The role of social interaction in the tourism experience of Chinese visitors to Japan: A grounded theory approach

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Introduction

The core function of tourism is the creation (Sternberg 1997) and consumption (de Jager 2009) of experiences. Tourist experiences typically take place in the presence of or in collaboration/co-creation with other people, and as a result usually involve some level of social interaction. Prior studies suggest that the desire to come into contact with other people is one of the important motivations for travelling (de Rojas and Camarero 2008; Pearce 2005a). Examples of categories of people that may exert an impact on tourist experiences include service providers (e.g., Minkiewicz, Evans and Bridson 2013; Salvado 2011), the local community (e.g., Azevedo, 2009; Richards 2010), and other tourists (e.g., Reichenberger 2017; Rihova et al. 2013).

Previous research on tourist social interactions suggests that typical motivations for pursuing these interactions are a desire to exchange information (Murphy 2001), companionship, security, and belonging (Rihova et al. 2013; Cary 2004; Pearce 2005b), or to cope with anxieties as 'temporary strangers' in unfamiliar environments (Greenblat and Gagnon 1983). In addition, social interaction may contribute to additional enjoyment (Moore, Moore and Capella 2005), social development (Tung and Ritchie 2011), engagement in the experience (Minkiewicz, Evans and Bridson 2013), stimulation of thoughts, feelings, and creativity (Ballantyne, Packer and Falk 2011), and typically generates positive appraisals and memorable experiences (Campos et al. 2016; Tung and Ritchie 2011).

Acknowledging tourists' social interaction as an essential factor in the tourist experience, scholars suggest a fresh perspective of the relationship between destination and tourist is needed. For example, destinations should be viewed as a context in which the tourists create their own experiences through the interactions with the destination (Scott, Laws and Boksberger 2009). White and White (2008) assert that the tourist experience should be viewed as produced by tourists through the interactions with the physical environment and with other people, including residents and fellow tourists. This makes it necessary for destination marketers to carefully monitor and understand tourist social interactions so they can facilitate the positive interactions to improve tourists' experiences and at the same time avoid or alleviate negative influences by other people on the tourism experience.

Thus, our review of the literature reveals that previous studies on tourist experience have largely concluded that social interactions play an important role in tourist experiences. However, many studies have focused on the managerial side of the equation and have not sufficiently addressed the perception towards the social aspect of tourism experiences from the tourist standpoint. The attempt to improve the co-created tourism experience by facilitating the social interactions of tourists is only meaningful after the examination of the tourists' awareness and perception of the

influence other social agents exert on the tourism experience.

Such examination is especially necessary when looking at the tourism experiences of Chinese outbound tourists, as our literature review suggests that this issue has been primarily researched in western destinations and has focused mainly on western tourists. In spite of the fact that East Asia has become a dominant force in global tourism as both destination and source markets, there is a notable lack of studies in East-Asian destinations and involving East-Asian tourists. More specifically, while Chinese tourists constitute an important and ever-growing source market for outbound tourists in global tourism (Li et al. 2013; WTO 2018), academic study of Chinese tourists is still relatively rare. This study makes an exploratory start in addressing plural gaps in the literature by focusing on the role of social interaction in the tourist experience as perceived by Chinese tourists in Japan, currently the second-largest East-Asian destination in global tourism. For Japan, inbound tourism has become one of the main strategic pillars for economic growth at both the national and regional level (Henderson 2016) and mainland China is the largest source market for Japanese inbound tourism (Kennedy and Lotus 2015; Tan 2018).

Methodology

A number of studies have documented the existence of a distinct influence of Chinese culture on various aspects of tourism behavior: willingness to travel and destination image (Tigre Moura, Gnoth and Deans 2014); preferences and expectations (Mok and DeFranco 1999); and behaviors (Kwek and Lee 2010). Therefore, in addressing the research gaps we identified, we cannot simply assume that the research findings of previous studies involving western tourists are applicable to Chinese tourist experiences. We adopt the grounded theory method to allow us to go back to the starting line in generating insights on how social interaction occurs and is perceived by Chinese tourists visiting Japan.

