



Exploring the male Chinese tourists' motivation for commercial sex when travelling overseas: Scale construction and validation

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ABSTRACT

Sex and tourism has long been understudied. Little is known about tourists' motivations for consuming commercial sex while travelling, and even less, if indeed anything, is known about that of Chinese outbound tourists in particular. Based on twenty interviews and two surveys with a sample of 534 male Chinese tourists who had engaged in commercial sex when travelling overseas in the previous 12 months, this study aimed first to explore why male Chinese tourists travelled overseas and purchased commercial sex, and second to construct a comprehensive scale for measuring male tourists' motivations for overseas commercial sex. With acceptable reliability and validity, the measurement scale yielded in this study consisted of eight motivation dimensions labelled as socialisation, relaxation and escape, travel-related novelty, sexual desire fulfillment/excitement seeking, sex-related learning, sexual mastery, social prestige, and business/pragmatic purpose. Both the theoretical and methodological implications related to the developed scale are also discussed.

1. Introduction

While sex has been acknowledged as an integral and critical component of the tourist experience (Berdychevsky, Poria, & Uriely, 2013b; Hart & Hawkes, 2000), its relationship with tourism has been significantly understudied (Carr, 2016). Sex as a tourist motivation has been discussed academically in research on commercial sex tourism (Graburn, 1983), and has also been adopted as a dimension for defining the relationship between sex and tourism (McKercher & Bauer, 2003). However, much existing literature in this area has been situated within a postcolonial conceptual framework that is generally grounded in either north-south power relations, or exploitation of the developing countries by the developed ones (Carr, 2016; Oppermann, 1999). Accordingly, commercial sex tourism in the existing literature has often been linked to a tourist flow from the Western world to the East.

The past two decades have witnessed a booming outbound tourist flow from emerging Asian markets, and particularly from China, which has become one of the largest tourist-generating countries in the world. In 2017, the number of Chinese outbound tourists reached approximately 12.9 million, an increase of 55% over the figure for 2012 (China National Tourism Administration, 2018). Along with the expanding market scale is the growing diversity in the demands of the Chinese outbound tourists (Sparks & Pan, 2009). Although no specific estimates

are available regarding the size of the group of Chinese tourists who travel overseas and consume commercial sex, there is reason to believe that this niche market is substantial based on the preliminary investigations of this study. Researchers have started to question whether the current 'paradigm' in sex and tourism research can respond to this new trend in global tourism mobility (Bandyopadhyay, 2013; Carr, 2016). If there are Chinese outbound tourists travelling overseas for commercial sexual experiences, it remains unclear why they do so.

Despite the fact that tourist motivation has already been widely examined in the literature, difficulties in identifying and recruiting adequate research participants to obtain empirical, particularly quantitative, data mean that few studies have extended the discussion of tourist motivation to consumption of commercial sex. Even fewer, if any, studies have probed the motivations of male Chinese tourists to engage in commercial sex when travelling overseas. Based on 20 interviews and two surveys with a sample of 534 male Chinese tourists who had overseas commercial sexual experiences in the previous 12 months, this study aimed to explore why male Chinese tourists engage in commercial sex during their overseas travel. Following the measurement scale development procedures recommended by Churchill (1979), the present study also attempted to construct a comprehensive and reliable scale for measuring Chinese tourists' motivations for commercial sex when travelling overseas. Serving as the first step in a

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series of academic efforts to address the mind-sets, behaviours, and experiences of male Chinese tourists who have commercial sexual experiences during overseas travel, this study is expected to contribute to the literature by introducing a Chinese culturally-embodied perspective to the understanding of the complex relationship between sex and tourism.

2. Literature review

2.1. Commercial sex in tourism

Sex has for some time been linked closely with tourism, as “tourists are motivated to travel by the sexualized fantasies associated with romance and the exotic” (Want, 2002, p. 205). When people travel, they tend to leave behind some of the social baggage that may affect their sexual behaviours (McKercher & Bauer, 2003). From this point of view, tourism can be seen as a liminoid phenomenon (Berdychevsky, Gibson, & Poria, 2013a), which, according to Ryan and Kinder (1996), is “a temporarily constrained, socially tolerated period of wish fulfillment, a form of fantasy enactment that is normally denied to people [in their daily environment]” (p. 507). Despite the prevalence of sex and the sexual in tourism, it was not until the 1990s that the nexus between sex and tourism began to be examined as a subject of tourism research (Bauer & McKercher, 2003; Carr, 2016; Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Hall, 2001; Ryan, Robertson, Page, & Kearsley, 1996).

In terms of the existing literature on sex in tourism, commercial sex tourism is probably the most written about (Berdychevsky, Poria, & Uriely, 2013b; Frohlick, 2010; Oppermann, 1999). Herman (1995) calls sex tourism “one of the booming markets in the New World Order – a multi-billion dollar industry with finders, brokers, syndicate operations and pimp ‘managers’ at the scene of action” (p. 5). It is believed that the globalisation seen over the past few decades has contributed significantly to the growth of sex tourism which now features not only the convergence between tourism and prostitution, but also the linkage between the global and the local (Lury, 1996; Wonders & Michalowski, 2001). As Wonders and Michalowski (2001) note, the growth of sex tourism largely benefits from the dramatic increase in immigration and outbound tourism worldwide, as these phenomena have expanded two groups: potential sex workers and sex consumers.

