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Yun Zhang

University of Wollongong, yz142@uow.edu.au

Lois Burgess

University of Wollongong, lburgess@uow.edu.au

Gregory M. Kerr

University of Wollongong, gkerr@uow.edu.au

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The provision of education to international students in Australia is increasingly important to the higher education sector as well as other industry sectors including tourism. Although previous studies have identified the contributions of international students to tourism, there are limited studies investigating leisure travel behaviour based on student nationality and segments within nationalities. As the first stage of a broader study, this research by way of open-ended interviews, investigates the propensity of Chinese university students to travel within Australia. By way of qualitative data analysis the findings reveal a number of paradoxes which need to be addressed in further research to better understand the attitudes and behaviours of Chinese students towards travel for leisure purposes whilst in Australia.

Keywords

Understanding, propensity, Chinese, university, students, for, leisure, travel, within, Australia

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Understanding the Propensity of Chinese University Students for Leisure Travel within Australia

Yun (Nancy) Zhang, University of Wollongong, yz142@uow.edu.au

Lois Burgess, University of Wollongong, lburgess@uow.edu.au

Greg Kerr, University of Wollongong, gkerr@uow.edu.au

Abstract

The provision of education to international students in Australia is increasingly important to the higher education sector as well as other industry sectors including tourism. Although previous studies have identified the contributions of international students to tourism, there are limited studies investigating leisure travel behaviour based on student nationality and segments within nationalities. As the first stage of a broader study, this research by way of open-ended interviews, investigates the propensity of Chinese university students to travel within Australia. By way of qualitative data analysis the findings reveal a number of paradoxes which need to be addressed in further research to better understand the attitudes and behaviours of Chinese students towards travel for leisure purposes whilst in Australia.

Keywords: Tourism, Travel, Leisure, Destination

Understanding the Propensity of Chinese University Students for Leisure Travel within Australia

Introduction

The provision of education to international students in Australia is increasingly important to its education industry as well as the overall Australian economy with the estimated contribution being AUS\$14.2 billion in 2007/08 (Australia Education International, 2008). For the most part, the consumers of Australia's 'education product' travel to, and stay, in Australia. International students in Australia are classified as being in one of five sectors. These are "Higher Education", "Vocational Education and Training (VET)", "English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS)", "Schools" and "Other". The Higher Education Sector has the largest group of international students with 176,161 in 2008 with 96,753 being from China. Chinese students studying in Australia tend to come from the provinces of Shanghai, Guangzhou, Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Beijing (Australian Education International, 2006). Hong Kong is treated as a separate category and provides another 14,697 students (Education International 2009). In addition to expenditure in higher education, international students undertake both essential and discretionary expenditures in a number of other sectors, one of which is tourism. Potentially, because international students reside in Australia for often 3 to 5 years, they have an opportunity to be consumers of Australia's tourism products. Research into the tourism behaviour of international students in their host country is supported by Weaver and Oppermann (2004) who claim that in spite of the known capacity of international students to spend within the tourism industry, national tourism organizations pay no attention to stimulate this market by the provision of marketing and promotional assistance to education institutions. Weaver and Oppermann (2004) suggest that tourism operators ignore the needs of international students because they are not considered as a mainstream tourist category. While there have been studies in this area, two shortcomings have been identified in the current literature. First there is a need to focus more on international students by nationality rather than treat them as a homogenous market. Field (1999), Pope, Shanka and Ali-Knight (2002) as well as Chadee and Mattsson (1996) identify that country of origin will influence travel expenditure. This is particularly the case with Chinese students, where there is an apparent lack of research. According to Yu, Weiler and Ham (2002), this is due to the expansion of the Chinese student market being a relatively recent phenomenon. This observation is supported by Arcodia, Mei, and Dickson (2007) and Wang and Davidson (2008). The second issue is that many of the studies dealing with leisure travel by international students with exceptions such as Dolnicar (2005) and Summers and McColl-Kennedy (1998) who identified risk factors, have a concentration on '*where to go*' and '*what to see and do*' rather than '*whether to go*'. This research addresses these shortcomings by conducting an exploratory study into the propensity of Chinese university students to travel in Australia during their stay. This study is guided by the framework developed by Kim, Jogaratnam and Noh (2006), who distinguished between 'pull factors', that is, '*where to go*' and 'push factors', that is, '*whether to go*'. This work concentrates on the push factors and seeks to identify those which might be influential in an international student's decision to travel for leisure. The research seeks to contribute to a better understanding of '*why*' and '*why don't*' Chinese university students travel in Australia.