The grounded theory method (hereafter, GTM) requires the researcher to allow the theory to emerge through the iterative process of a researcher's interplay with the data. Originally designed to generate theory that is grounded in empirical data (Glaser and Strauss 1967), Strauss and Corbin's approach (1990) acknowledges that theory building is not the goal of every research project and develops the GTM into a method that can be embraced by a wider range of qualitative research purposes, including not only building theory but also high-level description (Strauss and Corbin 1998). As our purpose is not to build a theory on Chinese outbound tourists' social interactions, we deem Strauss and Corbin's approach more suitable for this study, especially when compared with Glaser and Strauss's (1967) conventional approach, which emphasizes the generation of formal theories (Sonali and Kevin 2006), or Charmaz's (2000) constructivist approach.

Data collection

The data was collected through in-depth interviews. Interview questions were developed based on a review of the academic literature and were designed to prompt interviewees to reflect on their encounters with other people during travel, including

the 'service provider', 'local resident', and 'other tourist' categories identified by prior studies. Two native interviewers then independently conducted the interviews in Chinese.

Interviews were undertaken in situ, as based on previous research (Campos et al. 2015; Quinlan Cutler and Carmichael 2010; Stamboulis and Skayannis 2003) suggesting that any investigation of tourist interaction should be conducted during the actual tourism experience, where strong emotions, and meaningful memories occur. The locations were chosen to collect a sufficient variety of visitors in terms of age, gender, and travel style (i.e., FIT travelers and group-travelers). We conducted 29 interviews with 42 interviewees during June to July in 2018, of which 19 interviews took place in the Sapporo tourist information center and ten at the Asakusa Shrine grounds in Tokyo.

The sampling method

GTM calls for theoretical sampling, which means that it is concepts that are sampled, instead of drawing samples from specific groups (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Therefore, the sampling should be conducted based on emerging concepts along the data collection by "asking of effective questions" (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 73). In this study, the interviewees recruited were not restricted to those who had experienced interactions with others while travelling in Japan, neither did we restrict the scope of interactions to 'critical incidents. Instead, we focused on exploring the social aspect of Chinese outbound tourists' experience in more general terms. The tourists who reported their social interactions during traveling as mundane or insignificant, and the ones who claimed that social interactions rarely occurred during their trip were also interviewed and their responses were also analyzed.

The interview procedure

In the interviews we not only asked about the participants' experience interacting with other people, but also invited them to talk about their perceived roles of other people in their tourism experience through either direct interactions or even the mere presence of others. It should be noted that in this study, we did not only ask about the interviewees' personal experiences of interactions with others during the current visit to Japan. Instead, we encouraged interviewees to freely talk about any social interactions from their own experiences in addition to vicarious experiences on the social aspects of tourism they had heard other people talk about, as long as they regarded these experiences as salient, relevant, or memorable. Apart from the key construct of 'social interaction' we followed the principle of not employing preconceived ideas or assumptions to lead the data collection (Shah and Corley 2006). During the interviews, the interviewers explained the key concept of 'social interaction' as involving communication, contact, or encounters with other people.

Twenty-eight of the interviews were digitally recorded with the consent of the interviewees. The responses of the one interview without recording were recorded with handwritten notes right after the interview and then organized into digital text. We then transcribed all the interview recordings into verbatim text omitting paralanguage. This

approach is termed as "denaturalized transcription" by Oliver and colleagues (2005), and is regarded as specifically fit for the grounded theory methodology (Oliver et al. 2005; Davidson 2009; Charmaz 2000). Reduction of the oral feature in the written text facilitates familiarization to the data by other researchers (Davidson 2009). A second native judge then randomly checked 20 percent of the transcripts to confirm their accuracy.

Data analysis

The lead author then conducted the data analysis by means of data coding. A second native coder verified the validity of the coding by comparing it to the original Chinese text. Before the formal coding, the transcripts were first read repeatedly to gain a thorough understanding of the data (Miles and Huberman 1994). Data analysis was conducted with a combination of the manual coding technique and software-aided coding.

The manual coding technique was first adopted with Strauss and Corbin's (1990) approach of coding, which includes open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The three procedures of coding were employed as different way of interacting with the data simultaneously, along with constant comparison of phenomenon and concepts (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

