



Tourist typology in social contact: An addition to existing theories



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The study explored six dimensions of tourist-host social contact.
- Five types of tourists were identified according to those dynamic dimensions.
- The study empirically examined and further developed Cohen's work.
- The results provided both theoretical and practical contributions.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 September 2016

Received in revised form

28 December 2016

Accepted 29 December 2016

Keywords:

Social contact
Tourist typology
Interaction
Tourist-host

ABSTRACT

Tourist-host social contact, as a unique type of social contact, is not getting sufficient attention in tourism academia considering its remarkable impacts on tourists' travel attitudes, behaviors and long-term perceptions. The objectives of the current study are to explore the dimensions of tourist-host social contact and to contribute to the theory of tourist typology according to their dynamic nature in tourist-host social interaction. Forty-five in-depth interviews were conducted to generate insightful information. The software of NVivo 10 was applied to examine and code the transcripts. As a result, six dimensions were adopted to describe tourist-host social contact, which are purposes, determinants, activities, intensity, impacts and attitudes. Five types of tourists were pinpointed and theoretical and practical contributions of the study were discussed.

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1. Introduction

Tourists are surrounded by the social environment when entering a destination. To various extents they cannot avoid interactions with local residents. Such kinds of contact were stated to have the power to influence tourists' travel attitudes, behavior and long-term perceptions toward the destination (Allport, 1954; Cohen, 1972). Intergroup contact can enhance the understanding of other groups, undermine bias and stereotypes, and further improve the intergroup relations (Allport, 1954; Binder et al., 2009; Kawakami, Dovidio, Moll, Hermsen, & Russin, 2000; Kirillova, Lehto, & Cai, 2015; Pettigrew, 1998). Intergroup contact may reduce anxiety, distrust and cultural sensitivity toward other groups (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002; Stephan & Stephan, 1985) and enhance the empathy between them in order to

positively affect the intergroup relations (Batson et al., 1997; Stephan & Finlay, 1999).

Given the importance of social contact, tourist-host social contact, as a unique type of general social contact, is not receiving sufficient attention in tourism academia. Furthermore, social contact has long been treated as a qualitative and abstract concept. Though some scholars attempted to quantify the concept of social contact (Huang & Hsu, 2010; Islam & Hewstone, 1993; Rothman, 1978), few studies have provided systematic and convincing dimensions. In addition, though there are numerous studies exploring tourist typology (Plog, 1974, 2001; Cohen, 1972, 1979; Smith, 1989; Pearce & Lee, 2005), few of them emphasized tourists' rich behavioral patterns of social contact. The assumption of homogeneity in social contact may mislead the investigations and result in incoherence among different studies (Binder et al., 2009; Huang & Hsu, 2010; Nash, 1989). The lack of grouping regarding social contact also creates difficulties for practitioners to draw effective marketing strategies for diverse segments and hence lower tourists' satisfaction and revisit intentions.

As one of the enlightening works of the tourist-host social

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contact in the early stage, Cohen (1972) specified the “extent” and “variety” of social contact to be the main indicators to assess the results of such interactions. However, what “extent” and “variety” stood for were not explained in detail. In addition, Cohen (1972) theoretically proposed a tourist typology based on their pursuit of novelty and familiarity in a destination. This typology provided a basis for understanding mass tourists' behavioral patterns with the hosts. Yet, the single criterion, “pursuit of novelty and familiarity” was too general to precisely describe the rich characteristics of different types of tourists' behavior. Consequently, a multi-dimensional tourist typology empirically unveiling tourists' contact patterns with the locals is needed to better understand this interactive process. To fill in the aforementioned gaps, the objectives of the current study are to empirically explore the dimensions of tourist-host social contact and to further classify tourists according to their characteristics across those dimensions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social contact

Cross-cultural social contact, interchangeably referred as cross-cultural social interaction, is defined as the face-to-face contacts between people from different cultural backgrounds (Cusher & Brislin, 1996; Yu & Lee, 2014). There are various branches of cross-cultural contact according to the different criteria of classification defined, such as on whose territory the contact occurs, the time span of the interaction, contact purpose, the type of involvement, the frequency of contact, the degree of intimacy between participants, relative status and power and numerical balance (Bochner, 1982).