Methodology

In order to identify key themes which might be important to Chinese students relative to travel in Australia, five-semi-structured interviews of Chinese students studying at the University of Wollongong were conducted. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. The questions were aimed at opinions, attitudes and behaviours of Chinese university students in general, not just that of the respondents. The fifth interview yielded similar responses to the previous four and it was considered that an acceptable level of saturation had been reached for this stage of the research. It should be noted that the researcher who undertook the interviews was a post graduate Chinese student who was able to gain the trust of participants and therefore deeper insight into the issues raised. The data analysis was undertaken using the steps recommended by Burnard (1994). The hard copy of each transcript was reviewed by the researchers and with the aid of shading and notes, and “meaning units” (Burnard, 1994 p. 113) were identified. These meaning units were highlighted in the electronic copies of the transcripts with the use of a different font colour to the overall text. The next stage was to look for similar “meaning units” and group them with reference to a descriptive label. Meaning units which could not be allocated to a descriptive label were assigned to a ‘miscellaneous’ category – these were potentially important but not deemed relevant to the research question. Each meaning unit within a descriptive label was allocated a letter to aid categorisation and sorting. This is shown in Table 1.

Descriptive Label	Code	Descriptive Label	Code
English language	A	Knowledge of destinations	J
Location of University	B	Role of friends	K
Culture	C	Visited destinations	L
Dislikes	D	Money to travel	M
Work Commitments	E	Immigration policies	N
Return to China	F	Hobbies/interests	O
Tourism advertising	G	Safety	P
Priorities	H	Suggested improvements	Q
Time to travel	I	Travel Behaviour	R
		Miscellaneous	S

Table 1: Descriptive Labels for Similar Meaning Units and Assigned Codes

The text from each transcript was transferred to a table to aid categorisation, with each meaning unit being placed in a separate row. Two adjoining columns were created for each row. The first recorded the participant number (1 to 5) and the second, the code allocated for each descriptive label (Table 1). The tables derived from each of the transcripts were merged. Following this, the ‘data sort function’ (from Tables in MS Word) was used to the ‘code column’. The result was a table which presented meaning units from all five transcripts according to their descriptive label. From the table, meaning units were able to be compared and contrasted and reference could be made back to the original transcripts as the additional column displayed the participant number. An example of the output from this process is shown in Table 2.

Meaning Units	Descriptive Label	Participant No.	Code
<i>Communication is the biggest problem for living in Australia</i>	Dislikes	2	D
<i>Sometime, I go to do part-time job or go to travel with my friends in the mid-session break</i>	Work commitments	3	E
<i>I get enough money I will go to China to meet my parents</i>	Return to China	2	F
<i>Study is our purpose in Australia</i>	Priorities	1	H
<i>In addition, to students there is lots of study work which they have to finish and they have to take care of their life as well</i>	Time to travel	2	I
<i>I have no knowledge about different travelling region</i>	Knowledge of destinations	1	J
<i>But my friends are not travel too much when they stay in Australia</i>	Role of friends	4	K
<i>Chinese students prefer travel with their friends</i>	Role of friends	4	K
<i>I think money [is] major reason to make people decide to travel or not</i>	Money to travel	2	M

Table 2: Sorting of Descriptive Units and Meaning Units by Code

Following the use of a computer to aid categorisation, the final stage of the analysis, by way of reasoning on the part of the researchers, was to look for patterns in the data (Burnard, 1994). This analysis required constant consideration and reflection of the descriptive labels with regular references back to the ‘meaning units’ and the original transcripts. In this study it was found that there were a number of ‘opposing labels’. These are identified and explained in the following section which concludes with some additional themes.

Findings and Discussion

The findings yielded a number of contrasts relative to travel in Australia on the part of Chinese university students. These are presented as paradoxes in the following paragraphs.

The paradox of location: It was revealed that the part of the consideration set in a student’s decision (also involving family and agents for university) to study in Australia was the “*beautiful place – we can see beautiful sky and sea*”. However, when asked about their travel to experience Australia there was a response that, “*my friends not travel in Australia too much*”. Most felt that Chinese students had not travelled much during their stay. Sydney was identified as being important due to its architecture, being different from China. In addition, despite comments such as “*I have no knowledge of different travel regions*”, Canberra as the national capital was identified as being an ‘obligatory place’ Chinese students visited.

The paradox of friends: It was revealed that Chinese university students prefer to travel as part of a larger group rather than as an individual or in smaller groups. For example, “*So you can find many students to travel together. More people join in, more fun ... during travel.*” When they did travel students claimed, “*My friends suggest me to go with them*” and

“Chinese student prefer to travel with their friends”. It seems that although friends are influential their friends do not travel.

