



Research Paper

Chinese cigar tourists to Cuba: A motivation-based segmentation

Tianyu Ying^a, Wei Wei^b, Jun Wen^{c,*}, Liang Wang^a, Shun Ye^a^a Department of Tourism and Hotel Management, School of Management, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, Zhejiang 310058, PR China^b Department of Hospitality Services, Rosen College of Hospitality Management, University of Central Florida, Orlando, U.S.A^c School of Management and Marketing, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Despite Chinese visitors' mounting interest in Cuba and especially its cigars, there has been scarce attention paid to the cigar tourism-related motivations of Chinese outbound tourists to Cuba. Based on 15 interviews and a survey with 459 Chinese tourists who had visited Cuba in the previous 12 months, this study developed a measurement scale for the motivations of Chinese tourists visiting Cuba as a tourism destination. This scale consists of seven motivation dimensions labelled as *Relaxation & escape*, *Cigar authenticity seeking*, *Socialistic nostalgia*, *Social prestige*, *Destination-specific attraction*, *Cigar-related learning*, and *Social bonding*. Further cluster analysis was performed, as a result of which Chinese tourists were segmented into three clusters based on the variation in the identified motivations: *authenticity-oriented*, *culture-oriented*, and *bonding-oriented* tourists. Significant differences in socio-demographic characteristics were detected among these clusters. Both the theoretical and methodological implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, Cuba has evolved from a relatively isolated nation, which shunned tourists, to one of the Caribbean's most significant tourism destinations for international visitors (Carty, 2009). Cuban cigars' unique qualities represent embodiments of their reputation and history (Simoni, 2009). Throughout Cuba's tourism development, Cuban cigars hold a prominent place, whose long history is grounded in their uniqueness as exceptional artefacts and objects of particularly high quality (Simoni, 2009). The mystique of the Havana cigar can be traced back to five centuries ago (Stubbs, 2004). As the island was further integrated into the global economy, Cuban cigars "became ever more a part of a wide range of narratives concerning Cuba and its relations with the world" (Simoni, 2009, p.1). Some of the most celebrated and expensive cigar brands include Cohiba, Montecristo (respectively Fidel's and Che Guevara's favourites) and Romeo y Julieta. Today, many tourists flock to Cuba fueled by their imagination and fantasy in search of high-quality cigars. Cigars have become long-time staples in Cuba that symbolize the nation in the minds of international people (Kaifa Roland, 2010).

To appeal to more tourists, Cuba has started to diversify its appeal, for instance, by constructing six golf courses to attract US visitors and to entice high-income visitors from nations such as China (Thomas,

Kitterlin-Lynch, & Lorenzo Del Valle, 2015). China is an emerging world market into which Cuba is aggressively trying to tap (Carty, 2009). In 2003, Cuba gained Approved Destination Status (ADS) from the Chinese government, which paved the way to the tourism development from the Asian had grown by 40%. China also established an agreement with Cuba, permitting domestic travel agencies to promote organized group tours to the island. In 2009, 40 Chinese travel agencies in Havana worked with Cuban state agencies to coordinate packaged tours in Cuba (Carty, 2009).

In recent years, Cuba has seen an increasing influx of Asian tourists (Medina, 2016). In recognition of this trend, China Outbound Tourism Research Institute published an article titled 'Chinese tourists set for pouring into Cuba' (Meesak, 2015). This article disclosed that in 2014, the arrival numbers of Chinese visitors to Cuba had reached 28,200, representing about 18% growth over the 22,000 arrivals in 2013. In the first quarter of 2015, the growth accelerated to 27%. In 2015, Air China announced its plans to open flights from Beijing, China to Havana, Cuba for transporting cargo, which has been recognized to also have the potential to tap into the Chinese tourist market (Anonymous, 2015). One of the major activities among Chinese tourists when visiting Cuba is the purchase of local products such as cigars. To attract Asian tourists and especially Chinese, some souvenir-shop employees learned how to say some words in Mandarin to communicate with visitors. A souvenir

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: yingtianyu@zju.edu.cn (T. Ying), Wei.Wei@ucf.edu (W. Wei), wenjuncun_513@hotmail.com (J. Wen), wang_liang@zju.edu.cn (L. Wang), yeshun1989@163.com (S. Ye).<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2018.07.003>

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and cigar shop on Eighth Street named Little Havana displays its greetings and promotions in Mandarin (Meesak, 2015). According to Peter Bello (Medina, 2016), the owner of Cuba Tobacco Cigar Co., "Chinese tourists have become our best clients: they're very loyal." Cuba's Tourism Minister, Manuel Marrero Cruz, also pointed out that cigar is one of the most popular products of Cuba which attracts Chinese tourists, and that Cuba Tourism Ministry has organized special tours for tourists to understand the whole production process of Cuban cigars.

Despite Chinese visitors' mounting interest in Cuba as a destination and in particular its cigars, there has been scarce attention paid to the cigar tourism-related motivations of Chinese outbound tourists to Cuba. To address this research gap, the current study aimed to: (1) explore the motivations of Chinese outbound tourists to Cuba for cigar consumption and purchase by developing and validating a cigar tourist motivation measurement scale; and (2) segment Chinese cigar tourists based on their variation in the identified motivations.