In psychology and sociology studies, contact theory has been recognized as one of the best approaches to elucidate intergroup relations. Allport (1954) proposed that intergroup contact can be an effective way to reduce prejudice between group members under certain conditions, such as equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, support of authorities as well as personal interaction. Properly managed contact between group members should lead to better interactions because prejudice may be reduced as one learns more about other group members and one's perceptions can be modified by that contact person and subsequently modifying the perceptions of the group as a whole (Wright, Aron, McLaughlinVolpe, & Ropp, 1997). As argued by Nash (1989), similar to any other social relationship, the relationship between tourists and their hosts requires certain understandings that must be agreed and acted upon if it is to be maintained.

2.2. Tourist-host social contact

Tourist-host social contact is stated to be a special form of cross-cultural contact. Typically, tourists stay in a destination for a short and well-structured period of time. Their purpose of travel set them apart from other inter-cultural contacts, like immigrants and temporary sojourners (Pearce, 1982a). Tourists do not need to adapt to the local community and normally travel in a small cultural bubble of their home culture (Barthes, 1973). Though tourists may experience a culture shock to some extent, such shock may be stimulating and exciting to travelers as it can fulfill their sensation-seeking motivation (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). In addition, the relative affluence of tourists locate them in a unique position in the host society, like strangers or adventurers. Thus, they have more opportunities to observe and scrutinize the host community from a tourist perspective (Pearce, 1982a; Simmel, 1950).

As a fundamental work of the tourist-host social contact studies, Cohen (1972) developed a fourfold tourist typology. According to

the degree of familiarity and novelty in travel, tourists are categorized into four types: organized mass tourist, individual mass tourist, the explorer and the drifter. The first two tourist types are further named “institutionalized tourist roles” and the other two are called “non-institutionalized tourist roles”. For the mass tourists, the environmental bubble of their native culture is quite strong. The environmental bubble is described as a protective wall which prevents risk, uncertainty, or novelty from the tourists. Thus, to a certain extent, mass tourists view the local society through the protective wall. Consequently, mass tourists are socially separated in the destination. On the contrary, non-institutionalized tourists would want to get involved in the local society and experience excitement in the trip. They seek the complete strangeness and direct contact with new and different people. In such cases, due to their way of life and travel, they meet a wide variety of people and have a deep contact with the local society. This study sheds light on the relational exploration between social contact and tourists' attitude towards destinations. Besides Cohen's (1972) theory, a developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (Kirillova et al., 2015), acculturation theory (Rasmi, Ng, Lee, & Soutar, 2014), social exchange theory (Ap, 1992; Choo & Petrick, 2014; Madrigal, 1993) and social representation theory (Andriotis & Vaughan, 2003) were also adopted to investigate the tourist-host social contact from diverse perspectives.

2.3. Dimensions of social contact

Some studies have explored the dimensions of social contact. Table 1 shows the summary of the existing literature investigating different aspects of social contact. Rothman (1978), Mo, Howard, and Havitz (1993) and Reisinger and Turner (2002a, b) applied activities of social contact as the only measurement of social contact. Woosnam and Aleshinloye (2013) adopted contact frequency to measure the tourist-host interaction.

Some other research considered multiple dimensions to measure the social contact experience. Quality and frequency of tourist-host social contact were considered to evaluate the residents' attitude to tourism development (Akis, Peristianis, & Warner, 1996). Islam and Hewstone (1993) tested how the number of contact points, contact frequency and contact quality were related to various dependent variables. Frequency, activity and strength of social contact were taken into consideration to assess the closeness of interpersonal relationships (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989). As one of the most recent study, Huang and Hsu (2010), building on Berscheid et al. (1989) and Islam and Hewstone (1993)'s results, examined the activity, frequency, influence, valence, intensity, power and symmetry of customer-to-customer interaction on cruises. Considering the existing studies, there is hardly any agreement on the selection of social contact dimensions, which made the development of this domain unsystematic and inconsistent.

The functions of social contact have been well addressed in the socio-psychological realm along with the application of Allport's (1954) contact theory and other related studies (Bochner, 1982; Cusher & Brislin, 1996; Yu & Lee, 2014). Tourist-host social contact, as a unique type of social contact, is yet to be explored further. To date, some studies have applied social contact to assess the tourists' impact on the host community (Rothman, 1978; Pearce, 1982b; Islam & Hewstone, 1993; Reisinger & Turner, 2002a, b). Measurement items were simply brought from other disciplines without rigorous investigation. Existing research failed to explore the various dimensions of social contact per se, which led to an inconsistency of the application of social contact. Moreover, as a fundamental work, Cohen's (1972) tourist typology was not receiving sufficient attention regarding its contribution to understanding tourists' social contact with locals. Thus, a systematic

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