In the open coding process, the transcriptions were analyzed line-by-line to identify substantive categories and generate initial conceptual categories (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The coder tried to grasp the meaning of the interviewee response and to attach annotations or 'concept' to each section of the data that have substantive meanings. Combined with axial coding and selective coding, the annotations in the open coding process were formulized in the final coding framework as codes, or were abandoned as being less suitable (Flick 2018). In axial coding, the coder tried to differentiate the categories generated from open coding and to interpret the relationships among them. Connection between subcategories and categories were made in this process, and the relationships were repeatedly verified against the data by constant comparison (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Based on the work above, in selective coding, the most significant categories were determined, which enabled the coding work to focus on the potential core concepts. Figure 1 illustrates the working process of coding
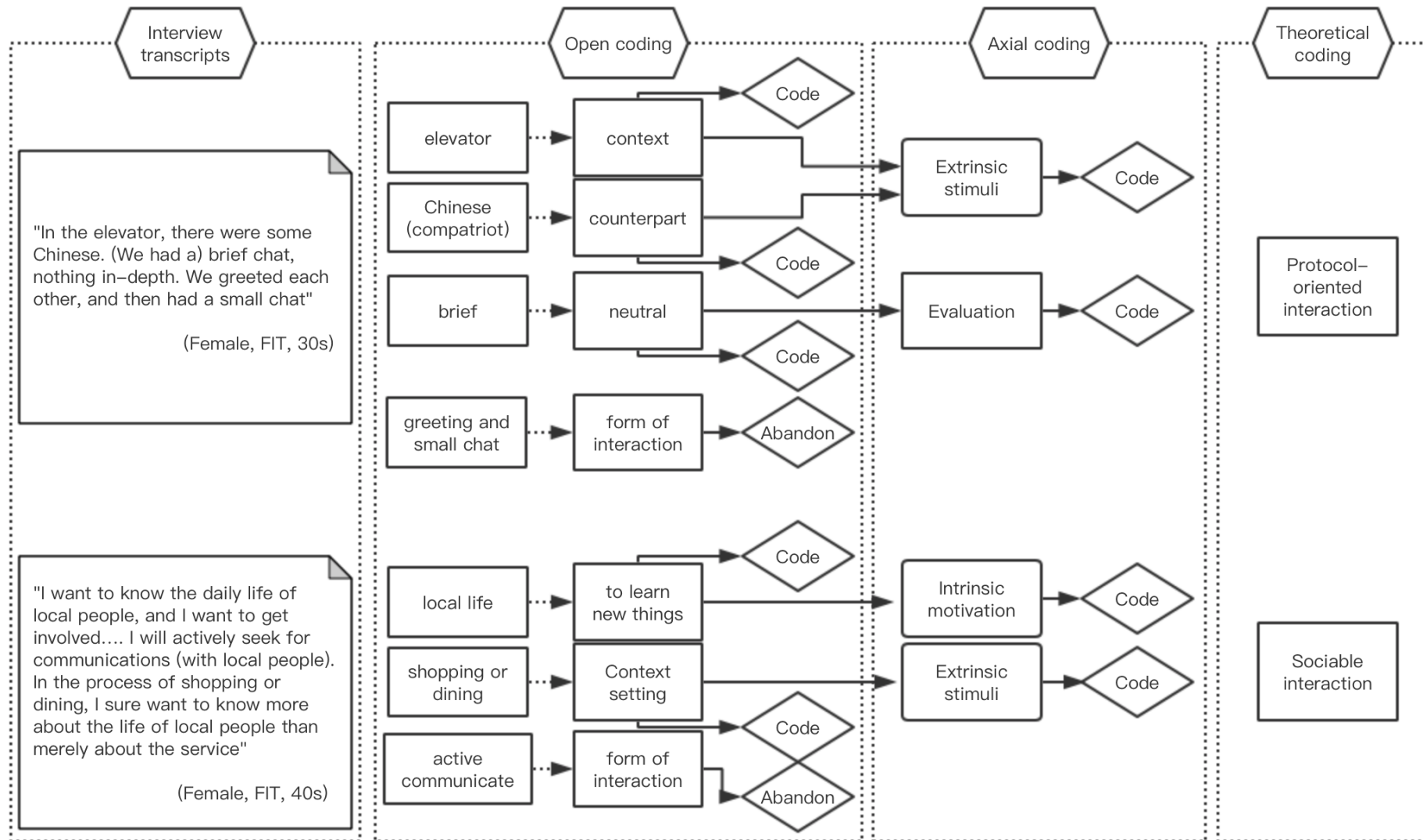
Figure 1. Example of the working process of coding

The back-and-forth coding process resulted in a mature coding framework, and the data were then transferred into the NVivo 12 software package. Using this software, the final coding framework was utilized and transcripts were re-coded accordingly. The repeated coding work contributes to further validation of the research findings.