2. Literature review

2.1. Cigar and tourism: A special-interest tourism perspective

After a 30-year hiatus, Cuba has once again become a major tourism destination in the Caribbean in the early 1990s (Kaifa Roland, 2010). Since the early 1990s, Cuba's economic policy in the tourism sector has changed by promoting the investment in tourism, which now ranks Cuba's second largest source of foreign revenue (Luxner, 2013; Rettinger & Wójtowicz, 2014). The development of tourism in the 1990s has resulted in an acquisition of some English-derived units such as cigars by Cubans (Sánchez Fajardo, 2017). Cigars stand as an iconic object at the center of tourism attention in Cuba (Simoni, 2012). The twentieth century witnessed the fast development of manufactured cigarettes and a growing number of smokers (Motofei, 2017). In Cuba, state authorities and officials have strived to promote tourism visits to sites where cigars are produced, aiming to associate the meaning of Cuban cigars with the smooth and coherent functioning of Cuban economy and society (Simoni, 2009). For instance, images of elderly Cubans smoking cigars are integral to tourism representations of the island, and are frequently promoted in tourism postcards, guidebooks, and brochures (Simoni, 2012). Khrushchev, Henthorne, and Latour (2007) called upon cross-cultural consumer research to gain the knowledge vital to establishing cross-cultural understanding of Cuban tourism. More specifically, Khrushchev et al. (2007) suggested studies on Cuban hospitality managers, workers, as well as tour providers at various tourist attractions, one of which is Cuba's famous cigar factories.

The deployments of cigars in factories and shops are connected with the ideal of a communist Cuba, which functions smoothly and produces world-class commodities (Simoni, 2009). As part of culture, history, and heritage tourism, cigar-factory tours under the guidance of official personnel are strongly promoted to tourist to Cuba. On these tours, official guides explain the production of cigars and visitors can follow the different operations that produce the confection of cigars labelled as particular brands. In the factory shop, tourists are invited to apply the knowledge they just acquired from the factory tour to choosing brands and different products. The guarantee seals, labels, brands, and logos are thus portrayed as crucial elements, through which authentic Cuban cigars (i.e. faithful to their brands and reputations) could be best evaluated (Simoni, 2009). In addition to the officially regulated cigar tours and shops, Cubans are also creating other opportunities to engage with tourists through selling cigars (Simoni, 2009). For instance, informal cigar deals are regularly offered to tourists, constituting another important segment of the island's tourism economy (Simoni, 2009). These informal cigar deals account for a variety of interactions between tourism and the informal economy (cf. Cabezas, 2004; Kummels, 2005; Simoni, 2008).

2.2. Motivation of cigar consumption

In attempting to understanding consumers' motivation of cigar consumption, previous researchers have investigated social, cultural, and hedonic drivers. Latour, Michael, and Braun-LaTour (2003) referred to cigar consumption as a socio-cultural phenomenon with a profound symbolic nature. Gallo (1997) acknowledged that cigar consumers have adopted the cigar as a social prop to be played on the theatrical stage of their life. Latour et al.'s (2003) study of the modern cigar consumer pinpointed the deep meaning of cigars as a cultural icon. Specifically, Latour et al. (2003) performed a review of previous research on cigar consumption experiences (e.g. Beirne, 2000; Peyser, 1997). Based on this review, Latour et al. (2003) described cigar consumption as an act of conspicuous extravagance with internal hedonic symbolism (e.g. bond, aesthetics, comfort, memories). In addition to these underlying social, cultural, and hedonic drivers of cigar consumption, Kaifa Roland (2010) stated that consumers may be drawn to Cuban cigars precisely by the localized nature of the mystified hand-rolled production process, which reveals the importance of authenticity as related to Cuban cigars. Nevertheless, a systematic investigation of motivations in relation to cigar consumption remains lacking.

2.3. Cigar consumption in China

In order to better understand the motivations of cigar consumption among Chinese visitors to Cuba, this study had taken into consideration the unique characteristics of Chinese consumers. China is the third largest sales market of Cuban cigars (Lin, 2012; Yu, 2011). In 1997, China had become the largest consumer of cigarettes in the world, consuming an estimated 1679 billion cigarettes (Knight, Ayers, & Mayer, 1998). As the world's largest tobacco production and sales nation, China's tobacco industry's production and sales accounted for nearly 30% of the global total, making significant contributions to the national economy (Wang, 2015). With the economic development of China and the improvement of people's living standards, Chinese consumers' desire for cigars has dramatically mounted over the past few years (Gao, Berg, Huang, Zheng, & Fu, 2013). For instance, an increasing number of cigar clubs, cigar bars, cigar nights at restaurants, and cigar specialty stores have started to appear in major cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou (Xia, 2009). Between 2005 and 2012, cigar sales in China increased by 820% (China Cigar Market Report, 2012, 2013). Due to the high-tariff and monopolistic system of the Chinese tobacco market, the price of cigars is often very high. As a result, many customers choose to purchase cigars from foreign markets (China Cigar Market Report, 2012, 2013).

Cigars are particularly popular among China's emerging wealthy class, who pay upwards of 250 yuan (\$40) for Floris from Honduras, Don Diegos from the Dominican Republic, and Cohibas from the Cuban state tobacco company Habanos (Hearn, 2009). Despite their high price, cigars are in increasing demand in China where there are 350 million smokers and where conspicuous consumption is increasingly pervasive. Even though Altadis, the fifth largest tobacco company in the world, has developed strategies to provide a less-expensive, synthetic line of cigars, many aspiring aficionados still prefer to purchase genuine Cuban 'puros' under the table in trendy cigar bars for the standard price, or on the streets of touristic districts like Beijing's Sanlitun. On the one hand, Chinese consumers' penchant for authentic Cuban cigars may be linked to their desire to establish a social status or a life style. This could be explained by the country-of-origin (COO) effect, which denotes that the country-of-origin can influence consumers' inference of a product's trait information (Wang, Chen, & Han, 2011). Wang et al. (2011) provided empirical evidence that for cigar products, the COO effect was significant, such that Chinese consumers show a significantly more positive attitude toward overseas luxury brands compared to national ones. Chinese consumers perceive some luxury products from a specific origin country to provide higher reputation value, thus helping

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