ABSTRACT

The primary objective of this study is to identify and understand, from a cultural perspective, the departure of Chinese consumptive values from their U.S. counterparts on a vacation experience. Through analysis of travelogues by tourists from China and the U.S., three salient themes were identified. They are Scenery, Food and Mood. Although all three were emphasized by both Chinese and American tourists, a closer look revealed that they’re being valued quite differently. What is important to the overall satisfaction of an experience in fact differ for the two groups. These exhibited divergences are found to be underpinned by different cultural dispositions, which are pivotal in shaping and influencing distinctive values. The results allow meaningful understanding of the uniqueness of Chinese consumption values, which are buttressed by its complex cultural system.

KEYWORDS: culture, consumption values, tourism experience, Chinese tourists, American tourists

INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, the theory of consumption values has drawn scholarly interest in the field of consumer choice behavior. The theory can be used to predict, describe and explain consumer behavior (Sheth, Newman, & Gross, 1991b), such as to purchase or not purchase a product, why purchase one particular product type, and why choose one particular brand. Thereby, it has been well tested and evidenced in multiple product and service domains including airlines’ frequent flyer programs (Long & Schiffman, 2000), sponsorship awareness (Pope, 1998), apparel (Tse, Wong, & Tan, 1988; Kim, Forsythe, Gu, & Moon, 2002), and organic food (Finch, 2005).

When proposing the theory of consumption values, Sheth et al. (1991a) acknowledged that culture significantly affects consumption values. While attempts have been made to explore the cross-cultural differences in the context of retailing (Xiao & Kim, 2009; Sin & Yau, 2001; Tse et al., 1988; Gnepta & Petrosky, 2001), empirical evidence in the tourism context has been sparse. Vacation, as a tourism product, is an experience good. The intangible nature of a vacation experience dictates that the appreciation of a destination is likely to be subject to subjective interpretations. This subjectivity in turn can be influenced by an individual’s cultural background. For instance, in two comparable island settings, U.S. tourists are fond of the exotic scenery whereas Chinese tourists feel that 景美那是没得说, 人文方面有待提高 (Jing Mei Na Shi Mei De Shuo, Ren Wen Fang Mian You Dai Ti Gao) [“The island’s natural beauty is impeccable;
however, it needs improvement in the sense of humanism”). Due to the heterogeneity in tourists’ cultural and physical environments, evaluative responses are yielded from quite different perspectives in this regard.

Chinese tourists have unique consumption values that are deeply rooted in and driven by its culture. The consumption values framework well tested in the West might not be applicable to this cultural setting. Nevertheless, no study has been found, in particular, to investigate the consumption value distinctness in vacation experiences of Chinese tourists. China has experienced phenomenal growth in outbound tourism. World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2010) has forecasted that by 2020 China will produce 100 million outbound tourists, ranking fourth with respect to market size. Understanding what constitutes a valuable experience for the Chinese tourists, therefore, is paramount to destinations vying for this lucrative market.

Against this backdrop, this research intends to dissect Chinese tourists’ valuation of a vacation experience. This assessment is conducted by contrasting Chinese tourists with US tourists. The similarities and differences in consumption values are uncovered through analysis of textual data of customer reviews of their experiences in two comparable destinations. Our research intends to identify and understand the underlying cultural influences of such phenomenon.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumption values

Consumption values are defined as perceived utilities delivered by a choice alternative (Tse et al., 1988) and serve as justification and stimuli for actual purchase of products and services (Xiao & Kim, 2009). Research into a variety of disciplines including economics, sociology, anthropology, psychology, marketing and consumer behavior by Sheth, Newman and Gross (1991a) identified five different types of consumption values that determine consumer choices and eventual satisfaction. These values are functional value, social value, emotional value, epistemic value, and conditional value. Functional value refers to a product’s functional and practical attributes. Social value is the value associated with certain status or perception that helps the consumer fit into a social group. Emotional value compels the consumer to make a purchase when certain emotion or feelings are evoked by an alternative. Epistemic value drives market choices by motivating the pursuit of novelty, new knowledge and new experience. Conditional value relates to the situational capacity that certain products satisfy, such as seasonal or special occasion related.

