

Understanding Travel Constraints: An Exploratory Study of Inbound International Students in China

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Abstract. China has been considered as one of the top 10 countries for international education destinations. Inbound students' traveling in China, however, involves various uncertainties and constraints that can inhibit their participation. This study adopted the qualitative methodology and 17 in-depth interviews. The results suggest that inbound international tourists in China are subject to some travel constraints, including the lack of accurate information and specialized equipment required in some areas, or the insecurity caused by the lack of perceived skills and the inability to feel a sense of control and mobility. These limiting factors will greatly affect the type, frequency and destination choice of tourism activities for inbound international students. Implications and limitations are also discussed.

Introduction

China's share of the international education market is growing as its culture attracts large numbers of students from Asia and elsewhere; indeed, there are 730 higher education institutions (HEIs) in China which provide education for international students, and the number of international students in Chinese higher education has increased from 1, 236 in 1978 to 489, 200 in 2017, well on the way to meet its target of hosting 500,000 international students by 2020 [1]. For such reasons, scholars and practitioners are keen to explore this segment.

Existing studies on international student travel behavior are mainly conducted in the context of western countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States, New Zealand, and Canada [2], and most studies focused on the outbound travel tendency of Chinese students [3]. In addition, other researchers surveyed international students from different perspectives, such as travel motivations [4], travel patterns and preference [5], travel risk perception [6]; however, very limited knowledge is available about: *What are inbound international students' travel constraints in China?* Tourist behavior including leisure constraints is some of the most studied themes in tourism research [7]. Nevertheless, most of the previous studies are based on quantitative method approaches [8, 9].

Usually, the international students are not tourists, as their study commitment is usually more than one year of the tourist rule, so there is research value in exploring them individually as a special group [10]; however, previous studies have found that this group often participates in short trips and should therefore be considered part of the domestic travel market. Along with the increasing number of students to study abroad from "traditional suppliers" such as China, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and India, this research proposes the notion of "reversed gaze" and calls for a paradigm shift in exploring inbound international students' leisure preference and travel behavior in China, as opposed to the Chinese outbound international students' travel behavior in the occident that is usually regarded as "receiving countries" in education industry.

This study mainly analyzes travel constraints experienced by international students in China and the reasons for experiencing such constraints. The underlying reasons why some international students' travel constraints are managed, negotiated and overcome are further explored by adopting qualitative research method. By examining the above questions, the findings may help tourism

management organizations that want to target this market segment to improve international tourists' services and products by decreasing their perceived leisure constraints and encouraging negotiation.

Literature Review

Constraints-negotiation Model

Backman and Crompton defined leisure constraints as “those barriers that inhibit continued use of a recreation service” [12]. Crawford and Godbey cited the most common types of leisure and tourism constraints as intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural [13]. At the intrapersonal level, individuals' stress and skill level can be the inhibiting factors in addition to other psychological attributes such as fear and anxiety [14]. Interpersonal constraints refer to the extent to which family and friends' interest or lack thereof influences individuals' leisure participation [13]. Structural constraints are external factors such as time, money, and transportation that prohibit individuals from participating in a leisure activity [13]. Crawford et al. 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 [14].

Research has explored the concept of “constraint negotiation” [13, 14]. Further, Crawford et al. claimed that it was possible for people may actively maintain participation in response to limits placed on them instead of passively reacting by reducing or stopping participation [14]. Additionally, an individual's negotiation process is also influenced by various psychological factors such as motivation, satisfaction, and socio-demographic factors (i.e., age, gender, and income). Generally, although studies have sought to identify the leisure constraints of Chinese International Students in western countries, comparatively little research has examined whether these perceived constraints negotiation applies to inbound international students in mainland China. To bridge this gap, the present study drew upon leisure constraint theory and investigated how encountered leisure constraints may influence inbound international students and the reasons for experiencing such constraints.

Inbound International Students in Mainland China: The Development of Chinese Higher Education Internationalization

The number of international students is often used as a measure of a country's level of international development in higher education. After China's entry into the world trade organization in 2002, with the continuous improvement of its international influence, the rapid development of economy and international exchanges, the Chinese government will recruit international students as a national soft power and enhance the international competitiveness of important national strategy, and the increase in the number of mainland China entry students means that China's higher education will develop towards the internationalization of higher level. Therefore, the Chinese government has made relevant policies to increase the number of inbound international students [15]. For example, “the study in China” program, the central government's ultimate goal for the program is to receive 500,000 international students by 2020, making China the largest recipient of international students in Asia and a major study destination in the world. To achieve this goal, the Chinese government is offering more scholarships to attract overseas students. Under these policies, the number of international students funded by the Chinese government has increased nearly six fold in the past decade.

China has long been regarded as one of the world's top 10 host countries for international education. Regarding “One Belt One Road” policies, more than \$900 billion has been allocated to initiatives that will boost both lands (the ‘Belt’) and sea (the old ‘Silk Road’) trade routes which run west, to Europe, via Asia. Since this policy has created jobs for people in these countries, local people are more motivated to study in mainland China [1]. According to China's Ministry of Education (MOE), Southeastern and Central Asian countries have become important markets for China's international education. Over the past few years, there has been an exponential growth of international students coming from shared-border countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, India,

Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Mongolia [15]. Contrary to the increasing market share of Asia and Africa, the number of students from developed Western countries has shrunk rapidly.

