



A structural model of liminal experience in tourism

Hui Zhang, Honggang Xu*

School of Tourism Management, SunYat-sen University, Building 329, 135 Xingangxi Road, Guangzhou, 510275, PR China

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ABSTRACT

Tourism destinations serve as liminal places where tourists can be temporarily free of their secular obligations, therefore cultivating a fertile ground for Yanyu (艳遇), a typical liminal experience, to grow. However, little is known about which factors drive tourists' liminal experiences. Based on stimuli-organism-response (SOR) theory and sensation seeking theory, this study examines the impact of tourscales and sensation-seeking on liminal experiences by using data collected in Lijiang, a city named “the capital of Yanyu”, in China. The findings reveal that physical and social tourscales have positive effects on liminal experiences, and that socially symbolic and natural tourscales have positive effects on emotional arousal and liminal experience. Emotional arousal mediates the effects of socially symbolic and natural tourscales on liminal experience, and tourists' sensation-seeking motivations have a positive significant effect on those liminal experiences. Lastly, the theoretical and managerial implications of the study's findings are discussed.

1. Introduction

For a long time, China's society has been strongly influenced by the moral and intellectual codes of Confucianism. Chinese society is conservative in terms of gender relationships in daily life, but holidays are typically considered as a temporary escape from the daily norms of life as normal responsibilities are suspended (Weichselbaumer, 2012). This liminal transition phase has the “potential for an enriching experience in short, limited and constrained time periods that makes holidays so different from other pursuits” (Ryan & Kinder, 1996, p. 509), and in a liminal world, people can behave in a way as if they are free from constraints and obligations. Yanyu, a rising tourism phenomenon which originally meant a favorable opportunity for an encounter with a beautiful woman and which violates Chinese cultural beliefs, values and traditions, becomes acceptable and even natural in this liminal world (Xu & Ye, 2016). Tourism destinations, therefore, cultivate a fertile ground for Yanyu to grow. For instance, Lijiang, a popular tourist destination in Yunnan Province, has earned the reputation of “the capital of Yanyu” among Chinese tourists (Sun & Wang, 2012), and “seeking Yanyu” has become an important motivation for many tourists there (Cui, He, & Xu, 2016). Lijiang is not unique. Other historical towns are also observed to have similar phenomena, such as phoenix town in Hunan province, Yangshuo in Guangxi Autonomous Region (Xu & Ye, 2016).

Although the phenomenon of Yanyu in tourism has gained increased public attention in recent years, few studies have specifically examined

this issue. Hong (2007) was the first to report the phenomenon of Yanyu. Then, other researchers pointed out that gender relationships among tourists in Lijiang are different from those in daily life (Xu & Ye, 2016), and that Yanyu is an experience transcending secular life and serves as a way of fulfilling tourists' psychological needs (Liu & Sun, 2015). While little research has been done on Yanyu tourism, a closely related topic – sex/romance tourism – has received considerable attention in Western literature (e.g., Jeffreys, 2003; Oppermann, 1999). Previous studies on Yanyu tourism and sex/romance tourism have deepened our understanding on its nature as a liminal experience, but research gaps are also identified. First, previous research on Yanyu tourism and sex/romance tourism has been conducted using qualitative methods (e.g., field observations, interviews and web data), and how to conceptualize tourism as a liminal experience from a quantitative perspective is a neglected area. Second, since only certain tourism destinations (e.g., Lijiang, Fenghuang, Wuzhen, & Tongli) are constructed as Yanyu destinations, it is interesting to ask whether destination-level factors have an influence on liminal experiences, and furthermore, how do these factors influence a liminal experience? Third, individuals have different attitudes towards novel experiences and therefore different willingness to pursue such experiences due to their different motivations (Zuckerman, 1994). So, do individual-level factors have an influence on liminal experiences?

In order to address these research gaps, this study chose the historic town of Lijiang to empirically investigate the antecedence of tourists' liminal experiences (e.g., Yanyu experience) in a destination.

* Corresponding author. School of Tourism Management, Sun Yat-sen University, Building 329, 135 Xingangxi Road, Guangzhou, 510275, PR China.
E-mail addresses: zhangh46@mail.sysu.edu.cn (H. Zhang), xuhongg@mail.sysu.edu.cn (H. Xu).

Specifically, two theories are used to develop the research model, as follows. The stimuli-organism-response (SOR) theory from environmental psychology (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) was borrowed to study the effects of tourscares, which means the general atmosphere in a tourism destination experienced by tourists as it relates to emotional arousal and liminal experience. Then, sensation seeking theory was employed to investigate the influence of sensation-seeking on liminal experience. To our knowledge, this study is the first attempt to empirically examine the antecedents of liminal experience in a tourism context. By investigating the influences of destination-level and individual-level factors on tourists' liminal experience, it is hoped that this article will make several theoretical contributions to liminal experience research, as well as in servicescape, environmental psychology, destination image, and sensation-seeking theories. Furthermore, this study will provide valuable managerial insights for tourism destination marketers in designing favorable tourscares and targeting different segments according to their motivations, e.g., sensation-seeking.

