



Understanding travel constraints: An exploratory study of Mainland Chinese International Students (MCIS) in Norway

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ABSTRACT

An exploratory approach using qualitative methodology and 15 in-depth interviews with Mainland Chinese International Students (MCIS) in Norway was employed in the study. The country is experiencing an increasing number of both MCIS and Chinese tourists in general. Passive activities remain as the most popular activities due to travel constraints consisting of lack of information and equipment and the perception of risk due to the lack of perceived skills. Parental disapproval and fear of “losing face” while also wanting to seek independence are specifically relevant for this particular segment. Such phenomenon causes dilemmas which also serve as travel constraints. While constraints influence type of tourism activities, frequency and destination choices, they do not inhibit travel and tourism activity participation all together. Some constraints can be limited by the tourism industry while others are more challenging as they are dependent on individuals' willingness and motivation to negotiate the constraints.

1. Introduction

Travel behaviour including constraints are some of the most studied themes in tourism research (Cohen, Prayag, & Moital, 2014). However, a majority of existing studies are based on quantitative method approaches (Cohen et al., 2014). Thus, there are many topics that are yet to be explored. Mainland Chinese tourists are at present world's largest outbound tourist market of approximately 131 million outbound journeys annually (Nielsen, 2017). Such development has been positive for many countries' tourism industries including long-haul destinations in Europe. With a 12% increase in spending from the previous year, this market continues to lead international outbound tourism (UNTWO, 2017). For such reasons, researchers and practitioners are keen to explore this segment. As this market may be difficult to reach due to language issues and restricted itineraries, Mainland Chinese International Students (MCIS) can be considered as a useful group to study in order to further understand such segment (Hughes, Wang, & Shu, 2015; Lantai & Mei, 2017). Although international students are argued to be a distinctive market different from the tourist market, studying MCIS may provide further understanding of an increasingly important segment within the Chinese tourist market which seeks novel and unique experiences. Additionally, existing studies on Chinese nationals and MCIS in general are more focused on travel behaviour, needs, motivations and preferences rather than travel constraints. While many studies have

provided sound knowledge of what MCIS' travel constraints consist of (such as Cai, 2015; Hughes et al., 2015; Walker, Deng, & Chapman, 2007; Walker, Jackson, & Deng, 2007), there is a need to explore why such constraints exist in the first place. Moreover, constraints that inhibit travelling cannot be assumed to be the same as why people cease participation in certain tourism activities or refuse participation despite having the desire (Nadirova & Jackson, 2000). Based on the existing research gaps, this study consists of two main research objectives:

- To explore travel constraints experienced by MCIS in Norway and the reasons for experiencing such constraints.
- To understand why some travel constraints are managed, negotiated and overcome while others are not.

An exploratory approach with a qualitative research methodology consisting of semi-structured interviews was employed. This study focused on MCIS in Norway as they are at present a significant group of international students from the Asian region in Norway. In 2017, there were approximately 950 MCIS, which is the fifth largest group of international students in Norway (Database for Statistics on Higher Education, 2018). The mainland Chinese market is also currently the fastest growing inbound tourist market in Norway with approximately 480,000 commercial guest nights in 2017, which is a 21% increase from the previous year (Statistics Norway, 2018). With an increasing number

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of courses and full-degree programs conducted in English, free education system (for both local and international students) as well as the increasing number of inbound mainland Chinese tourists, understanding the behaviour of such segment including their travel constraints is crucial for the Norwegian tourism industry.

2. Literature review

2.1.1. Travel constraints

According to [Hung \(2014\)](#), travel constraints are defined as factors that inhibit individuals from travelling on a continual basis by causing inability to travel. Specifically, constraints “result in the inability to maintain or increase frequency of travel, and/or lead to negative impacts on the quality of the travel experience” ([Hung, 2014](#), p. 857). Much of the knowledge on travel constraints is understood from leisure constraint studies ([Nadirova & Jackson, 2000](#)). In leisure constraint literatures, constraints are studied based on the three levels of a hierarchy model, consisting of intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural constraints. At the intrapersonal level, individuals' stress and skill level can be the inhibiting factors in addition to other individual psychological attributes such as fear ([Crawford, Jackson, & Godbey, 1991](#)). Only after intrapersonal factors are addressed, individuals will experience the next level of interpersonal constraints, including social interactions with friends and family. The last level, the structural constraints may consist of cost and accessibility issues such as time, money, facilities and lack of information ([Alexandris, Funk, & Prichard, 2011](#); [Son, Kerstetter, & Mowen, 2009](#)). [Crawford et al. \(1991\)](#) argue that intrapersonal constraints are the most powerful factors because if these constraints cannot be overcome, it is less likely for individuals to reach higher order constraints. The hierarchy model was updated by [Jackson, Crawford, and Godbey \(1993\)](#) to include constraints negotiations, which is further discussed.

[Hughes et al. \(2015\)](#) applied a similar approach to the hierarchy model. While similar in many sense due to the hierarchy and sequential approach, [Hughes et al. \(2015\)](#) used the term intrinsic barriers to describe the intrapersonal constraints, extrinsic barriers to explain the interpersonal constraints and control barriers rather than structured constraints. Additionally, they consider lack of companionship as a control barrier rather than an intrapersonal constraint. Although the terms constraints and barriers are often used interchangeably, there is a difference between the two ([Jackson & Scott, 1999](#)). [Jackson \(1988\)](#) argues that the term barrier does not capture the greater extent of various leisure constraint behaviours as barriers tend to direct researchers toward one type of constraint. Constraints are more complex and typically referred to as “factors that are perceived or experienced by individuals to limit the formation of leisure preferences and to inhibit or prohibit participation and enjoyment in leisure” ([Jackson, 1997](#), p. 461). Additionally, another major difference in [Hughes et al. \(2015\)](#)'s model is that structured constraints or control barriers have to be addressed prior to extrinsic and intrinsic barriers.