Not only do consumption values reflect and predict consumers’ purchasing behavior, but they cast influence on the post-purchase satisfaction. It’s acknowledged (Xiao & Kim, 2009) and empirically proven (Hu, H., Kandampully, J., & Juwaheer, T., 2009) that consumers’ value systems greatly affect their satisfaction and sense of happiness. The authors indicated that consumption values, as important consumer attributes, contribute largely to the post-purchase evaluation of an experience. If the perceived values are fulfilled, gratification will follow as a result.
The intricacy of Chinese culture

Culture, defined as “socially acquired behavior patterns common to the members of a society”, is a determinant in shaping consumer choice behavior (Sheth et al., 1991a). Comprised of knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and other acquired abilities (Loudon & Bitta, 1988), culture is entrenched and serves as a main driver of consumption values. Under different culture umbrellas, consumption values may differ on saliency. As a product of subjective interpretation, value is culturally molded, fostered and driven. Certain value that is interpreted as prominent in one culture may not be as pronounced in another. Thus, to decode the departure in consumption values, it is important to understand foremost the cultural roots that consumption values are built upon.

Previous studies that explored the relationship between culture and consumption values are based on individualism and collectivism framework (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995). Investigation into Chinese consumption values and satisfaction (Kim et al., 2002; Xiao & Kim, 2009) stressed that individualism and collectivism are important predictors of consumption values for Chinese consumers. However, the borrowed framework, although predominant in assessing culture differences, stemmed from the western perception of China and the Chinese and may not accurately capture the panorama of Chinese culture. Emphasizing the division of individualism and collectivism that label, respectively, Occident and Orient, the existing framework seems to oversimplify the intricate nature of Chinese cultural system. Individualism and collectivism, though touched upon one aspect of the culture, could be solely one of many facets the Chinese culture displays.

Dating back to history, Chinese culture has been a fusing sea of cross-flowing ideas and beliefs. Many philosophical thinking emerged since Zhou dynasty (1045-256 BC) and have shed profound influences on social and political changes in China. Two dominating ideologies, Confucianism and Taoism, are inherently contradictory to each other but meanwhile reach certain level of harmony in enlightening the masses. Pan (1990) proposed a dual structure for Chinese culture in which “humanism and monarchy, rationalism and ritualism, individualism and collectivism restrained and interpenetrated each other to form a special stability”. The author found that many values that appear to be conflicting as “fire and water” to the West, such as humanism and autocracy, can go hand in hand and even depend upon each other in Chinese culture. Lin and Wang (2010) further claimed that Chinese culture is heterogeneous in nature, with contradictory and conflicting values often coexisting. To illustrate, the authors noted that the values of thriftiness and extravagance, self-constraint and self-expression, asceticism and political engagement are shared by both elite and grass-roots.

It should be noted that, by assuming the many facets of the conglomerate does not suggest that the culture is chaotic and turbulent and that the Chinese have no set values to follow. Seemingly conflicting ideas interact with each other to stay static in Chinese mind; as Lin and Wang (2010) observed, moral consciousness always play a critical role in balancing the values and many values relate to each other in such a way that resemble a means and an end. So when there is pressure from outside environment that impedes value realization, the value would thereby be understated and suppressed.
METHODOLOGY

The current study utilized the grounded theory developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) to identify the different consumption values perceived by Chinese and U.S. tourists in travelogues. Grounded theory is believed to be effective in analyzing textual data as the approach allows for insightful interpretation and enhanced understanding to the phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990); it has been used extensively in the field of tourism studies (Daengbuppha, Hemmington and Wilkes, 2006; Hsu, Cai and Wong, 2006; Kim and Jamal, 2007; Papathanassis and Knolle, 2010).

The grounded theory approach was adopted for this study out of three major considerations. First and foremost, our research topic is more appropriate to be addressed by grounded theory than other more structured approaches as the richness and profundity of textual and contextual information provided by travelogues can be better captured. A second consideration is that while the consumptive theory provides an excellent guiding reference, we intend to use a more grass roots approach to allow salient themes in the raw data to emerge. Last but not least, grounded theory is appropriate for a study that aims to explore consumer-based theories and constructs (Hirschman and Thompson, 1997; Flint and Woodruff, 2001; Daengbuppha, Hemmington and Wilkes, 2006), and in particular, to conduct comparative analysis of data which bear, albeit discreetly, distinctiveness in perception of certain value (Locke, 2001).

Data collection

Our data was gathered from customer review websites such as elong.com, ctrip.com tripadvisor.com as well as many travel blogs maintained by individual tourists. This approach avoids the potential deficiency of “inconsistency and misinterpretation” that may be caused by personal interviews pertaining to exploring perceptions (Papathanassis and Knolle, 2010) and allows rich and non-manipulated data to yield freely.

