



Understanding the cruising experience of Chinese travelers through photo-interviewing technique and hierarchical experience model



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ABSTRACT

North America has long been the center of cruise business, followed by Europe. However, the increasing interest of Asian travelers in cruises and their affordability motivated destinations to actively develop cruise terminals to accommodate mega cruise ships. Cruise vacation appeals to the Chinese travel population as an attractive travel alternative. However, the mindset of Chinese travelers should be explored further, which is important in the effective design of targeted, attractive, and appealing cruise products. This study photo-interviewed 20 Chinese cruisers from four major cities in China to understand their cruising experience. The hierarchical experience model is proposed based on interview data. The study offers an alternative view of travel experience, which has theoretical and practical significance.

1. Introduction

The history of North American cruising industry can be traced back to the 17th century when Samuel Cunard traveled across the Atlantic with 63 passengers on a 1154-ton steamship in 1840 (Gulliksen, 2008). Early cruises mainly functioned as transportation from point A to point B. However, this practice diminished because of the growth of airline services in the 1950s (Gulliksen, 2008). Since then, carrying leisure travelers as an alternative revenue source has become a lucrative business strategy for many cruise lines, such as Princess Cruises (established in 1965), Norwegian Cruise Line (established in 1966), Royal Caribbean International (established in 1969), and Carnival Cruise Lines (established in 1972).

Cruise tourism is a thriving business in North America and Europe, but its development in Asia is still at its infancy. The double-digit growth rate in Asian cruise market indicates that cruise has become a new way of travel in Asia and China contributes to the majority of cruise passenger growth (Cruise Lines International Association [CLIA], 2014a; 2016a). Given the potential of cruise business in Asia, many Asian cities have been actively developing cruise business by constructing cruise terminals to accommodate mega cruise ships. For instance, Hong Kong reconstructed the Kai Tak airport as a new mega cruise terminal in its effort to become the leading cruise hub in Asia Pacific. Several new cruise terminals were established in other Asian cities in recent years. These cruise terminals include Tianjin Cruise Terminal, which was established in 2009, Shanghai Wusongkou International Cruise Terminal in 2011, Singapore Cruise Center in 2012, and Shenzhen Prince Edward Bay Cruise Homeport in 2016. Cruise tourism

has become an alternative that provides new experience to tourists and has the potential of becoming one of the main attractions of a destination. However, the lack of understanding exhibited by Asian consumers toward the cruise tourism market may lead to inappropriate products, marketing strategies, and cruise development policies. Western business models may not be appropriate in Asia, as shown in various examples, such as Hong Kong Disneyland, where the design, operation, and management had to be modified to meet the needs of Asian customers. Therefore, understanding the mindset of Asian customers is vital to the development of cruise tourism in Asia.

China quickly emerged as a key player in the Asian cruise market with 770,000 cruise travelers from 2012 to 2015. This number represents 66% of annual passenger growth in China (CLIA, 2016a). With the surging interest of Chinese in cruise tourism, China is actively developing ports to accommodate such interest and to gauge market potential. The increasing importance of China in cruise tourism is revealed by not only the increasing number of ports being built in the nation but also the rising number of cruise calls in China and the formation of China Cruise and Yacht Industry Association in 2006. The recent 2016–2017 China Cruise Industry Development Report stated that China has become the second largest cruise market in the world with an exponential increment of cruise travelers in the past ten years. In 2015, the top ten ports in China received 629 cruise calls which represent a 35% increase from the previous year, with 2.5 million Chinese traveling outbound on cruises, representing a 43.9% increase from the previous year. The China cruise market is expected to continue to grow at an average rate of 40% every year. The number of Chinese cruise travelers is expected to reach as many as 5 million in 2020 and 10 million in

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2030, eventually ranking China as the top player in the cruise tourism market.

Chinese consumers are eager to experience new products for their enjoyment, and traveling for leisure is one such new experience. The interest of the Chinese people in experiencing travel can be reflected in the high visibility of Chinese travelers in domestic tourism destinations and international arenas. Therefore they represent a lucrative market to businesses and destinations with high volume of tourists from the mainland Chinese market. The large population base and consumption power of China should, therefore, influence cruise companies and their decisions. The following questions should then be explored: how to integrate cruise vacations into the mindset of Chinese consumers and how to cater for their needs on board. To gain a deep understanding of Chinese consumers' decision-making when choosing their travel products, it is important to understand what they desire from a cruise vacation. This study aims to interpret the cruising experience of mainland Chinese travelers to understand what cruise tourism means to them and what leads to a memorable cruising experience.

2. Literature review

Pine and Gilmore (1998) proposed a theory of experience economy that explains a trend of economic center from companies that sell actual commodity, followed with the provision of service, to the staging of a memorable experience for their customers. One important aspect of this theory is the assumption that experience is an economic offering instead of extension of consumption of goods or service. They suggested that creating a memorable and personalized experience could bring economic benefit and differentiate the position of a company among competitors. Four types of customer experience were concluded in accordance with customer involvement tourism events or services and the connection between customers and events or services. Experience with a low level of connection and participation, such as watching a TV show, was termed entertainment because customers are passively receiving information and such experience is not closely related to them. By contrast, high levels of both dimensions lead to an escapist experience, such as acting in a play. Of these two types, a high level of participation and low level of connection is described as educational experience. A high level of connection and low level participation was concluded as esthetic experience. Immersive theatre is an example of such experience, wherein audiences are part of the scene and immersed in the play, but are not required to actively influence the performance.

