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## Preliminary Analysis of Customized Tourism Experiences: Chinese Tourists in Europe

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	<b>Comments</b>	<b>My improvement</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The description of traveler experience needs to be significantly improved.</li><li>• Research questions need to be more specific and better defined here.</li></ul>	I rewrote totally this section.
<b>Literature review</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Most of the literature review is irrelevant to this research.</li><li>• The authors need to review relevant literature that describes how experience is defined and measured, and explains what affects traveler experiences in this situation</li></ul>	I rewrote this section too, briefly discussing the conceptualization and measurement literature.

# **Preliminary Analysis of Customized Tourism Experiences: Chinese Tourists in Europe**

## **Introduction**

Experience can be regarded as one of the core constructs in the field of tourism and leisure (Jeroen and Wim, 2021). It is also one of the most complex because of explorations from various disciplines, including psychology, sociology, phenomenology, marketing and management. Tourist experience has been classified temporally into anticipated, lived and remembered experiences (Scott and Le, 2017). However, not all tourist experiences become memorable tourist experiences. Memorable experiences are important because only those experiences remembered and recalled can influence tourist future decisions (Zhang et al., 2018). Emotions have found to play an important role in tourism encounters, especially in forming memorable experiences (Tung and Ritchie, 2011). Although tourist experience has been a well-established area, it remains unclear that how customized travel products affect tourist experience.

According to Craig Wight (2021), one characteristic of tourism consumption is the increasing preference for alternatives to mass tourism. The provision of customized tourism activities is growing in popularity, so are individually tailored tourism experiences. Europe is the most visited destination by Chinese tourists, second only to Asian destinations. Despite that, little is known about Chinese tourists in Europe (Jan and Wang, 2016). One striking trend that emerged before Covid-19, is that the number of Chinese tourists who selected customized tours increased by 315%, representing 8% of total trips to Europe (Ctrip 2019). However, tourism research has not kept abreast of this important niche segment, let alone reveal their travelling experiences.

Considering the paucity of literature about Chinese tourists in European destinations and about customized tourist experiences, the purpose of this research is to reveal the evaluation of customized travel experiences of Chinese tourists in Europe. In this study, 'customized tour' refers to prospective tourists who get help from a travel consultant in designing and customizing their itinerary to their interests and in the end buy part of the package from the agency, such as guiding, transport, or accommodation.

## **Literature Review**

Experience has been a part of studies spanning many fields, thereby giving rise to a variety of definitions (Walls et al., 2011; Volo, 2009; Adhikari and Bhattacharya, 2016). From psychology perspective, the concept is defined as peak experiences short in duration and contrasting with Nadir experiences; through economic and marketing lens, an experience is the total outcome to the customer from the combination of environment, goods and services purchased, and successful experiences are those that the customer finds unique, memorable and sustainable over time. Likewise, the tourist experience has also been defined heterogeneously given its complex nature. Based on psychology, Larsen (2007:15) maintains that a tourist experience is a past personal travel-related event strong enough to have entered long-term memory; Volo (2009:119), from tourist perspective, conceptualizes tourist experiences as all the events that occur between sensation and perception as well as memory. Uriely (2005) identifies four noteworthy conceptual developments in the study of the tourist experience. However, as concluded by Chhetri et al. (2004),

there is no single theory defining the meaning and extent of tourist experiences although a number of authors have made attempts to formulate models by generalizing and aggregating information.

Personal experiences are determined by the mechanisms of the human brain, such as consciousness, attention, perception, emotion appraisal and action. This concept is classified as moment-by-moment lived experience, anticipated experience and remembered experience (Scott and Le, 2017). The lived experience is “our consciousness of the present, our sensing and feeling in the here-and-now” (Jeroen and Wim, 2021). It is what you are experiencing. In contrast, remembered experience “relates to those from the past that are stored in our memory and follow after the initial sensing and feeling (Jeroen and Wim, 2021).” Research in psychology has found that emotion has a key role in vivid memory (Scott and Le, 2017). The anticipated experiences can be understood as expectancies or in Larsen’s study (2017) expectations, that is individual’s ability to anticipate, to form beliefs about and to predict future events and states.

