



The creative experience and its impact on brand image and travel benefits: The moderating role of culture learning



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ABSTRACT

This study extends and examines a theoretical model of moderated mediation in which culture learning serves as an intervening mechanism that clarifies the moderate relationships among brand image and the dimensions of travel benefits (relaxation and health). The study also considers the four dimensions of direct and indirect effects of a creative experience (peace of mind, escape, unique involvement and interactive opportunities). The results of a study of 403 foreign tourists provide support for this integrated model across the dimensions of travel benefits. As expected, the moderating effect of culture learning is found to be a positive effect of brand image on travel benefits because culture learning strengthens that positive linkage. Alternatively, creative experiences enhance the positive indirect effect of travel benefits through brand image. Finally, the results also show that an interactive experience may have indirect effects on peace of mind through opportunities for unique involvement and escape experiences. We used alternative models to measure the robustness of the findings and discuss how this interesting pattern of moderated mediation could be clarified by using empirical evidence of religious beliefs focused on foreign tourists' different cultural experiences.

1. Introduction

Chinese religion and beliefs have existed and been maintained in China for thousands of years, which provides abundant religious resources for attracting tourists to experience the unique religion-themed tourism (Hung, 2015). It has been realized that temples are not only a centre of faith for domestic tourists and residents but are also the best representatives of Chinese culture for attracting foreign tourists (Song, Lee, Park, Hwang, & Reisinger, 2015; Su & Wall, 2017). Although the matter of *whether* culture and religion influence tourist travel intention has received ample academic and empiricist attention, little is known about *how* culture and religion affect tourists' travel benefits (Hung et al., 2017). Examining the foreign tourist travel decision making processes that convey the effects of different cultural experiences has been recognized as a critical way to understand this issue (Liu, 2016), yet empirical examinations of such processes remain scarce, especially studies considering special events such as experiences visiting the temples of different religions. Moreover, the previous studies that have been done on cultural experiences tend to focus on domestic tourists (Mok & Defranco, 2000; Quan & Wang, 2004) or on the tourist decision making process using structural model analysis (Bond, Packer, & Ballantyne, 2015; Liu, 2017). This has provided a disorganized and

inadequate understanding of how cultural or religious experiences affect tourists' destination brand image and how different perspectives form foreign tourists' creative experiences. The purposes of this study were to extend the existing tourism literature and investigate the role of creative experiences in transmitting the effects of culture brand image, examining this matter in the context of foreign tourists' perceptions of visiting Taiwanese religious settings.

Chinese temples are one of the most popular places that represent the native culture, which help visitors to interpret the valuable cultural assets and make those assets meaningful as well as memorable (Laing, Wheeler, Reeves, & Frost, 2014). According to Chang and Liu (2009), temples rank among the top ten popular sightseeing spots that attract millions of domestic and international visitors who include them in their travel activities; however, few tourism studies have focused on temple cultural experiences. Temple cultural experiences are distinct from other cultural tourism activities in terms of their uniqueness, their mysterious quality, and their authenticity in shaping the tourist experience (Bendle, Lee, Choi, Seo, & Lee, 2014). Whereas other tourism activities are expected to capture part of the Chinese culture, such as Chinese traditional craftsmanship, aesthetics and heritage, the qualities found at temple sites are not very apparent in other cultural experience activities (Schroeder, Borgerson, & Wu, 2015). The current study

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focuses on temple visitation to understand the creative experience of Chinese culture both because of the prevalence and critical influence of temples on tourism resource allocations and policy making and because examinations of the creative experience-brand image-travel benefit relationship are lacking for foreign tourists in particular. Moreover, different cultural experiences provide tourists with opportunities to learn about local culture, stories, expertise, and traditions and it provides unforgettable memories for those who do not reside in this place and create this living culture (Tan, Kung, & Luh, 2013). To develop appropriate marketing or promotion strategies, industry practitioners must identify which cultural activities may provide creative experiences and shed light on the memories of foreign visitors (Jiang, Li, Liu, & Chang, 2017). Previously conducted theoretical work also suggests that the effects on tourist behaviour are likely to be more pronounced in a variety of religious and traditional cultures because cultural tourism tends to be more focused on representing local residents' lifestyles and unique ceremonies, which create different memorable experiences for tourists (Fourie, Rosselló, & Santana-Gallego, 2016; Mok & Defranco, 2000). Furthermore, religious affiliation is a cultural attribute that allows foreign tourists to shape their novel experiences and their perceptions of their destination. In line with the above arguments, past studies of cultural tourism have reported that they discovered that different systematic analyses, such as the mediation-moderation analysis found in studies of tourism activities, is important (Liu, 2017).