In terms of tourism, the concept of experience has been examined by scholars many years before Pine and Gilmore's experience economy. In the 1970s, a polemic of tourist experience mainly focused on the nature of tourism or touristic experience (Uriely, 1997). On the one side of the polemic, scholars (Broostin, 1964; Turner and Ash, 1975; cited in Uriely, 1997, p. 982) argued that modern people seek for superficial act instead of authentic tourism experience. On the opposite side, which is primarily represented by MacCannell (1973; cited in Uriely, 1997, p. 982), they criticized such point of view and believed that modern tourism is a "meaningful modern ritual which involves a quest for the authentic." Cohen (1979) attempted to address this polemic from a sociological perspective and proposed five different tourism experiences based on individual social "center," an absolute reality for individuals, and the individual attitudes toward such an experience. However, despite the successful creation of a theoretical structure of tourism experience, Cohen did not explain the importance of tourism experience and the outcome of enhancing such an experience. In the 1970s and 1980s, tourism experience was more related to the motives of starting a trip rather than the outcome of travel.

Following Pine and Gilmore's definition of experience, later experience literature continued to develop the definition of tourism experience. Schmitt (1999, p. 57) defined experience as "a result of encountering, undergoing or living through things" and to "provide sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioral and relational values that

replace functional value." Lewis and Chambers (2000; cited in Walls, Okumus, Wang, & Kwun, 2011, p. 11) considered experience as a general outcome of customer purchase, which is a combination of service, goods, and environment. Andersson (2007) regarded tourism experience as an outcome or linkage of tourism production and consumption. Oh, Fiore, and Jeoung (2007) discussed Pine and Gilmore's definition of experience and concluded a slightly different result; they concluded that, from a customer's prospective, experience is "enjoyable, engaging, memorable encounters for those consuming these events." Mossberg (2007) believed that experience involves customers in different ways, emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual.

Early tourism experience literature is characterized by defining and exploring the nature of touristic experience, whereas recent literature is geared toward measuring customer experience and its connectivity with other factors. The use of the term "experiential marketing" by Schmitt (1999) signifies the beginning of the new era of marketing with emphasis on overall understanding of customer needs and experience. Schmitt (1999) proposed a strategic framework for marketing experience, namely, strategic experiential modules (SEMs). He suggested that customers are rational and emotional animals who emphasize the experience they gain during a consumption. Additionally, consumption should be a holistic experience rather than focusing on individual parts. This definition means experiential marketers would aim for a specific experience, such as "grooming in the bathroom," and consider the commodities or service that could enhance this experience instead of emphasizing individual items in the context, such as shampoo or perfume (Schmitt, 1999, p. 58). Based on this definition, he proposed five components of SEM, namely, sense, feel, think, act, and relate. Sense is related to creating sensory experience to "differentiate companies and products and to motivate customers and to add value to products" (Schmitt, 1999, p. 61). Feel is referred to as creating affective experience to strengthen the links between positive mood and the products. Think module pertains to the creation of a problem-solving experience that triggers customers' creativity to create "convergent and divergent thinking" (Schmitt, 1999, p. 61). Act module is related to the actual physical involvement of customers. Relate is a general module that contains all modules, but mainly focuses on concepts outside the customers themselves. Yuan and Wu (2008) examined the relationships between and among three of the marketing strategies outcomes of Schmitt (i.e., sense, think, feel), perceived service quality, emotional value, functional value, and customer satisfaction under a context of F&B service, namely, Starbucks. They concluded that experiential marketing strategies can induce customer satisfaction by increasing experiential value.

Several tourism models were proposed by scholars to demonstrate the means and ends of tourism experience. Aho (2001) proposed a model of experience process in tourism and argued that tourism experience should include the stage of awakening; this stage entails triggering the interest to visit a certain place should be considered the start of an experience process. Interest is strengthened through information gathering and visiting decision is made, which is the second stage. After an actual visit, travelers would evaluate the experience and store physical factors, such as photos, social factors, people to remember, and mental factors, such as impressions of local views, which are the third, fourth, and fifth stage in this model. Travelers would then reflect on the stored factors about the visit and experience they gained, which would enrich their lives. Oh et al. (2007) proposed measurement scales for tourism experience based on experience economy theory. Besides discovering measurement instruments for the four types of experience of Pine and Gilmore, they also found a connection between experience and other factors related with tourism; these factors are arousal, memory, overall quality, and satisfaction. Other scholars applied the measurement or their models to further examine the relationships under different contexts. Mehmetoglu and Engen (2011) examined the relationship under the context of music festival in Norway and suggested that escapism and esthetic experience affect

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