Research Methods

Research Design: Qualitative-methods Study

To explore the travel constraints experienced by inbound international students in mainland China and the reasons for experiencing such constraints, this study adopted a qualitative research method design with international students who have currently or already studied in Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs).

A qualitative investigation was carried out based on 17 semi-structured in-depth interviews to explore the travel constraints experienced by inbound international students in mainland China. This exploratory step was conducted to allow researchers to ask a set of pre-determined questions in a face-to-face interaction and enrich scarce literature. Thus, this methodology was suitable due to its ability to explore an under-researched segment; besides, it is particularly important in studies where the respondents' voice must be heard.

Data Collection

This study used a snowball sampling method. Researchers began the sample by contacting four international exchanged students who are currently studying in a large university in East China and then obtaining contact information for additional international students. An interview guide which served as the main research instrument was developed based on themes and topics generated from literature.

At the beginning of the interview, researchers will carefully explain the nature of this study and inform the participants of their right to withdraw from the interview at any time. Study participants will first be asked to think about the reason why they choose mainland China as an exchanged country. After that, participants will be asked to recall their experience with travel in mainland China, including travel preference, e.g., where they have traveled to, where they intend to travel, why participation in certain tourism activities (including passive and active activities) was chosen. Other questions will focus on constraints when traveling including the issue of companionship as well as other commonly known constraints among international students such as cost, travel distance, budget and time.

Data Analysis

As the data was manageable without the use of a particular software as a tool, this research does not use any software to categorize, code and organize the materials. Thematic analysis was adopted due to its ability to constantly compare the collected data to identify the characteristics of the text.

Findings

Constraints Influence Choosing Travel Destinations

While the study focused on the travel constraints of inbound international students in China, it also raised the question of why China was chosen as the country studied in the first place. Interestingly, the respondents chose China as their research target were not directly related to the purpose of tourism. Examples are as follows:

I think China is a mysterious country. It has a history of more than 5,000 years. I came here mainly because the school had an exchange program, which was completely accidental [I3].

After arrival, all respondents were positively surprised by the famous scenic spots, beautiful tourist attractions, and Chinese food. For example, they explained:

I was really amazed by China. Chinese food is very famous; my classmates are full of praise towards it [I7].

As for the choice of destination for overseas students in China, the most popular destinations include some famous tourist attractions or cities with Chinese characteristics, such as Mount Huang, Shanghai, and Nanjing. Although some of the travel constraints that occur during travel and how they affect participation in travel and leisure activities are the focus of this study; some of the cognitive limitations of destination selection that exist before to travel also show up. This includes the choice of tourist destinations in China. For example, while respondents expressed a desire to travel to more remote areas, such as northwest China (such as the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region), they were unable or intended to do the following:

I really wanna see Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, but I am lack money and time. It's a shame because people have been telling me that if you haven't see Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, then you haven't been to China [I3]!

While many international students do express a desire to travel to remote areas, the combination of unfamiliar environments, the potential for information asymmetry, and the risk of spending time and money discourages them from doing so. Importantly, lack of time and money does not preclude travel or participation in travel activities, although they are also identified as travel constraints. As suggested by Jackson et al., respondents will negotiate constraints through behavioral strategies, including modifying their travel plans, going to closer destinations, choosing accommodation, and planning other expenses accordingly [14].

International Students' Perceived Travel Constraints

Most inbound international students express that their travel is determined by the mental, interpersonal, and structural constraints that they are subjected to by the combination of obstacles at different levels corresponding to the hierarchical constraint model, which needs to be overcome to facilitate their participation. Introspective constraints, including fear of the unknown (cultural differences), fear of safety, lack of language skills and uncertainty caused by unfamiliar environments, are among the most immediate and fundamental obstacles to the willingness to travel. Even after dealing with personal constraints, international students may encounter the next level of interpersonal constraints. They often lack companionship or are opposed by their parents. External constraints refer to the lack of means of transportation or difficulty in using, not knowing the specific situation of the destination and the degree of travel distance. Besides, structural constraints (barriers) include cost, time and transportation.

Summary

It is important to understand the travel constraints and negotiations of inbound students in mainland China. Although there are more and more empirical studies on travel constraints, there are very few studies on overseas students in mainland China. The level of international tourism services and facilities in mainland China is unbalanced, and the development is relatively slow and immature compared with other countries. In addition, international students are more likely to travel alone or with another travel partner from the same country of origin rather than to participate in organized groups and trips, which adds more perceptual uncertainty to their journey.

This study contributes to the relevant body of knowledge in the following aspects. Firstly, it can be determined that there are indeed some travel constraints for Chinese inbound international students, and whether these students have the desire to participate in active activities such as adventure tourism, which contradicts the previous assumptions. For international students whose mother tongue is not Mandarin, the long-term use of Chinese language environment in China has increased the difficulties and uncertainties in the travel of international students in China to some extent. Secondly, this results also confirm that limiting factors do not lead to total nonparticipation, but to the type of travel and leisure participation. Therefore, the analysis of this study yields some key insights into the travel constraints experienced by China's inbound international student market.

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