The notion of experience, especially memorable experience, has dimensions. In the pioneering work of Pine and Gilmore (1999), two dimensions, i.e. participation and connection, were sorted into educational, entertainment, esthetic, escapist experiences. While in tourism field, Tung and Ritchie (2011) identified four key dimensions of memorable experiences: affect, expectations, consequentiality and recollection. Kim et al. (2012) compiled existing components of tourist experiences in the literature and then by quantitative analysis, seven dimensions were found to be prominent. Walls et al. (2011) conducted a comprehensive overview of experiential research in hospitality and tourism. According to their study, interview and questionnaire are two most common methods used to measure tourist experience. Alternatively, “unobtrusive method” (Volo, 2009) such as travel blogs can be used to obtain data from subjects indirectly. These online narratives represent a totally unplanned and researcher-uncontaminated description of their vacations.

## **Methodology**

This paper uses online travel reviews (OTRs) to assess Chinese tourist experiences in European destinations. Those online narratives published online can be used to explore tourist experience unobtrusively (Volo, 2009). The OTRs of the study were retrieved from the online travel platform Mafengwo which is known as the travel bible among younger Chinese netizens. Travelers can pick packages that offer differing levels of freedom, ranging from tailor-made packages, all-inclusive ones to short trips. The reviews of interest were collected manually by entering the keyword “Europe”. As such, it returned all the travel products to European destinations which could be customized according to customer’s need. At the end, 311 reviews in Mandarin were collected from 25 popular itineraries mainly within the year 2019 and 2018. The usable reviews were 277 as 34 were missing text.

This study first, adopted the content analysis approach to explore the evaluation of Chinese tourists. Content analysis is defined as a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from the data to their context (Krippendorff, 2018). This is an unobtrusive method used to identify patterns and structures with the aim to capture the meaning of textual data. The categories were derived from inductively data-driven approach without pre-defined categories. The conceptual content analysis employed an open coding and recoding approach. When one category is evaluated

positively by user, 1 will be entered, on the contrary, -1 will be documented if the category is assessed negatively. After that, thematic analysis was used to identify the main themes of the OTRs. These themes tend to capture shared meaning around the central concept.

## Results

The traditional text analysis is very informative in revealing users' cognitive, affective and holistic evaluations of their travel experiences. Table 1 shows the nine categories and four themes identified.

### Theme one—core attributes

The first theme is called core attributes, encompassing the attraction/activity and tourist guide category. The reviewers have rated the attraction category for varying reasons, depending on the travel product they purchase. The Nordic countries were deemed as fascinating destinations for the stunning natural beauty, like aurora, lagoons, ice and cave, and the amusing activities like dog sledding, visiting Santa Claus village, seeing the icebreaker, walking on the ice cap and undertaking shark-watching. In the countries like Italy, Greece, the hot spots and cities were a must-see for the visitors: the alluring sea and white building on Santorini blew the tourists away; the color and water of Venice let the traveler linger on there. The travelers were enthralled by the views of the central European countries, for instance Switzerland is picturesque for its nice residential buildings, good air quality and towering glaciers as a tourist reported: *Switzerland's scenery is really good, a casual shot is a star film-like scenery! The air quality is high, and you can see the snow-capped mountains in the town. This trip abroad is very satisfactory, looking forward to the next trip (France Switzerland Italy 14-days romantic tour).*

The reviewers thought of tourist guides as being dedicated, professional, warm, punctual and humorous. They knew the local cultures and attractions well, recommended intriguing activities and kept solving problems. The reviewers complimented them, in some cases for playing the role of good, warm driver and for not pushing forced shopping. For instance, one user shared: *The handsome guide also in charge of the ground transportation is very dedicated. He did not take us to do forced shopping, just escorted us along the way (Finland, Norway Iceland 12-day aurora tour).*

