

Building Familiarity with a New Market: Motivations for Chinese recreational vehicle tourists in Australia

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Introduction

This case study is centrally concerned with researching the blog postings of Vivian Chen, a key individual representing one new market - Chinese recreational vehicle (RV) tourists who drive an unfamiliar vehicle in an unfamiliar country. The experiences of the blogger are highlighted and embedded within the context of the rise of new tourism interests among the Chinese (UNWTO, 2011). Three succinctly reported areas of literature provide a background for the case. They are the growth of Chinese outbound tourism and its social media characteristics, fundamentals of tourist motivation, and the special interest topic of drive and recreational vehicle tourism. The point of this case study is to showcase the way managers can access novel information about new trends from online tourist records.

Notes on Chinese outbound tourism

Studies indicate that the needs of Chinese tourists are growing and evolving (Zhang, 2012). The sheer numbers of overall Chinese outbound tourists - 82 million outbound tourists in 2012 growing to an anticipated 100 million by 2020 - provide rich opportunities for tourism growth as well as some concerns for setting managers in the favoured destinations (China Tourism Academy, 2013). Abundant evidence exists that Chinese tourists are now travelling in ever increasing numbers outside of Asia, including rising numbers visiting western countries. As research on Chinese tourists grows in the western academic literature, it becomes important to provide detailed information on how the rapidly growing Chinese market engages with western destinations. There is a major need to build an understanding of the full and rich reactions of Chinese tourists to the key locations they visit. Recent studies in Germany, France and Italy offer a beginning (Fugman & Aceves, 2013; Taunay, 2013; Pearce, Wu, De Carlo, & Rossi, 2013). At the overall level, package tourists are currently still the largest component of the total outbound Chinese market (Corigliano, 2011; Shao, 2012). Nevertheless, a growing trend for independent travel is forming among the young generation of graduates. These more independent Chinese tourists are empowered by their use of social media. They are well connected and active online. They contribute a large number of rich travel blogs which record their daily tourist

experiences (Pearce, Wu, & Osmond, 2013). In considering these blog postings there are important social influence forces at work. Many blogs become extremely popular and are read by thousands of enthusiastic would be and actual travellers. The present focus in this case study on a female Chinese traveller is a leading example of this trend - the specific work to be analyzed has been read by over 240,000 other travellers, many of whom have also commented on the traveller's blog.

Such blog postings represent an opportunity for a fresh approach to understanding the new markets visiting novel destinations. By sourcing socially influential blogs, solid insights into the main ways Chinese tourists consider and mentally prepare for the specific activities in the destination can be understood (cf. Ryan, 2005; Ye & Tussyadiah, 2011).

Studies of tourists' motives

Understanding tourists' motives is a rich study area of academic and applied interest. It is a mixed offering of speculative ideas, descriptive schemes and emerging theories (Pearce, 2011). True tourist motivation is a push factor, a patterned summary of the social, cultural and biological forces driving travel behaviour. The push-pull distinction first developed by Dann (1977, 1981) is a useful descriptive organiser. It provides a neat classification which differentiates between forces driving the individual and applicable to any destination (push factors) and the characteristics which appeal in a destination (pull factors). It is not a theory in the sense of a well-articulated set of propositions and predictions about tourist behaviour (Smith & Lee, 2010). Full theories or conceptual schemes in this area require a dynamic, multi-motive, measurable and integrative approach with some capacity for prediction. They also need to be transparent in their methods, a requirement which is not always met with consultancy efforts in this field. There are few theories of tourist motivation but there are several descriptive accounts (Bowen & Clarke, 2009).

One way to access tourists' motives lies in examining documents they write or interviews they give after their holidays. In this kind of material there is an important inferred theoretical link. The approach argues that tourists are capable of reflecting on their motives when they have the opportunity to fully express their own travel reasons. The argument can be contested but it is also a leap of inference to believe that tourists can always neatly articulate a stable and unchanging set of trip purposes prior to travel (Rojek & Urry, 1997). At the organ-

Figure 1

Vivian, the blog queen of RV tours', blog information

无知80后房车游澳洲之二 “万无目的游澳洲” 继续拒绝进城!非常规路线!猪儿归来,更新中
vc0707 发表于 2011-05-10 15:38:46
本主题由 穷游大秘书 于 2012-7-16 14:28 设置高亮

回复 发新帖

返回列表 1/95 下一页

240562 浏览 1419 回复 18 喜欢

vc0707 7袋长老
发表于 2011-5-10 15:38 | 只看此用户

2个评分 1楼

ising level of exploring the needs of a new market, the push –pull descriptive distinction offers a way of summarising the comments tourists make about their activities, motivation and the destination. Studies done within this framework can be a precursor to more complex dynamic theoretical systems such as the travel career pattern approach (Pearce, 2011) or the more sociological category schemes built on the work of Cohen (1979; 2011). The particular appeal of using the detailed blogs written by tourists lies in accessing their direct spontaneous accounts of their choices and motives.

