Review of Cultural Distance Studies in Field of Tourism

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Abstract. Cultural distance is a concept that has been widely accepted in international business. But in tourism research area, it has garnered little attention. This paper tried to map the existing studies of cultural distance in field of tourism and further locate the possible research gaps. Through reviewing the 14 related papers, we summarized the research conditions from perspectives of research themes, research level and measurement of cultural distance. After this, suggestions were provided for future research.

Introduction

Cultural distance is a concept referring to the extent to which consumers’ origin cultures are different from or similar to the culture of the host (Shenkar, 2001). It has been widely accepted in field of international business. For example, Tihanyi et al. (2005) investigated influence of cultural distance on corporate overseas entry mode. Morosini et al. (1998) discussed relationship between cultural distance and cross-border acquisition performance, while Stahl and Caligiuri (2005) verified that cultural distance was significantly associated with expatriate coping strategies. Even though cultural distance has garnered great popularity in international business, it received relatively little attention in tourism research area (Ng et al., 2007). Crotts (2004) suggests that cultural distance can be a theoretically more exhaustive descriptor of cultural influences on tourist behavior. Culture itself couldn’t fully explain Chinese tourists’ different behaviors in different destination countries. Therefore, it is rational that the concept of cultural distance should be involved in tourism research. This paper aims to do a full review of existing cultural distance studies in field of tourism. Through this, we could locate the research gap and give directions for future research.

Method

This paper utilized three ways to search for cultural distance studies in field of tourism. First, by entering two key words in Google Scholar, namely cultural distance and tourism, in language of both Chinese and English, we got some relative studies. Second, changing to well-known Chinese database, like WanFang and HowNet, some other Chinese studies were located after entering the keywords mentioned above. The third way was looking for studies referred by papers found in the first two ways. Through those three ways, we finally obtained 14 research papers about cultural distance in field of tourism, shown in Table1. Among them, 6 are written in Chinese and another 8 in English. Cultural distance was investigated as key variable in 11 papers, while just mentioned in the other 4 papers. The following part will review those 14 papers from perspectives research themes, measurement of cultural distance and level of research.

Research Theme

After reading the 11 papers that studied cultural distance as a key variable, we found that those studies could be clustered into the following two research themes.

Influence of cultural distance on tourists’ destination choice. Among the 11 papers, 5 papers fall into this theme. Specifically, Jackson (2001) could be recognized as the first scholar who started the quantification of cultural distance in field of tourism. He found that there was no significant
relationship between cultural distance and tourists’ destination choice. However, by utilizing a more rigorous method, Ng, Lee and Soutar (2007) concluded that cultural distance was negatively associated with tourists’ visitation. Chinese scholars also made great efforts in explaining this topic. For example, through simple descriptive statistics, Qian (2008) found that Chinese tourists prefer outbound destinations with not too high or too low cultural distance. Differently, Zhao and Tian (2008) proposed that Chinese tourists tend to visit destinations with quite different culture from China while Zhang (2009) claimed that the higher the cultural distance, the fewer the number of visitation. It is evident that scholars could not come to consensus about the relationship between cultural distance and tourists’ destination choice.

**Influence of cultural distance on tourists’ perception of service quality.** 3 papers deal with this theme. Weiermair and Fuchs (2000) hypothesized that tourists from different culture-distance origin countries would have different travel experiences. But ANOVA analysis failed to verify this hypothesis. The authors concluded that cultural distance had significant effect on tourists’ perception of service quality and overall satisfaction. Yu (2010) and Zhang (2012) also tried to investigate this topic under hotel context. Yu (2010) found that cultural distance moderated relationship between customers’ perceived quality and perceived value while Zhang (2012) proposed that cultural distance had direct effect on customers’ perceived value. Totally, it is still uncertain about the role cultural distance played in explaining tourists’ perception of service quality. More efforts need to be made in this research theme.

**Research Level**

Sousa and Bradley (2006) claimed that it is important to discriminate research level. The variables used in studies should be corresponding to research level. Otherwise, the research design is problematic. In cultural-distance related studies, there are two types of research level, namely country level and individual level.

