' value systems, that is, upon a decision making process shaped by Chinese values and Chinese reactions to the pictures posted by other Chinese on their blog sites.

Photographs are therefore considered as an indispensable part of Chinese travel narratives. When compared with Western tourists, Chinese tourists are much more interested in posting large amounts of photographs in travel blogs (Volo, 2010). One possible reason for this is that Chinese like to show friends and others that they have actually been present in a location, thereby gaining 'face' (*mianzi*). Another reason is also rooted in Chinese culture. From Taoist beliefs, a harmony is perceived to exist between human beings and nature (Chen, 2001; Fan, 2000). This means both in classical Chinese painting and in contemporary photograph taking, representations of landscape are peopled images. This differs from Western notions of nature derived from the romantic movement of the nineteenth century when nature was perceived to be at its best when "unspoiled" (Sofield & Li, 1998). A Chinese blogger's photograph may therefore contain several elements, which in aggregate may become important sources of knowledge about Chinese preferences (Collier, 2001). In short, the taking of photographs may itself be subject to cultural norms. Chinese photographers are

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thought to be motivated to record their own presence in a place, thereby locating themselves as a complementary and harmonious part of a landscape (Wu, 1989). This differs from Western perspectives that lead photographers to photograph landscapes devoid of humans to better present a 'natural' picture of place (Urry, 2002).

This study examines Chinese blogger's pictures of New Zealand. The reasons for this included convenience as the authors are located in that country, and the fact that China is now the second most important source of tourists to New Zealand. Additionally New Zealand represents an interesting case study given the differences between the two countries, and additionally New Zealand features highly in surveys of Chinese as a desirable country to visit.

2. Literature review

The literature review comprises two related sections. The first relates to destination image creation, while the second relates to the role of photograph taking and the representation of place through photographs.

2.1. Destination image

With increasing destination choice becoming available to tourists, a destination must be differentiated from its competitors if it is to be successful. Given that, destination image is important for marketers and has therefore been extensively analysed in the tourism literature. Another reason for this past research is the complex conceptual nature of the purchase decision and the important role of image in influencing the initial tourist decision making process (Choi, Liu, Pang, & Chow, 2008) and the then subsequent behaviours and choice of evaluation criteria when assessing satisfaction with the holiday. Sirgy and Su (2000) indicated that destination image includes two main components, that is, controllable and uncontrollable attributes. Controllable attributes relate to the classical marketing four Ps (product, price, place and promotion) and uncontrollable attributes refer to tourists' personal characteristics that shape their selection and evaluation of images as possessing importance. It is both essential for tourism marketers to identify those controllable components and thus maximise patronage to the destination and to try to shape tourists' preferences through marketing and promotional initiatives to achieve some control over the 'uncontrollable' parts of the mix. At this point, understanding how tourists perceive the destination may help create an effective marketing strategy designed to attract larger numbers or specific categories of tourists. The paper is therefore premised on the notion that blogs contain data of value to both writers and readers, and through process such blogs influence an assessment of place.

However, destination image perceived by tourists from varying countries may differ according to nationality and culture (Sirgy & Su, 2000). Beerli and Martin (2004) conducted a tourist survey to measure the cognitive component of the image, and concluded that country of origin had a significant influence on image formation. Ryan and Cave (2005) supported this conclusion by drawing different perceptual maps of Auckland based on subsamples of New Zealand, Chinese, Japanese and UK residents visiting the city. It is generally assumed that people within the same culture share common beliefs, attitudes, customs, meanings, and behavioural norms, and through these distinguish themselves from other groups (Triandis, 1972). Consequently it has been found that images formed in the minds of tourists are mediated by cultural background (MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997). Yet again it is found that tourism organisations need to understand the motivations and the perceived image of that destination when attempting to promote a particular destination to a specific market (Sussmann & Ünel, 1999). It is concluded that while destinations try to attract tourists with professional photographs illustrating both attractions and imagery, an analysis of the photographs taken by tourists and disseminated by them through social media is also of help in better understanding

the images of destinations held by tourists. Indeed in the latter case one directly accesses data that show tourists helping confirm or create photographs as being attractive and important to image construction.

Motivation is the main factor that influences tourism demand patterns. According to Murphy (1985), motivation is important for the development of tourism, because without the need or interest to travel, the tourism industry would not exist. Motivation is closely connected with expectation and satisfaction. In turn expectations are tentative representatives of the future travelling experience in which tourists have a conscious feeling of desire (Gnoth, 1997). Equally satisfaction studies cannot be isolated from motivation (Pizam, Neumann, & Reichel, 1979). Mill and Morrison (1992) tend to understand motivation through satisfaction because motivation arises when an individual wants to satisfy a need. Thus motivation has impacts on expectation and satisfaction formation (Gnoth, 1997). For their part Hanefors and Larsson Mossberg (1999) introduced a model of travel escape motives based on the cultural background and individual characteristics of Japanese package tourists. They suggest that compensation motives are linked together with the prerequisite of a specific destination and the activities offered there. At this point, cultural difference is a significant impact element for travelling motivation in the choice of destination and the tourism activities.

Researchers have adopted various approaches to measure tourist motivation for the purpose of product development, service evaluation, image formation, and promotion (Fodness, 1994), and both quantitative and qualitative methods have been applied in these studies (Pearce & Butler, 1993). Yet both methods have been criticised. The quantitative method is mainly criticised for being led by researcher-generated list of motivations (Bright, 2008), while the qualitative method may provide rich information about the motivation, but the result remains problematic because of tourists' "unawareness" of their real motivations for travelling (Buck, 1977). Based upon the need to discern "awareness", Dann (1981) suggests the adoption of unobtrusive measures might be the best way to understand tourists' motivation. Researchers may reveal tourists' real motives through observation and reading their travel stories instead of depending on tourists' response to questions set by researchers (Dann, 1981).

2.2. The role of photograph taking

It has been noted above that tourists have different sets of motivations for taking photographs during their trip, and Chalfen (1979) believes that most tourists tend to document their "authentic experience". It is suggested that this is why the majority of tourist photographs involve a set of images already seen in brochures, TV programmes, blogs and social networking websites (Jenkins, 2003; Urry & Larsen, 2011) as they confirm the sense of 'being there' at signed places (MacCannell, 1976). Many photographs also contain family members or friends because tourists engage significant others with significant places to produce their desired togetherness, wholeness and intimacy (Haldrup & Larsen, 2006), especially from a Chinese cultural perspective. Robinson and Picard (2009) also indicate that taking photographs is a sense of playfulness, especially for family or group tourists. Thus taking photographs is not only a way of bringing the outside world home by tourists (Robinson & Picard, 2009), but also a process of accumulating personal and family memories (Urry, 2002; Urry & Larsen, 2011). Therefore, such an analysis helps to understand tourist behaviour, if only at the level of following their itineraries. It has been argued that the motivation for taking photographs and the content of these photographs are fundamental issues related to visual culture and modern society (Robinson & Picard, 2009).

Primarily because people seek tangible memories of their travels, the development of photography and the expansion of tourism have been closely bound together (Balomenou & Garrod, 2010; Bell, 2010; Crawshaw & Urry, 1997; Garrod, 2009). Using digital cameras and mobile phones, photographs are today widely produced and stored in

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