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Tourists' Online and Face-to-Face Social Contact and Destination Immersion

Tourism is stated to provide a process of transition. Tourists are claimed to enter a liminal space when traveling. Along with the development of the internet, the liminal sense of tourism has been greatly haunted by the advanced communication technology. The current study, adopting a qualitative approach, explored tourists' online and on-site social contact when traveling with different groups. A six-fold tourist typology was established to portrait their behavioural patterns with robust theoretical evidence supported. A contact-liminality nexus was also developed to indicate different tourist types' tendency between their original zone and the liminal zone. Both theoretical contributions and practical implications were discussed.

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Introduction

The Information and communication technology or (ICT) has been completely integrated into our daily lives, and tourism is not an exception (Wang, Xiang, & Fesenmaier, 2016). People are getting closer via the online world and have the need to be connected no matter where and when. As argued by Jansson (2007), information technology has changed tourists' perceptions and behaviours. The encapsulation and decapsulation of tourism as well as the critical degree to which tourists may favour most need to be reconsidered given the unavoidable intervention of the presence of advanced technology. The digital power has combined tourists' network at home with their network at the destination. The hybrid social network presents the modern tourists an ever complex, functional and connected world during their trips and holds the possibility to influence tourists' travel experience in different manners. However, limited studies were conducted to investigate tourists' behaviour and connectiveness with different social groups with both online and on-site manners being taken into consideration. To fulfil this gap, the current study aims to establish a robust tourist typology regarding their online and on-site social contact behaviour during travel and to explore the destination immersive level of different tourist types.

Tourism liminality and destination immersion

In tourism anthropology, tourism is stated to provide a process of transition. It has been argued that tourists enter a liminal space when traveling. Liminality is described as the apartness feature of the central period of a ritual (Turner, 1977). Gennep (1960) first proposed that life is made up of a series of transitions, which include pre-liminal rites of separation, liminal rites of transition, and post-liminal rites of incorporation. Turner (1967) discussed the nature of liminality during initiation rites, emphasising that individuals are in the state of ambiguity and are holding the equality among those who participate in the rite of passage together (Huang, Xiao & Wang, 2018).

Along with the development of the internet, the liminal sense of tourism has been greatly haunted by advanced communication technology in our life. The emergence of new media is challenged to either for intensifying the touristic experience of a place or for blurring the touristic qualities of the texture (Jansson, 2007). Jansson (2007) proposed the dialectic of encapsulation/decapsulation as a means for approaching tourism as a space-communication nexus. In the nexus, he argued that "the digital and mobile media might provide resources for the intensification of touristic experience-a fulfillment of the encapsulation process. However, the mediatization can also break this bubble by abolishing the boundaries between tourism and everyday life, leading to decapsulation" (Jansson, 2007, p.19). The proposed nexus also identified three realms, namely scripting, navigation, and representation, within which new media can both sustain and threaten the process of encapsulation.

To recognise a tourist's immersion status in a destination, an initial question that urged to be answered is how to identify a tourist's immersion status in the time-space liminality. Extensive studies have been found to investigate this phenomenon. As claimed by Lash and Urry (1994), immersive attitude means "a curiosity about places, people, cultures, and their historical and anthropological roots"; "an openness towards and appreciation of cultural differences" and "an aspiration to understand the relative place of one's own society and culture in a broader global framework" (quoted in Jansson, 2007, p. 16). Immersive tourists hold a desire to understand the social and cultural realities beyond the ordinary tourist destinations, connect to the local social network, and try not to reveal the identity of being a tourist (MacCannell, 1976; Maoz, 2006; Jansson, 2007).

To develop a systematic and convincing typology regarding tourist online and on-site social contact behaviour, a robust theoretical base is required. As thus, the current tourist typology is empirically and theoretically supported by two layers of attributes. The first layer represents the empirical level of attributes, entitled behavioural pattern, including the online

and on-site social contacts with different parties. The second layer composes of four theoretical bases which are from the social and psychological contexts, covering travel motivation (Crompton, 1979; Iso-Ahola, 1982; Ryan, 1998; Pearce & Lee, 2005), authenticity (Wang, 1999), tourist destination role (Cohen, 1972) and tourist experience mode (Cohen, 1979).