Memo-taking

Memo-taking is an integral component to GTM research (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). During the whole process of data collection and analysis, the coder continued to take memos regarding (1) queries and ideas about the research process and data being collected, (2) the progress and directions of the research, and (3) reflections on the research techniques and procedures. The continuous memo-taking supports the researchers to reconstruct the details of the study and to keep the study grounded (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

Main findings

Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed several constructs. The main contribution of this research is the categorizing and conceptualizing of direct social interactions reported by the interviewees. Direct social interactions are the interactions that occur when social actors acknowledge each other by communicating verbally or non-verbally with each other. This study reveals three major groups of social actors who may influence the tourist experience: tourists from the same or other countries as the interviewees; service providers; and local residents.

We have labeled three types of direct social interactions discovered in this study as follows: 'protocol-oriented,' 'help-related,' and 'sociable' types of direct interaction. Protocol-oriented interaction is the most frequently reported type of interaction in this study; it is mechanistic in nature and occurs when a tourist feels obliged to be polite by initiating or responding to the other individual's courtesy because they must share time or space with one another. Tourist encounters with service providers when purchasing or receiving a product or service also falls into this category. The second most frequently reported type of interaction is related to the tourists' need to get help from other people (including other tourists, local residents and service providers), or the tourists' response to help requests from other people (mainly other tourists). Sociable interaction occurs out of the interactants' intrinsic motivation to socialize. It is worth noting that -compared to protocol-oriented and help-related interaction- sociable interaction was less frequently mentioned by our Chinese interviewees.

The categorization of the three types of tourists' social interactions is mainly based on the factors influencing the occurrence of the interactions, and we have labeled these factors as 'extrinsic stimuli' and 'intrinsic motivation'. Extrinsic stimuli are the external factors that are beyond the control of the tourist, whereas the intrinsic motivation is the tourist's desire to initiate or to respond to social interaction. Figure 2 illustrates the relationships among the three types of interactions and the factors influencing their occurrence.
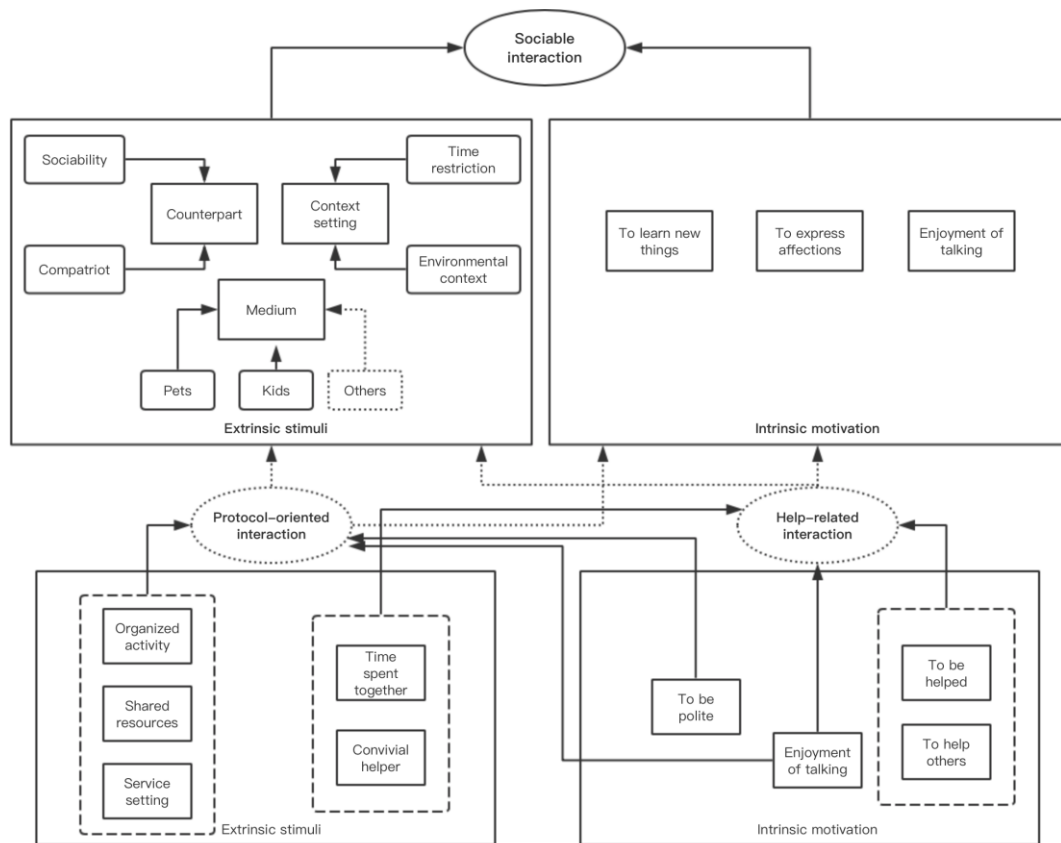
Figure 2. Relationship among protocol-oriented interaction, help-related interaction and sociable interaction