The data collection phase was carried out in a two-month period from September 2010 to November 2010. Two destinations, Hainan (China) and Puerto Rico (U.S.), are chosen for the analysis as they are comparable in many aspects. Geographically, they are both islands and have tropical climate. Additionally, both have been popular vacation destinations within their countries. One hundred travelogues created by tourists from each country were collected and reviewed for the analysis. Our data became saturated thereafter as further data collection became repetitious and failed to contribute new information to the recurring themes. For studies that adopt qualitative approach, it’s claimed (Papathanassis and Knolle, 2010) that saturation is comparable to representativeness in quantitative research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Line-by-line analysis of travelogues was done following an open-coding process.
Guided by the research aim, our criteria were to capture salient and recurring topics that are related to how an island experience is being valued and related to the overall satisfaction. For each travelogue, outstanding keywords or phrases were noted and recorded, such as “pristine as paradise”, “best punch” and “fine food is the highlight of the trip”. Keywords or phrases that fit into similar context were grouped into sub-themes, for instance, “pristine” and “untamed wilderness” under “scene”. Six sub-themes were further categorized into main themes. To illustrate with an example, “scene” mentioned by U.S. tourists and “spots” by Chinese were integrated into broader theme “scenery”. In compliance with the same principle, three major themes emerged as a result (Figure 1).

The three salient themes that emerged in the data were Scenery, Food, and Mood. Under each theme, data were further examined contextually with regard to their unique value representations in two cultures. Figure 1 illustrates these themes and divergent points noted by U.S. and Chinese tourists.

**Scenery**

Scenery is a prominent theme that was noted by both Chinese and U.S. tourists. Both groups value scenery in a vacation experience. This is not surprising given previous literature has repeatedly attested to the importance of scenery in drawing tourists. While the emphasis on the functional and practical features of a destination experience is palpable and consistent between the two cultures, how and why the scenery pleases them appears to differ. U.S. tourists are
pleased by the pristine beauty of a scene. Chinese tourists, on the contrary, expect man-made spots on site of a scene. Take mountain scenery for example, the US tourists appreciate geological features in its purest form, the less human touches, the better. Chinese tourists, however, would not derive the same level of satisfaction if there is no human story associated with it, although the human touches can be either tangible such as a temple in the mountain or intangible such as a legendary figure associated with the mountain.

This divergence needs to be examined through the lens of culture. It’s noted that Westerners embrace the idea of nature, untainted and unfettered by civilization (Mertens, 2008). In American mind, as Cronon (1995) indicated, wilderness speaks for “the last remaining place where civilization, that all too human disease, has not fully infected the earth” and is often compared to Eden. Pure and authentic, wild areas are seen as an escape from the perpetual urban chaos brought by industrialization. In fact, the idea of wilderness has been promoted by resorts as a selling point in their marketing scheme, illustrated by “the incomparable Mameyes River, the only river in Puerto Rico untouched by the hands of men”(Rio Mar Beach Resort, 2010) and “Niihau island, visit this pristine island, untouched by development and crowds”(Niihau Helicopters Inc., 2010).

For the Chinese, the divergent interpretation has dual implications. Firstly, the Chinese see the human and historical touch as an integral part of the landscape. Chinese tourists look for a combination of scenery and history. In fact, a Chinese idiom equates attractions with 名胜古迹 (Ming Sheng Gu Ji [“Scenic spots and historical relics”]). In Hainan, the Chinese tourists demonstrate a great liking for attractions associated with stories of renowned people in history, such as the attraction 天涯海角 (Tian Ya Hai Jiao [“The furthermost point of the world”]) which witnessed the political exile of the great poet Su Shi. This phenomenon is evidenced by a Chinese proverb 山不在高，有仙则名 (Shan Bu Zai Gao, You Xian Ze Ming [“The mountain does not have to be magnificent as long as there’s a story behind it”]). Emphasizing the “点” (Dian [“Spot”]) aspect, the story behind the mountain is considered the focal point of the experience and may be the only memory trace that can be recalled after the trip concludes.

Secondly, in the Chinese travelogues, 景点 (Jing Dian [“Scenic spot”]) is a recurring topic. Chinese tourists emphasize the “点” (Dian [“Spot”]) aspect while the U.S. tourists focus on the “景” (Jing [“Scene”]) aspect. To the Chinese, the scene is bound to be a well developed and controlled spot in order to be appreciated by tourists. Therefore, the vacation experience has to include visits paid to a list of established and administrated entities even if it is a nature-oriented attraction.