Methodology

The current study followed an interpretivism paradigm, which seeks to explore reality by interpreting the truth from individuals (Veal, 2017). Given the absence of substantial literature on tourist online social contact, a qualitative research approach was adopted to examine the rich content of tourists' online social contacts during their travel. Semi-structured in-depth interview was applied. Regarding the sampling method, purposive sampling was firstly used to determine eligible respondents according to the expertise and professional judgment of researchers. In the current study, qualified informants should be the tourists who travelled overseas during the last two years and used online platforms to contact with the others during their trips. Second, by following snowball sampling, respondents were asked to invite people to their social connection who were qualified for this research. The interviewers will stop inviting new informants when information saturation is reached.

The interview protocol includes three parts, covering travel experience, online and on-site contacts with different people and finally their demographic information. Chinese tourists are the target for the current study, not only because China is the largest outbound tourist market (UNWTO, 2017), but also due to the salient usage coverage of internet, e-commerce, and the social media (China Internet Network Information Center, 2017). As a result, 47 interviews were conducted. Each session was between 26 and 88 minutes. The software of NVivo 11 was applied to technically code the transcripts.

Data analysis, results and discussion

Demographics

Table 1 shows that, among the 47 informants, 34 are female and 13 are male. Moreover, 40% of informants are between 25 and 29 years old, followed by 30–39 years old. Interviewees are generally well educated because 44 out of 47 hold university degrees or above. A total of 15 participants are employed as managers and administrators, and 12 are professionals.

Furthermore, 51% of informants are single. This demographic pattern shows great consistency with the profile of the general Chinese outbound tourists released by the China Tourism Academy (2018), which highlights that young generations born in the 1980s and 1970s with high educational level are dominating the outbound tourist market. Meanwhile, female travellers occupy 60% of the market.

Tourist Typology

Inactive Online Sharer. Inactive Online Sharer is not active in sharing, co-creating and interacting with the others in the online world. This behavioural characteristic has extended from their daily life to their travel. Their travel motivations are mainly self-improvement, understanding the otherness, and experiencing local culture. In their travel, they have minimum contact with their home social group, and the mostly mentioned contact is to inform their families and friends that they arrive at the destination safely. Some even do not tell their families about their travel plan in advance. Compared with their original social group, they tend to have an intense interaction with the people they meet in the destination. Their contact groups cover travel companions, other tourists, service personnel and the residents.

Digital Detox. The intensified and overwhelmed usage of internet every day might exhaust our attention and energy both mentally and physically. To fully recover in the holiday and to immerse themselves in the liminal time and space, some tourists choose to switch off

their smartphone and disconnect with their original world. They believe that this is the only way to get recovered and to entirely enjoy their holiday. We call this group of tourists Digital Detox. Unlike the Inactive Online Sharer who is inactive in online activities no matter during travel or their everyday life, Digital Detox uses the internet to communicate with the others greatly back in their home. However, they consciously and proactively control their exposure in their home environment during the travel to encapsulate themselves within the liminality.

Diversionary Traveller. Diversionary Traveller has a low commitment with either the home or the destination. This type of tourists maintains a low level of communication with their original social network, but compared with the first two types, their contact via online platforms is significantly more. Diversionary Travellers may check their message inbox, emails or any other online communication platforms to respond to any necessary inquiry and to maintain a basic level of online existence. Many informants reflect that they do so in their trips when they have the fragments of time in their travel, for instance, during a break, a gap between two attractions, rest in their room, or most importantly, have the free access to the internet.

Daily Life Controller. Daily Life Controller seeks to relax and recover and meanwhile keeps in frequent contact with their original social group during the travel. They would like to actively participate in their daily life even though during the holiday. For these tourists, with no doubt, the development of the internet helps them to maintain their desired presence in their original life. One important reason for this group of tourists to maintain a high level of interaction online is the responsibility. Some of them contact with their family members constantly to ensure that everything is alright back home during their trips. The attention that Daily Life Controller paid to the travel is much less than Inactive Online Sharer and Digital Detox. The constant communication with their family issues, colleagues and clients blurs the boundaries between home and destination and dedifferentiate everyday life and holiday.