Protocol-oriented interaction

For the protocol-oriented interaction, the extrinsic stimuli play a leading role in their occurrence, and they at the same time stimulate the interviewees' intrinsic motivation (to be polite). The extrinsic stimuli of protocol-oriented interaction scenarios include the following three scenarios.

Organized activity: the interactants have to spend time together when taking part in an organized activity such as a package tour in the destination, or queuing.

Shared resources: the interactants are restricted to share space (e.g., railway terminal, dining place, tourism attractions) or share the same view (e.g., both parties of the interaction want to take photos in front of the same view) with each other.

Service setting: tourists' encounter with service providers when processing a purchase or receiving a service.

In some protocol-oriented scenarios where the interactants must spend a relatively longer time together, protocol interaction may occur repeatedly and subsequently encourage the tourists' intrinsic motivation of social interaction. Our data revealed several instances where protocol-oriented interactions developed into sociable interaction.

Help-related interaction

Help-related interaction occurs mainly out of the tourists' intrinsic motivation: to get help, or to respond to the help request of other people (mainly other tourists). In the case of Chinese tourists visiting Japan, an interesting finding is that a number of help-related interactions were initiated by the convivial helper (mainly local residents) who proactively offered to help the tourists.

Our data also discovered five help-related scenarios where tourists interact with other social actors: guiding directions, sharing information, borrowing/lending, providing know-how (e.g., filling out an immigration form, buying tickets, ordering food), and lending a hand (e.g., photographing, babysitting).

Similar to the protocol-oriented interaction, the interviewees also reported incidents where help-related interactions developed into sociable interaction.

Sociable interaction

We labeled the interactions where the interviewees' intrinsic motivation to socialize plays a leading role as sociable interaction.

In sociable interactions, the role of extrinsic stimuli (which we categorize into the sociability of the counterparts, the context setting and the medium) is restricted to facilitating the intrinsic motivation. The analysis of interview responses reveals five categories of interviewees' intrinsic motivation to sociable interaction: to learn new things, to express personal comments, to exchange comments, and to enjoy talking.

Discussion and conclusion

In contrast to previous studies which reported social aspects as an important and appealing component of the tourist experience (Pearce 2005b; White and White 2008; Murphy 2001; Brown 2005), this study reveals some distinctive characteristics of Chinese outbound tourists. First, the Chinese outbound tourists often lack the intrinsic motivation to engage in or initiate direct social interactions with unacquainted others. Nevertheless, our interviewees reported a reasonably high number of cases of social interaction. Our analysis suggests that external factors may play a more decisive role in the occurrence of Chinese tourists' social interactions. Second, our findings suggest that tourists are at times unwillingly involved in the interactions. The largest portion of the interactions reported by the interviewees occurred due to what we have called protocol-oriented considerations, which represent situations when a tourist feels obliged to be polite by initiating interaction or by responding to the courtesy of the other person. Even in the help-related interactions and sociable interactions, the conviviality of the counterparts accounted for the most significant factor facilitating the occurrence of sociable interactions, whereas the interactions initiated by the interviewees were relatively few.

Deeper analysis of the interview responses reveals that the tourists' perceived cultural and language barrier is the major reason for their hesitation towards social interactions with others. This has some implications for Japanese destination marketers regarding

the need to take measures to eliminate tourist concerns about the cultural and language barrier and to establish an environment fostering genuine and positive social interactions.

Limitations and avenues for future research

The major limitation of this study is related to the number and characteristics of the interviewees in our sample, as they only include group tour tourists and FITs travelling with companions. Not including the Chinese (solo) backpacker tourist is an important limitation to this study, as previous research has shown that this is a group for whom social interaction is an essential part of travelling (Murphy 2001). Follow-up studies that focus on the backpacker type tourists are called for. Studies in other destination countries (in terms of different degrees of cultural and language barrier perceived by Chinese tourists), are needed to further validate and expand upon our findings.

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