Recreational vehicle tourism

In western countries, the widespread availability and affordability of the motor vehicle in the first few decades of the twentieth century quickly produced a new form of recreational behavior - drive tourism (Belasco, 1981). American citizens in particular took to the road to enjoy the freedom of this new form of personal and family transport. A sub-community of drive tourism, recreational vehicle (RVs) travel developed from the 1960s on. Recreational vehicles include caravans, pop-top caravans, camper trailers, tent trailers, motorhomes, campervans, slide-on campers, and fifth wheelers. Most studies on RV tourism have been conducted in developed countries focusing on the senior cohort, for example, the “Snowbirds” in North America (Counts & Counts, 2004), the “Grey Nomads” in Australia (Holloway, Green, & Holloway, 2011; Pearce, 1999) and the movement of senior and retired Europeans (Connell & Page, 2008; Viallon, 2012). Cross cultural comparative studies exist, especially between the North American Snowbirds and Australian Grey Nomads (Hardy, Hanson, & Gretzel, 2012). Studies about the role of Asian and Chinese markets self-driving in international destinations are, however, seldom found.

This case study, building on these key themes, seeks to understand a newly emerging phenomenon; specifically the motivations of Chinese RV tourists travelling within Australia. It locates and selects one case study for close scrutiny after scanning the behaviour of socially influential Chinese blog writers. The concept of a recreational vehicle in this study in this study is limited to motorhome and camper vans, because foreign licence holders are not allowed to rent a towable vehicle in Australia.

Research Methodology

A netnographic approach

The research method adopted in this case study is netnography (Kozinets, 2010). Netnography is a novel adaptation of traditional ethnography for the Internet as a virtual fieldwork site (Kozinets, 2002). It is a naturalistic and unobtrusive methodology. It has been found to be powerful in gaining an insider’s perspective on a given online culture in marketing studies. In the digital tourist era (Pearce, 2011; Sigala, Christou, & Gretzel, 2012), netnography has been used in tourism studies (Podoshen, 2013). In addition to its ability to access emic voices, netnography also works well as an exploratory approach, and is applicable to researching the views of those participating in newly emerging phenomenon (Kozinets, 2010). The most well-read blog concerning Chinese recreational vehicle travel is the centerpiece of the current case study.

Two key Chinese websites, Qyer.com and Sina.com were considered. Qyer.com specializes in providing a forum for discussing outbound independent travel. It is the most popular and interactive online community among the Chinese outbound travelers. Qyer.com, when accessed in the end of December 2012, had 477,530 travel blogs, with 14,030 about travelling to and in Australia (Qyer, 2012). The second site, Sina.com, is China’s most popular comprehensive online community (Sina, 2012). By selecting these two slightly different website styles, the researchers were able to examine specially focused reports about Chinese RV travel in Australia. In total, 37 blogs were identified to suit the purpose of the research with 27 blogs generated from Qyer.com and 10 valid blogs elicited from Sina.com. RV blogs which were cross-posted were counted as one blog entry. A profile for each blog was built, covering demographic information. Listings of the Chinese tourists’ motivations for travelling to Australia and doing an RV trip were developed from the respondents’ own words and phrases.

To enhance the communication of the material to colleagues a native Mandarin speaker who is also fluent in English translated the comments and interrogated the files in response to the questions of English speaker fellow researchers. The material was carefully sorted into push factors and pull factors following the core definitions of

these terms in the academic literature. Definitive quotations were noted and assembled in a separate file. Analysis of the data was conducted manually, because the data set is reasonable in size, can be organised quite readily and the researchers were very familiar with the data context (Kozinets, 2010). A standard qualitative content analysis procedure was adopted (Berge, 2007). The coding results from a sub sample of 7 blogs were cross-checked by a research assistant who was also fluent in both Mandarin and English. The average level of agreement was a highly acceptable 97%. The key case is drawn from the Qyer site. In common with the other 36 blogs the special interest case adopted a detailed mixed text and image style using the tourist's own photographs to record her Australian RV tours on a daily basis.

Results

The case: Vivian Chen is from Guangzhou, a city close to Hong Kong. She was born in the early 1980s. She is a fan of drive tourism and had driven a lot within China before her first Australian trip in May, 2011. She worked for the marketing industry and had been quite successful. She decided to leave her stressful job and travel to Australia. Her decision was supported by her driving friends. They decided to do an RV tour, their first overseas tour in Australia. She bought Lonely Planet Australia as soon as they settled on visiting Australia. She was in charge of all the planning work, while her friends were responsible for

driving. They have four principles in doing road trips – “no big cities”, “no group tour route”, “avoiding fee charging sites”, and “choosing a budget type of travel emphasising flexibility.” She travelled for 18 days covering 5,600 kilometres along the east coast of Australia in 2011.