Food

Food is another salient and recurring theme noticed on both sides. To U.S. tourists, the variety of tropical drinks in Puerto Rico is a “must-have” joyful element to add to the exotic island feel. Yet, the exquisiteness of food is not so much in the pursuit. They are satisfied with the local, simple, and organic food from roadside family restaurants. Their Chinese counterparts tend to demand more sophistication in this regard. The Chinese tourists appear to place higher importance on finely prepared delicacies. For them, the value of a vacation experience is
associated with their experience with food. If the food part does not perform well, the whole experience can be spoiled.

This difference can be understood by delving into the cultural milieu. Drinking holds an established and persisted position in American culture (Room, 1983) and it is associated with relaxing and mellowing vacation experience. Researchers (Del Boca, F., Darkes, J., Greenbaum, P., & Goldman, M., 2004) have found that among U.S. College students, the heaviest consumption of alcohol take place during holiday times when there’s no urgent demand for work, such as spring break vacation on an island.

Turning to the China side, the Chinese quest for fine food is in conformity with their culture, by which the delicacy of food is highly valued. As Confucius advocated, 食不厌精, 脍不厌细 (Shi Bu Yan Jing, Kuai Bu Yan Xi [“Grain is never milled fine enough, meat is never sliced thin enough”]). Lin and Wang (2010) pointed out that the Chinese, even grass-roots group, have an innate desire for a hedonistic and extravagant lifestyle. Besides hedonism and extravagance, the China society has an aspiration for social status as a result of 5000 years of immersion in feudal system. Yet, owing to scarcity, most people’s individual dreams and desires had to give way to more basic needs. The rapid growth in economy today has made the finest food, once only available to the dominating class, an attainable goal for a vast population. Therefore, the Chinese are eager to get a taste of the status and prestige once assumed by the hierarchy, as frequently mentioned by Chinese tourists, 符合身份 (Fu He Shen Fen [“Fit into my social status”]). In this regard, food is being valued beyond functionality value. Chinese tourists seem to attach values to food far beyond the practicality aspect. They appear to somewhat associate food with social values.

Mood

Both U.S. and Chinese tourists reported that they feel relaxed and refreshed in the island setting. However, travel literature from the U.S. side speaks more of the pure pleasure from a casual, laid-back, island-themed atmosphere while the Chinese stress the feeling of 心胸开阔 (Xin Xiong Kai Kuo [“Open-mindedness”]) and 豁然开朗 (Huo Ran Kai Lang [“Instant enlightenment”]).

The divergence in is embedded in culture. One the one hand, for Americans, most of daily ritual is centered at work (Hummon, 1988), which is seen in complete contrast to leisure (Douglas). Gottlieb (1982) claimed that U.S. tourists consider vacation as “time off” in denial of the normal and rational perception of time. Therefore, on vacations they expect to obtain total relaxation by indulging and “doing nothing in style” (Gottlieb, 1982). Chinese cultural geography, on the other hand, dictates the unique Chinese experience. As an agrarian society, the majority of China’s population has tied with their land. Population density in China is many times higher than the U.S. given China's arable land is mostly concentrated in the east part of the country. Owing to the constraint of physical environment, the Chinese long for the unusual openness of an ocean view. This feeling is particularly strong among tourists who came from inland regions of China. While both groups appreciate the emotional value brought upon by a vacation experience, the Chinese appear to bring it up a notch from joy to enlightenment.
CONCLUSION

This study sought to identify and interpret the cultured divergence between U.S. and Chinese tourists in consumption of an island experience. Through analysis of travelogues by tourists from both countries, the authors identified three major themes, Scenery, Food and Mood. Although the major themes were emphasized by both U.S. and Chinese tourists, a closer examination showed that they are being valued from quite different angles. In comparison, what is important to the overall satisfaction of the experience deviate for the two groups. As evidenced by the finding that the Chinese minds are saturated with culture and history whereas the U.S. counterparts suggest a pure appreciation from the nature’s standpoint. These divergences appear to be attributable to different cultural dispositions. Chinese culture is rather complex and paradoxical than homogeneous. The reading between lines in travelogues led to the suggestion that a destination experience is should be interpreted upon the understanding of culture.

The current study will make important theoretical contribution to the literature of consumption value in terms of understanding how Chinese consumption values have been shaped and influenced by cultural factors. Solidly established in the culture, the Chinese consumption values bear uniqueness in many aspects and demand further scrutiny. It is evidenced that the approach to understanding Chinese tourists’ valuation of a vacation experience should stem from a close examination of culture and history rather than simply base on existing Western frameworks that lack the sensitivity to explain the intricacy of Chinese culture.

REFERENCES