### Theme two—supporting core attributes

The second theme is composed of food, transport and lodging categories. The reviewers rarely mentioned dining experience and transportation in the corpus. Despite that, the users appreciated the restaurant recommendation of consultant or roadbook, local home-eating experience, eating local specialties and delicious food at a reasonable price. For example: *We had a great time, especially the consultant arranged for us to dine at a local's house. We had a great time talking with our hosts (France, Switzerland Italy 14-days romantic tour)! The transport, over the on-site stage, was praised by users for availability of pick-up and drop-off service, shuttle bus among localities, warm, responsible and punctual driver, charter service, good self-driving experience and using luxury vehicle. One review elaborated an experience: The transportation is very good, especially the inter-country transportation, business car, door to door kind, absolutely praise (Czech Republic Austria Hungary 12-Days Big City Customization Tour).*

The reviewers valued the accommodation which was five-star, clean, spacious, comfortable, convenient with good location. Besides, users admired the hotels that had upscale facilities, luxury spa, good natural environment, welcome gift to guests, nice breakfast and a superb view of the city/lake/mountain. They also felt satisfied if the place was low-priced/economical, or if they met good host and thought the place had good value for money. As one user's comment went: *The hotels in Helsinki and Lake Saimaa are particularly great with a welcome gift on the first night of our stay. The five-star hotels in Helsinki, needless to say, the location and environment are fantastic. Lake Saimaa's detached vacation home is really great, for it is surrounded by natural forest. The hotel also has spa center. After riding around the lake area, we enjoyed the comfortable spa service back in the hotel (Iceland Finland Norway 11 days customization tour).*

### Theme three—agency attributes

This theme consists of travel consultant, itinerary category. The consultant, as one of the categories identified being evaluated most nicely, is the person who designs and customizes the travel itinerary by communicating with customers. The reviewers extolled them as responsible, patient, warm, professional, caring, thoughtful; they tend to be a problem-solver, available around the clock, good at communication, and making the detailed roadbook. Many users expressed gratitude for their service and assistance along the way. For example: *From the pre-departure ticket booking, unexpected events during the journey, to the care and sympathy after trip, the consultant is always the first to help me solve problems, so I feel warm. Really thankful (France, Switzerland Italy 14-day romantic tour)!*

The itinerary is assessed favorably among all texts as the consultant category. The reviewers loved travel trajectories which were reasonable, professional, not tiring, worry-free, complete, enjoyable, clear, smooth, tailored. They had no-whistle stops and tightly followed the roadbook; they were neither too intensive nor too loose, neatly coordinated and met the expectation. One thing worth noting is that roadbook is an important sub-item under the category. Roadbooks are books to be digital or traditional, provided/offered by the agencies to customers to assist the semi-independent leisure travelers in the tourism destinations with respect to the daily tour and hospitality. Users complimented the roadbook for it was nice, detailed, user-friendly and worth collecting for memory as one commented: *They gave us a very detailed and thoughtful roadbook, so we can basically follow it without any brain, which is especially awesome (Greece Italy 12 days honeymoon customization tour)!*

### Theme four—overall appraisal attributes

This theme focuses on the reviewer's holistic evaluation of the travel experience and service. It is made up of value for money and future patronage/recommendation categories. A total of 31 reviewers thought the personalized travel product they purchased were cost-effective. The price was within a reasonable range, or in a few cases, the users claimed that the price was not as expensive as they thought, or very competitive as compared to its counterparts. Among 277 pieces of texts, 41% of users, when typing the comment, either highly recommended the relevant travel agency/mode to others or would choose the same travel agency/mode in the future. They created desirable e-word-of-mouth on the social community.

The first two themes—core attributes and supporting core attributes, correspond to the structural model of the tourist experience proposed by Quan and Wang (2004). According to them, the tourist experience consists of two dimensions: the dimension touristic peak experience refers to the attractions that constitute the major motivations to tourism; the supporting consumer experience

is the dimension that gratifies basic consumer needs on the journey, such as eating, sleeping and moving. The fourth theme is also widely investigated in the research inquires as constructs revisitation intention, satisfaction, loyalty, whereas the third theme, agency attributes, marks the novelty. Under this travel mode, the role of it cannot be neglected when travelers evaluate their remembered travel experiences.