Social Media Hyper. As an extreme group in this typology, Social Media Hyper maintains a high level of social media presence when traveling. Traveling to them serves as an opportunity to share the instant feeling and traveling experience, achieve a self-fulfilment, and even to show off among their original social group. There travel happiness mainly comes from sharing and co-creation. They send pictures to their families and friends, post plenty of pictures on their personal pages supplemented with their feelings at that moment, and even do the live broadcasting wherever they go. Collecting likes, getting feedback from the networks, and interacting with their social groups create a lot of fun to their journey. Traveling per se is happy but sharing this kind of happiness with more people is even better.

Dual Zone Traveller. This is the last type of tourists to be introduced in this typology as it carries the characteristics generated from a high level of social contact both online and on-site. This group of tourists is ambitious enough to manage both the original world and the liminal world. They tend to maximise their energy level in the trip and maintain active in both zones. They get a balance of both online and face-to-face social contact in their travel and can transit in between their original world and the travel liminality free with little hassle. This is the most comfortable way of travel for Dual Zone Traveller, enjoying the happiness of travel and staying on top of their home environment.
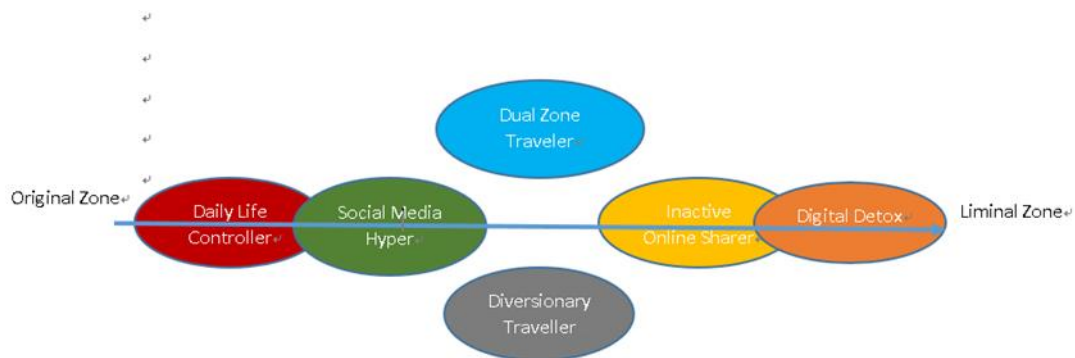
Contact-liminality nexus

As one of the research objectives for the current study, tourists' destination immersion status is also evaluated. According to the social, psychological and behavioural characteristics of different tourist types, a contact-liminality nexus (Figure 1) has been drawn to describe their destination immersion status.

In this nexus, Daily Life Controller is the one most attached to their original zone due to different kinds of responsibilities back in their homes. Though Social Media Hyper shares a

similar online and on-site contact pattern with Daily Life Controller, their destination immersive level is greater than the Daily Life Controller. Though they spend quite a great portion of their travel time online, the things they share may reinforce their travel experience (Jansson, 2007). On the other end, Inactive Online Sharers, due to their inactive presence in the online world, they are entirely encapsulated in the destination liminal zone and contact with different groups of people frequently and intensively. Digital Detox shares similar contact behaviour in the destination, which is minimizing the online presence and maximizing the on-site contact in a destination. The only difference is that they do this consciously to get detoxed from their overwhelmed online connectiveness in the real world. Their internal desire to get fully immersed into a destination is the strongest among all types of tourists. Hence they are the closest one to the liminal zone when travelling.

It is notable that Diversionary Traveller and Dual Zone Traveller are in the middle position of the nexus. Diversionary Traveller is argued to have a much less online social presence during their travel than the Daily Life Controller. However, it does not mean that they actively contact face to face with the others in the destination. Their low commitment to both original zone and liminal zone restricts their interactions with the others via either of the two manners. Dual Zone Traveller tends to have a high social presence in both online and on-site environment. We can understand this group of tourists as trying to maximise their experiential value co-created with different parties during their travel, no matter from an original network or in the destination. This is the newly emerged tourist type with the development and wide usage of the internet, and the size of this group is ever growing rapidly. However, as can be imagined, due to their shared amount of attention on the destination, their liminality immersive level cannot exceed those of Digital Detox and Inactive Online Sharer.

Figure 1. Contact-Liminality Nexus

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