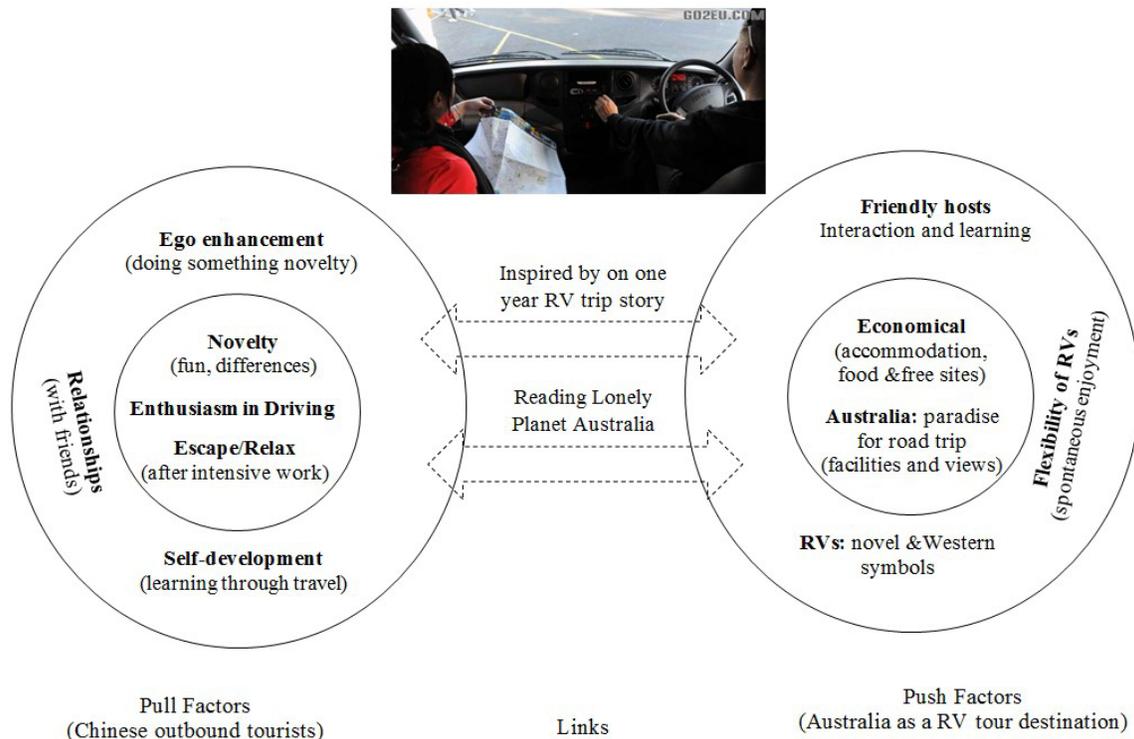
Vivian enjoyed the Australian road trip so much that she repeated the experience. In 2012, accompanied by one of her friends, she came back to Australia and hired a campervan. They repeated part of the eastern coast trip and did their first trip to Tasmania, a popular touring destination in Australia.

The distinctiveness of the case is that Vivian has written a very widely read interactive blog about her trip on Qyer.com (see details at <http://bbs.qyer.com/thread-391695-1.html>). Because of her humorous writing, unique travel style (RV), detailed information, and helpfulness to fellow travellers, her blog has become a bible for Chinese tourists' RV trip in Australia. By April, 2013, Vivian's blog had been read 240,562 times, with 1419 interactions with fellow travellers. The blog is thus a running commentary not only on Vivian's travels but also acts as document which reveals the interests, anxieties and preparation of a sub cultural group of travellers. presents her motivations for her RV tour in Australia.

Vivian's enthusiasm for drive tourism acted as a very important push factor. Australia as a quality destination to undertake an RV trip cheaply and enjoyably was a powerful pull factor to attract her and her