Among the 14 cultural-distance related studies, most fell into type of individual level study. 4 papers deal with topics from level of country. Actually, there are some advantages of individual level study, which could incorporate individual differences into consideration. For example, when analyzing effect of cultural distance on customers’ perceived value, individual factors like sex, income and education level were included as controls variables (e.g. Yu, 2010). Otherwise, country level studies aimed to investigate characteristics of a group of people. Variables used in country level studies were calculated mean value of sample but not individual value. When Ng, Lee and Soutar (2007) discussed Australian tourists’ visitation intention, the authors utilized mean value of all tourists’ intention as the dependent variable. Similarly, Qian (2008), Zhang (2009), and Ahn, Mckercher (2015) conducted a country level study.

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<th>Paper</th>
<th>Research theme</th>
<th>Research level</th>
<th>Measurement of cultural distance</th>
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<tr>
<td>Jackson (2001)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ng, Lee &amp; Soutar (2007)</td>
<td>Theme1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Qian (2008)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zhao &amp; Tian (2008)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weiermair &amp; Fuchs (2000)</td>
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<td>Subjective judgement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yu (2010)</td>
<td>Theme2</td>
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Measurement of Cultural Distance

7 papers of 14 quantified cultural distance, with another 7 measure cultural distance on the basis of authors’ subjective judgment like Kastenholz (2010). Since this paper aimed to map the rigorous methods of calculating cultural distance, those another 7 papers were excluded from consideration in this part. Among the 7 papers quantifying cultural distance, 4 of them utilized the formula provided by Kogut and Singh (1980), theoretically based on Hofstede’s national culture study. Another 3 studies required the respondents to rate the 7-point scale of cultural distance, which contained only one question. For example, Ng, Lee and Soutar (2007) used the question like “Do you think how similar is your own culture to the destination culture?” (1=very different, 7=very similar).

In academic area, Kogut and Singh (1980)’s method has been widely accepted, especially in field of international business. Because it is simple to use and covers more than 70 countries, which means less cost but more data. The Likert scale method bears its own advantages. It incorporates the individual differences, which brings in more information for further study. Also, the Likert scale method could be used in both individual level and country level research, while Kogh and Singh (1980)’s method only could be applied to country level study.

Summary

Conclusively, cultural distance has garnered little attention in tourism research area. Some scholars tried to involve cultural distance in explaining tourists’ behaviors but failed to conduct rigorous studies. Because of this, we found that there were many contradictory conclusions in cultural distance related papers. For example, scholars failed to reach an agreement about relationship between cultural distance and tourists’ destination choice. Some proposed that they were negatively related while some others suggested a positive relationship. Since those studies didn’t set up a strong theoretical logic and verify it with rigorous methods, it is reasonable that they came to different conclusions.

Considering aspect of research level, the most serious problem is that some scholars lack consciousness of research level. This problem is reflected in two cases. In one case, country level cultural distance was used in individual level studies. In the other case, individual level cultural distance was used in country level studies. Also, compared to individual level studies, country level studies occupied a small part.

Finally, a certain number of studies still relied on subjective judgment to measure cultural distance, instead of quantitative method. It highly reduced the validity and reliability of the studies. This phenomenon showed the neglect of quantitative research. Moreover, among those papers quantifying cultural distance, its calculation methods still need further comparison and verification. The backup theory should be reconsidered under the context of tourism rather than international business.

Directions for Future Research

Since the concept of cultural distance has hardly been studied in tourism, there leaves many research gaps for future studies. First, it needs further investigation about the influence of cultural distance on tourists’ behaviors, especially on tourists’ destination choice. It is expected that the results could help guide future destination marketing practice. Second, when conducting research, scholars

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<th>Author</th>
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<tr>
<td>Qian (2013)</td>
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<td>Kastenholz (2010)</td>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>Subjective judgement</td>
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<td>Mckercher &amp; Cros (2003)</td>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>Subjective judgement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suh &amp; McAvoy (2003)</td>
<td>Other</td>
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should consider the research level problem, namely individual level, country level or mixed level. Also, it is important to choose appropriate methods when calculating cultural distance. For country level study, both Likert scale and Kogut & Singh (1980)’s method are available. But for individual level study, it is recommended to use Likert scale. Actually, it is encouraged to compare the validity and reliability of different calculating methods.

References