For these objectives to be achieved, the article is structured as follows. The first section is a review of the literature on Yanyu as a liminal experience as well as on tourscares, emotional arousal, and sensation-seeking, and hypotheses are developed in the second section. The third section presents the methodology and the procedures for data collection and analysis. The results for the various analyses are then discussed, and finally, the conclusions are presented and suggestions are made for further research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Yanyu as a liminal experience

The term “liminal” was first developed by French folklorist Van Gennep (1960) for use in anthropology to describe the characteristics of rites in different stages of life; he divided the rites of passage into three stages: separation, liminal period, and reentry. This concept was taken up by Turner in his series of works and was extended into other areas, including sociology and human geography (Ma, 2010). Turner (2017) mainly focused on the second stage of Van Gennep's rites of passage (i.e., liminal period) and defined it as “units of space and time in which behavior and symbolism are momentarily enfranchised from the norms and values that govern the public lives of incumbents of structural positions” (Turner, 2017, p. 166). Turner (2017) indicated that the status of an individual in a liminal period is ambiguous in social structure. He believed that this ambiguity is important because it implies a possibility and openness on resisting social structure. People in a liminal period go through two different types of temporary and transitional stages: an existential state in which people's mental state has changed, and a symbolic state in which people challenge established social structures, norms and roles in a symbolic way.

Liminality is widely used in tourism contexts. In the tourism world, destinations serve as liminal spaces where tourists experience an anonymous environment and an evasion of social control, responsibility, and obligation. It also means freedom for fantasy, imagination and adventure, including love (Trauer & Ryan, 2005). Graburn (1989) believed that tourism is a ritual, and that in this process people experience separation from their routine lives and enter into a liminal experience state, and then re-incorporate into routine society. Bui, Wilkins and Lee (2014) confirmed travel (backpacking) as a liminal experience in an Asian context.

The word “Yanyu” (艳遇) in Chinese is composed of two characters, “yan” (艳) and “yu” (遇). The adjective “Yan” means bright-colored, beautiful, romantic, and amorous, while the noun “Yu” means an opportunity or encounter, and treatment (Modern Chinese Dictionary, 2009). In Chinese classical literature, Yanyu describes a favorable opportunity for an encounter with a beautiful woman. Now it can simply mean a beautiful encounter associated with gender and sexual relationships (Xu & Ye, 2018). A review of the literature (Hong, 2007; Liu

& Sun, 2015; Xu & Ye, 2016, 2018) reveals that several dimensions collectively constitute a comprehensive understanding of the Yanyu concept: namely, romance and relaxation, opportunities to encounter, a sense of loss, and aberration. Romance and relaxation refer to an intimate, romantic, or even sexual relationship. Opportunities to encounter means that a tourist may meet strangers of the opposite gender in a Yanyu destination by chance, or in other words, Yanyu is something that may come with luck, and not by deliberately searching. Sense of loss refers to the feelings of depression and anxiety when two parties in a Yanyu relationship are separated from each other after traveling; and aberration means that tourists do something they would not do in everyday life because these things are incompatible with general social norms, but in a liminal space, these norms can be accepted. Still, not everyone dares to pursue a Yanyu experience, even when they are out of their daily lives.

In the tourism literature, sex/romance tourism is very much related to Yanyu tourism, because both are phenomena in tourism destinations and associated with gender/sex. Sex/romance tourism means traveling for the purpose of engaging in sexual activity with others, particularly with local people (Jeffreys, 2003). Several differences should be considered between Yanyu and sex/romance tourism, however. First, sex/romance tourism typically involves exploitation (Oppermann, 1999), that is, rich tourists from developed countries engage in sexual activity with poor local people in underdeveloped countries (Richter, 2005). In Yanyu tourism, the intimate relationship usually occurs between tourists who are both strangers to the destination. Second, monetary exchange is considered the most important characteristic of sex tourist-sex worker relationships (Oppermann, 1999), while there is no commercial relationship in Yanyu tourism. Third, compared with sex/romance tourism between tourists and local residents, which typically involves sexual relationships (Jeffreys, 2003), Yanyu often means relatively free and easy interactions between male and female tourists; it serves as a way of fulfilling a psychological need and does not necessarily connote sexual relationships (Liu & Sun, 2015; Xu & Ye, 2016). Fourth, sex/romance tourism is often planned, but Yanyu emphasizes chance meetings and luck. Therefore, Yanyu enables tourists to obtain a special feeling different from other intimate relationships. Fifth, in sex/romance tourism, sometimes the relationship is maintained after the tourist leaves the destination, and the people may even get married (Herold, Garcia, & Demoya, 2001); however in Yanyu tourism, the relationship terminates after the trip (Hong, 2007). Lastly, sex/romance tourism is typically a cross-cultural phenomenon, while Yanyu is rooted in the Chinese context and represents a Chinese-specific cultural phenomenon. To sum up, Yanyu, as a liminal experience is a unique social and cultural phenomenon in Chinese society, and needs to be further investigated.

2.2. Tourscape

A tourscape represents the general atmosphere experienced by tourists, which is based on the concept of the servicescape as developed in service marketing. Bitner (1992) first coined the term servicescape and defined it as a combination of intentionally designed and controllable dimensions of physical settings which can influence customers' psychological and behavioral responses. While Bitner focused on physical environments, Baker, Grewal, and Parasuraman (1994) included social factors into the idea of a servicescape which involve people who are within a service setting, such as the numbers, types, and behaviors of other customers. Tombs and McColl-Kennedy (2003) further proposed the concept of a social servicescape and asserted that customer behavior is influenced by both the physical conditions of the environment and the social meanings embedded into the purchase occasion. Rosenbaum (2009) added “socially symbolic” servicescape to Bitner's (1992) servicescape framework, indicating that environmental elements are important in shaping the behavior of customers with unique ethnic, sub-cultural, or marginalized societal statuses, such as Jews and

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