While both hierarchy models and the numerous studies (including [He, Li, Harrill, & Cardon, 2014](#); [Hughes et al., 2015](#); [Li, Zhang, Mao, & Deng, 2011](#); [Nyaupane, Morais, & Graefe, 2002](#); [Walker, Deng, & Chapman, 2007](#); [Walker, Jackson, & Deng, 2007](#)) have provided sound knowledge in understanding what travel constraints are, there is also a research gap of why such constraints exist in the first place. For instance, when individuals indicate lack of companionship as a constraint, it would be interesting to explore why it is considered as a constraint. Moreover, other variables including the desire but inability to participate due to certain constraints is also important to investigate ([Nadirova & Jackson, 2000](#)).

This study has attempted to integrate both [Hughes et al. \(2015\)](#)'s and [Crawford et al. \(1991\)](#) and [Jackson et al. \(1993\)](#)'s models. Due to the time MCIS spend in the study country and other characteristics of

international students in general, MCIS are usually not considered as tourists. Hence, lessons from general leisure constraint studies are just as important in such context. Furthermore, constraints can also vary largely across contexts. For instance, it is possible to explore constraints before new leisure activities are started ([Lyu, Oh, & Lee, 2013](#); [Walker, Deng, & Chapman, 2007](#)), whereas travel constraints can also be studied during travelling and on how they influence tourism activity participation. As this study focuses on MCIS, it was assumed that a majority of this segment would undertake some types of tourism and leisure activities in their study country ([Weaver, 2004](#)), it thus concentrates on the latter.

2.1.2. Understanding travel constraints among MCIS

[Li et al. \(2011\)](#) argue that while studies on travel constraints are increasing, only a handful have investigated the MCIS segment. Despite the wide usage, some literatures argue that [Crawford et al. \(1991\)](#) and [Jackson et al. \(1993\)](#)'s hierarchy model is not applicable to all cultural contexts. [Chick and Dong \(2005\)](#) highlight for instance that there is a weakness in the model as it does not incorporate cultural constraints. Moreover, since cultural constraints as well as age, gender, lifecycle, education and financial situation are all determinant factors that can affect both intrapersonal and interpersonal levels in regards to MCIS ([He et al., 2014](#)), such factors must be taken into consideration when examining travel constraints. Nevertheless, while a majority of studies on travel constraints are based on the western context ([He et al., 2014](#)), [Walker, Deng, and Chapman \(2007\)](#) argue that their data supports the general applicability of this framework across two cultures when they examined MCIS and Canadian international students. Furthermore, [Godbey, Crawford, and Shen \(2010\)](#) found [Crawford et al. \(1991\)](#) and [Jackson et al. \(1993\)](#)'s model to be cross cultural relevant. However, the importance of the constraints on each level may vary depending on the cultural context and individuals themselves ([Godbey et al., 2010](#)). Some inconsistencies are also found in existing studies. For instance, in a study based on the US context, [Walker, Jackson, and Deng \(2007\)](#) discover that MCIS are more intra- and interpersonally constrained and less structurally constrained. On the contrary, in a more recent study of MCIS in Canada, structural constraints were identified as the most problematic followed by interpersonal constraints, which to a certain degree were an issue, and finally intrapersonal skills were not considered as a major issue ([Cai, 2015](#)).

As discussed, [Hughes et al. \(2015\)](#)'s model is another key contribution in understanding travel constraints experienced by MCIS. In their study of MCIS in Australia, some of the intrinsic or intrapersonal constraints (barriers) consist of language, safety issues, unfamiliar environment, cultural differences and food, while extrinsic constraints (barriers) include difficulties to find information, lack of transport, far travel distance and not knowing where to travel. Lastly, control or structured constraints (barriers) consist of cost, lack of time and companionship. It was concluded that many MCIS in particular were inhibited to travel due to high costs as well as lack of travel packages and student discounts ([Hughes et al., 2015](#)). Similar findings were also supported by [Gardiner, King, and Wilkins \(2013\)](#), although the study did not exclusively focused on MCIS.

Moreover, based on previous studies, it has been assumed that MCIS are mainly interested in passive activities such as sightseeing ([Kim & Jogaratnam, 2003](#); [King & Gardiner, 2015](#); [Liao, 2012](#); [Ryan & Xie, 2003](#); [Shanka, Ali-Knight, & Pope, 2002](#); [Xu, Morgan, & Song, 2009](#)). Thus, there are travel constraints that inhibit MCIS from undertaking or seeking alternative tourism activities. For instance, [Ryan and Xie \(2003\)](#), [Ryan and Zhang \(2006\)](#) and the more recent study of [Huang and Tian \(2013\)](#) argue that alternative activities such as adventure tourism are *not* popular among MCIS because their preferred activity was sightseeing. Thus, travel constraints in regards to nature and adventure tourism among Chinese nationals in general have received less attention in the literature. This is because it was assumed that this market displays less interest in such activities in the first place. In

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