The paradox of culture: A respondent stated that a motive to study overseas was to *“meet different people and learn a different culture”* while another referred to the *“attraction of a different lifestyle.”* Upon experiencing the Australian culture, there were a number of dislikes, particularly at university-age level. Students stated, *“I don’t like Australian lifestyle”* and *“night time in Australia is bar-time. I have not enjoyed the night time bar-culture.”* This attitude might be influential in a reluctance to travel if Chinese students feel that they will not conform to the Australian culture. Despite the initial motivation of ‘things Australian’ the participants suggested that *“there are limited options of entertainment ... especially the entertainment that suits Chinese”*. These statements might contribute to any degree of insularity on the part of Chinese students and a possible reluctance to travel.

The paradox of hobbies and interests: It seemed that the hobbies and interests of Chinese students did not usually fit with a leisure travel agenda. It was suggested that many Chinese students like to *“watch movies and cook”* and with regard to travel, *“first reason is personal hobbies”*. It was claimed, *“If people don’t like outdoor activity, they will not consider travelling around too much.”*

The paradox of communication: One of the stated objectives of Chinese students was to *“practice English”* and *“learn different culture”*. Despite this claim, the inability to communicate effectively in English was identified as a potential barrier to leisure travel. *“Language is a big problem for Chinese students. If you do not have enough English capacity, it is difficult to travel throughout Australia”*.

The paradox of work: The students interviewed stated that many Chinese students do not travel within Australia as they work during session breaks. Statements included; *“During the holiday, usually I choose to work and earn more money”* and *“Find part-time job to earn more money”*. It was suggested that those who have funds to travel, prefer to travel back to China evidenced by comments: *“I get enough money, I will go to China to meet my parents”* and *“I go back to China to see my family if I am missing them too much during the holiday.”*

The paradox of time: Despite an argument that full-time university students have ‘discretionary time’ during and between university sessions, it was suggested that Chinese students have limited time to travel. Given the additional commitments of coming to terms with a new language, comments included, *“we have no time to travel to other place”* and *“There is lots of study work which they have to finish and they have to take care of their life as well.”*

The paradox of immigration policy: From the students interviewed, it was suggested that Chinese students choose to study in Australia due to *“friendly immigration policy”* and *“Australian visa easier to get than USA”*. These students also suggested that immigration policy restricted them from travelling within Australia particularly after they had completed their studies. Comments included; *“Chinese students all hold student visa, they have to leave once visa expired”* and *“Immigration Department refuses [Chinese] graduates travel visa in Australia.”*

Other themes which were identified were limited recall or appeal of tourism advertising. For example, *“I cannot remember anything about tourism advertisement”* and from another person, *“Advertisements are not very impressive to me.”* While other international students

may have leisure travel high on their list of priorities while studying in Australia, this may not be so important to Chinese students as one participant claimed, “*Study is our purpose in Australia.*” Money and safety were also identified as issues restricting travel. In addition to possible changes to immigration policy to increase the opportunity to travel upon completion of studies, a suggestion from one participant was to “*set up agency which deals with all problems of travelling from Chinese students ...*”

Agenda for Future Research

The next stage of this research is to plan a survey using a questionnaire to be administered to a sample of Chinese students. The themes of interest identified will be used to generate a questionnaire with aim of finding out ‘*how many*’ of the Chinese student population have similar attitudes and behaviours towards tourism. In this regard, demographic data will be obtained to identify any attitudinal or behavioural responses which have consistency with demographic characteristics. The questionnaire will be developed, piloted and tested as recommended by Veal (2006). The data obtained from the questionnaires will be coded and analysed using SPSS statistical software. The type analysis will include the application of descriptive statistics such as mean, and frequency counts. The demographic data obtained such as gender, province of origin and marital status and the responses to questions will be subjected to tests of association such as t-tests and mean- ranking. If characteristics are found to classify Chinese students into groups, Multivariate Analysis of Variances (MANOVA) will use to determine any significant differences across the groups. As it is not possible (and perhaps not necessary) to ask every Chinese student within the population, it is proposed to sample Chinese students whose responses can be used to *infer* the characteristics of the population. The sampling framework which is to be selected has some risks as there are limits with regard to access to students throughout Australia. The sample will be drawn from a data base of Chinese students studying at the University of Wollongong. It is anticipated that 500 questionnaires will be distributed with an estimated response rate of 30%. Although this will be a convenience sample (Aaker *et al.*, 2008), comparisons with the characteristics of the population (obtained from Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations) will be made to support an argument for the representativeness of the sample.

Conclusion

As an explorative study, the findings cannot be generalised but there is enough evidence to suggest that there are themes or issues specific to the propensity of Chinese university students to travel for leisure purposes while in Australia. This supports the pursuit of further research and potentially an opportunity for marketers and university educators to determine if there are mutual benefits in assisting Chinese university students to consume more of Australia’s tourism product.

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