**Table 1.** Summary of themes, categories, evaluations, and snippets

Themes	Categories	No. of positive evaluation (n=277)	Snippets from reviews
Core attributes	Attraction/activity	110	<i>Switzerland's scenery is really good, a casual shot is a star film-like scenery! The air quality is high, and you can see the snow-capped mountains in the town. This trip abroad is very satisfactory, looking forward to the next trip.</i>
	Tourist guide	22	<i>The handsome guide also in charge of the ground transportation is very dedicated. He did not take us to do forced shopping, just escorted us along the way.</i>
Supporting core attributes	Food	27	<i>We had a great time, especially the consultant arranged for us to dine at a local's house. We had a great time talking with our hosts!</i>
	Transport	29	<i>The transportation is very good, especially the inter-country transportation, business car, door to door kind, absolutely praise.</i>
	Lodging	48	<i>The hotels in Helsinki and Lake Saimaa are particularly great with a welcome gift on the first night of our stay. The five-star hotels in Helsinki, needless to say, the location and environment are fantastic. Lake Saimaa's detached vacation home is really great, for it is surrounded by natural forest. The hotel also has spa center. After riding around the lake area, we enjoyed the comfortable spa service back in the hotel.</i>
Agency attributes	Travel consultant	145	<i>From the pre-departure ticket booking, unexpected events during the journey, to the care and sympathy after trip, the consultant is always the first to help me solve problems, so I feel warm. Really thankful!</i>

	Travel itinerary	145	<i>They gave us a very detailed and thoughtful roadbook, so we can basically follow it without any brain, which is especially awesome!</i>
Overall appraisal attributes	Value for money	31	<i>When we arrived at the destination, we really experienced the value for money!</i>
	Future patronage/recommendation	114	<i>We will continue to cooperate in the future if necessary ~ if friends need we will recommend ~ heart.</i>

## Conclusion and Discussion

This study reveals the customized tourist experience of Chinese tourists in Europe by OTRs. The results of this study show that, apart from core attributes, the supporting attributes have played a role in tourist experiences. It concurred with Quan and Wang's (2004) structural model that tourist experience consists of two dimensions—the dimension of the peak touristic experience referring to main attractions at the destination and the dimension of the supporting consumer experience, namely eating, moving and lodging. Nevertheless, the dimension of agency attributes has not been touched upon in the literature. Customized tours, a mix of the independent and group tours, lying within the continuum of traditional travel modes, largely depend on the service performance of travel consultant and the quality of planned itinerary. Therefore, this dimension should be taken into account when measuring tourist experiences.

The findings of the study have some practical implications for business suppliers. It suggests that under this travel mode, the reviewers assess most favorably the agency attributes, rather than any category of the core attributes and supporting core attributes, which indicates that the agencies should at the pre-trip stage, make elaborate, tailored roadbook by listening to travelers' voice and assigning a professional travel advisor; after embarking on travel, the consultant should be still available for solving any unexpected incidents because, it appears from the results, that fulfilling these two rules will be the backbone of a satisfying travel experience. This travel mode may become more welcome in the post-pandemic age as tourists are eager to minimize direct contact with others. The customized tours will enable them to travel freely in small group, with familiar members.

Despite its contribution, the study is not free from limitations. First, as the author alone took on the task of content analysis, it is inevitable to introduce biases, which can be minimized by inter-coding. Inviting other coders to analyze the same texts will make the findings more reliable. Second, this study only focused on positive evaluations of tourist experience. Future research can also delve into negative evaluations and their entailing reasons to avoid one-sided representation. Third, the OTRs of the study were retrieved from one platform manually. To have more valid findings, future researchers can scrape larger dataset from various travel websites.

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