Despite the growing body of research on different aspects of sex tourism, there has been a debate on how sex tourism and sex tourist should be defined. To define sex tourism and the sex tourist requires a clear conceptualisation of sexual behaviour and its role in the entire tourist experience (Carr, 2016). In sex tourism research, sexual behaviour is usually deemed as a broad concept that involves any activity with sexual overtones, including activities with and without intercourse/penetration (Oppermann, 1999). Blackburn, Taylor, and Davis (2011) adopt a motivation-based approach and define sex tourism as encompassing “individuals who plan their travel around the purposes of obtaining sex” (p. 122). For sex tourists, the consumption of commercial sexual services should be their principle motivation for travelling (Kibicho, 2009). This motivation-centric definition of sex tourism is not without challenges. As Oppermann (1999: 256) argues, “the purpose of travel and the activities engaged in by the tourists are rarely, if ever, the sole purpose and activity”. Many cases and settings where the phenomenon of sex tourism occurs would, therefore, be excluded if the definition of sex tourism were reduced to the tourists’ main motivation of obtaining commercial sex (Ryan, 2000).

In a similar debate over defining drug tourism, Uriely and Belhassen (2005) propose an experiential approach and argue that “the drug tourism experience begins with an awareness of the existence of such substances at a specific destination and continues through the acquisition processes and subsequent consumption” (p. 342). Following the same logic, Matter (2005, as cited in Samarasinghe, 2008, p. 152) differentiates sex tourists into “preferential” sex tourists who travel “explicitly for the purpose of engaging in sex tourism” and “situational” sex

tourists who “may not plan to have sex with locals while abroad, but seize the opportunity to have sex with locals while travelling”. Similarly, Bauer and McKercher (2003) propose analysing the role of sex in tourist motivation by examining the centrality of pursuing sex as a travel motivator along a continuum with contrasting extremes. At one end sits the purist for whom sex is the main or only reason to travel; at the other, lies someone for whom sex plays little or no role.

As this study focuses on exploring why male Chinese tourist engaged in commercial sex when travelling overseas, rather than on defining and conceptualising sex tourists in a Chinese context, the present study adopted the experiential approach and targeted those male Chinese tourists who are aware of the accessibility of penetrative and nonpenetrative commercial sexual services in an overseas destination and who acquire and consume such services during their stay. From this point of view, consumption of commercial sexual services is no longer necessarily seen to constitute the primary motivation for the research subjects of this study, albeit it an important component of their entire travel experience.

Since Cohen (1988) first raised the question about who was exploiting whom in his seminal work that analyses the love letters sent by Europeans to their “Thai girlfriends”, most existing sex tourism research has been situated in a postcolonial discourse where sex tourism is often linked to exploitation of developing countries by the developed north (Carr, 2016). A typical sex tourist, therefore, would be profiled as a middle-aged heterosexual male from a Western developed country visiting a developing country or former colonial nation for sexual experiences (Blackburn et al., 2011; Frohlick, 2010; Hall, 1994; Jacobs, 2010). As Carr (2016) observes, previous studies on sex tourism focused almost uniformly on Western tourists and developing nations as sex tourism destinations. Since noticing the booming flow in recent years of outbound tourism from Asian countries – particularly China and India – to Western destinations, scholars have started to question if the current ‘paradigm’ in sex tourism research still represents the reality of sex tourism (Bandyopadhyay, 2013; Carr, 2016). As no research has investigated the sexual experience of non-Western tourists travelling to tourist destinations in the developed world, it is equally important, and probably more interesting, to explore the sexual adventures of Asian tourists in the West (Bandyopadhyay, 2013).

Given that experiencing commercial sex or purchasing sex during travel is usually considered as socially unacceptable (Ryan & Hall, 2001; Want, 2002), it was not until relatively recently that sex tourism began to be considered worthy of serious intellectual investigation (Bandyopadhyay, 2013; Clift & Cater, 2000). As Carr (2016) notes, the majority of the extant sex tourism research has been driven by a social righteousness stance that identifies sex tourism as deviant. Accordingly, “[t]here are undoubtedly few issues in the study of international tourism more emotive and prone to sensationalism than that of sex tourism” (Hall, 1992, p. 64). This heavy emphasis on morality and moralising in the discussion of sex tourism not only contributes to the reticence of academics to research in this area, but also creates practical challenges and difficulties in obtaining quality empirical data on sex tourism. As a result, detailed and empirical academic investigation on sex tourism is scarce (Carr, 2016; Graburn, 1983; Hall, 1994), partially because “[c]onsumers tend to be unwilling to talk of their participation, the industry generally will not comment, and the workers often either cannot or will not comment” (Carr, 2016, p. 190).

Despite that prostitution is officially illegal and disapproved of as both morally corrupt and potential risk to health in mainland China (Jeffreys, 2004), and that Chinese society unanimously and strongly stigmatises sex workers and clients, prostitution or commercial sex activities are nevertheless available in China (in the form of street prostitution, hair salons, massage parlours, karaoke bars, and night clubs) (Kong, 2016). Given the attitude of the Chinese government and the importance of social identity in China, people who procure sex, even legally at overseas destinations, cannot expect their behaviour to be condoned by their social surrounding in terms of values and conflicts. Although it cannot be denied that socially

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