In this article, we identified two main second order cultural attributes—creative experiences and travel benefits, which further the examination of how creative experiences can act as a foundation that influences travel benefits through a brand image evaluation by visiting religious sites. Ribeiro, Woosnam, Pinto, and Silva (2017) asserted recently that tourism and travel studies should conduct integrative moderated mediation modelling to avoid overstating the effect of the single mechanism of mediation or moderation effects. In contrast, examining the mediating role of multiple attributes of second order attributes for travel decision making processes not only provides a more accurate measurement and comprehensive perspective of the mediating role of single attributes but also helps explain the complex travel and consumption decision making processes (Tsai, Horng, Liu, & Hu, 2015). To provide a wider perspective of the learning mechanism in cultural tourism, an integrated model of mediation-moderation was adopted that combines the mediation effect of brand image on creative experience and travel benefits, while moderating the effect of culture learning that strengthens the relationship between brand image and travel benefits. Drawing on the literature on creative experiences, brand image, travel benefits and culture learning, the current study proposes an integrated mediation-moderation theoretical model of cultural tourism. Fig. 1 depicts the proposed theoretical model.

1.1. Theoretical background and hypothesis development

Cultural tourism provides tourists with different cultural experiences, which have become the most popular tourism activity in the last 25 years (McKercher, Ho, Cros, & So-Ming, 2002; p.29). Various cultural representations, such as castles, palaces, historical buildings, festivals, or art, religion are powerful destination attractions and serve as non-oil sector economic growth in Asia region (Shuo, Ryan, & Liu, 2009). According to Egresi, Bayram, Kara, and Kesik (2012), in Asia, the number of religious tourists will be expected to reach 600 million per year. Given the importance of religion tourism in Asia, developing religion tourism not only would provide benefits for local economic development but also would give tourists different culture experiences that could be profitable businesses in the present and future periods (Hung, Lee, & Huang, 2016). Considering the spiritual importance of cultural experiences and the complexity of religious sites in the Chinese religious culture, understanding the multiple sequences and concepts of foreign tourists' perspectives is necessary for religion tourism development. To date, studies on the religious and cultural tourism of Chinese temple visitation experiences remain scarce, especially from the perspective of foreign tourists.

The important aspects of individual experience and the economic benefit of religion tourism must be considered. At the individual level, to make decisions about religion tourism, the critical attributes underlying creative experiences, such as “gray zones” (Quan & Wang, 2004), memorability (Willock, 2017), and additional value seeking for “saving” and “helping”, must be examined (Bandyopadhyay, 2018). However, there is still substantial confusion among academic experts and tourism industry managers regarding the identification of critical attributes and a lack of consistent consensus regarding how these influences are integrated to form a cultural experience and religious destination in the Chinese context (Mok & Defranco, 2000). Given the diverse cultural and geographic spectrum of foreign visitors, World Heritage Sites and famous temples or religions provide creative experiences of different cultures and become one of the most significant destinations that motivate foreign tourists to visit an area (Santa-Cruz & López-Guzmán, 2017). Thus, it is necessary to strengthen the scientific studies that analyse the behaviour and travel benefits of the foreign tourists to discover how different cultural learning may influence their value perception.

In the social science literature of experience discovery, previous tourism researchers have focused on the tourist experience in sharp contrast to the daily experience (Quan & Wang, 2004). Recently, Richards and Wilson (2006) and Ali, Ryu, and Hussain (2016) have proposed several dimensions for building a creative experience for tourist (e.g., interactive, unique involvement, escape and peace of

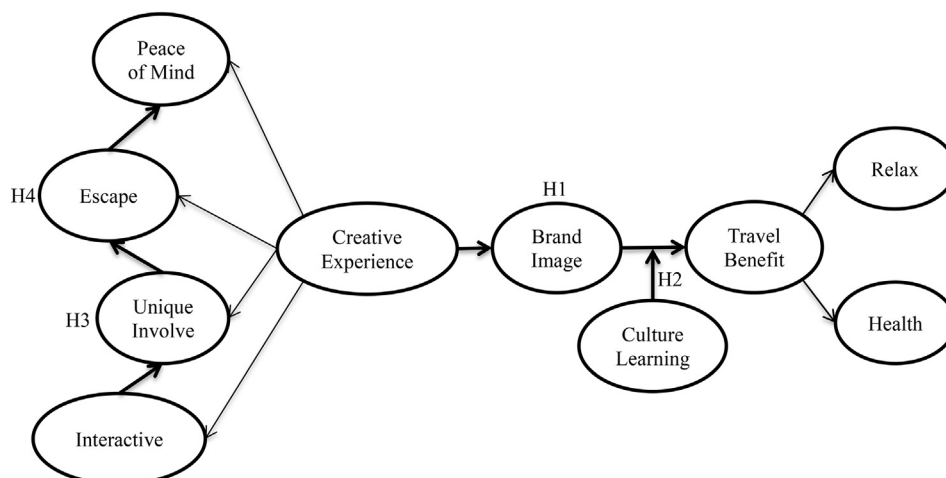


Fig. 1. Hypothesized model-full models. The solid lines represent the relationships that are included the hypotheses.

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