Figure 2

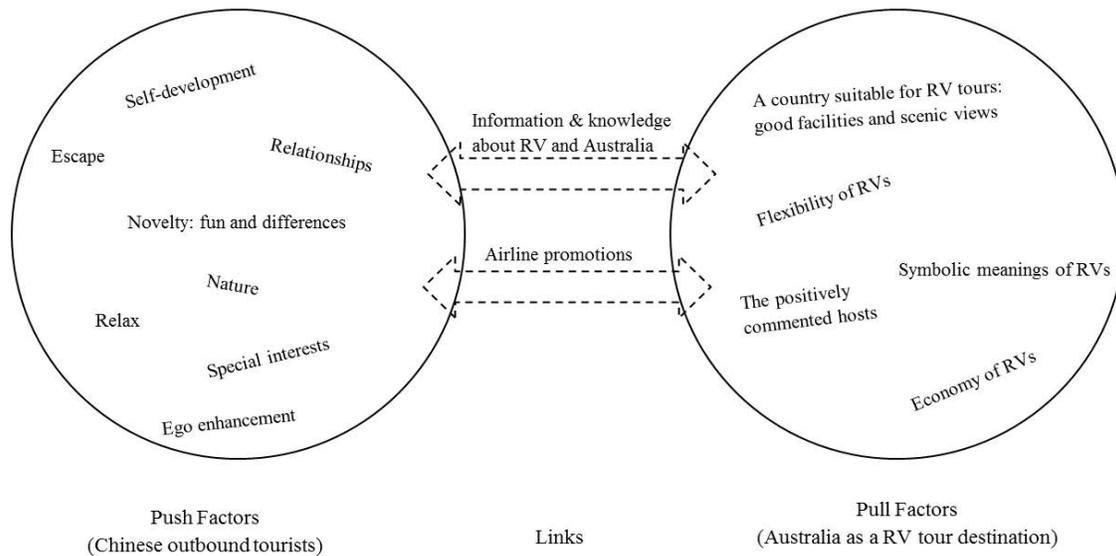
Vivian's motivation system (a fan of driving tourism)



Note: this information has been checked by Vivian. The photo is used with permission

Figure 3

The overall push and pull factors relevant to Chinese RV travellers in Australia



friends. These personal views thus become part of the popular fabric and Chinese image of RV travelling in Australia. Vivian comments on her blog:

“The biggest advantage of RVing is that you can always make the best things happen. You can choose to stay at the seaside, listening to the waves and counting the stars. You can also stay in a winery, welcoming the first piece of the sunshine in the morning. RVing is consistent with Australian’s national personality – free and unconstrained. If you would like to experience Australian lifestyle, RV trip is what you must do (I’m not charging for advertising fees!!)”

A broader view: Profiling the self-reported Chinese RV tourists in Australia

Based on the contextually rich information presented in all the relevant blogs, Vivian’s blog can be set in the context of like-minded RV travellers. Basic demographic information was collated from the constructed files. The majority of Chinese RV travellers were not seniors; rather they were relatively young and under 40 years of age (32 out of 37 blogs). Most of them were from the major Chinese coastal cities (29/37). People from other parts of China included those benefitting from budget airline connections (e.g. four of them were from Chengdu via Air Asia). Travelling with family, and with one’s partner were the most popular travel groupings. Travel with family not only included a core family of parent and a child or children, but included travelling with an extended family. In addition, travelling with friends was also popular. Travelling in a self-organized RV group was also evident with one group of 35 people consisting of 11 core families with teenagers and another group of 15 middle aged people interested in playing golf. The “push-pull” model built on detailed coding of the blogs for recurring themes

was applied at the general level (Dann, 1977).

Why RV in Australia?

The major push and pull factors that influence Chinese outbound travellers undertaking RV tours in Australia are presented in Figure 2. The presentation of these motivations reinforces the themes identified in Vivian’s account.

The push factors elicited from the blogs are also fairly consistent with motive items reported in tourist motivation studies (Hsu & Huang, 2008). For example the motives cover eight of the 14 factors listed in Pearce’s (2011) travel career patterns model of tourist motivation, though the priority and importance of different motivations vary for the Chinese outbound tourists. The motives identified also reinforce findings from broad travel motivations studies about Chinese outbound tourists, where travelling long distance, especially to a developed country, is a source of pride for many Chinese (Hua & Yoo, 2011). Special interests (e.g. driving, golf and bird watching) also constitute a strong push motivation for some Chinese.

The pull factors for Chinese RV tourists summarized in Figure 2 include the flexibility and economy features of recreation vehicles. These themes were also central to Vivian’s approach to RV travel. These same features have been widely reported by Australian “grey nomads” and North American “snowbirds”. Chinese RV tourists identified Australia as a good RV destination. Thirteen blog reports included comments that the dispersed nature of Australia and the provision of facilities suited RV tours. A typical statement was, “Australia is definitely a country designed for touring. ... They have carefully considered all the needs for RV travelling – caravan parks, petrol stations, shower facilities, public parks, free BBQ facilities, rest rooms and supermarkets”.

Chinese tourists were also drawn to the symbolic value of choos-

ing RV travel. The symbolic meaning of RVs embraces multiple aspects, but all “pull” Chinese tourists towards undertaking the RV trip. In the Chinese RV users’ minds, RVs are more than a mode of transport. They are home away from home. A father of a 2 year old boy stated that “with everything on board, RV tours offer the feeling of ‘playing house’ and helped us enjoy the fun of family time.” Similarly, quite a few people expressed their reluctance to leave their “temporary home” when they returned their RV to the renting companies. Further, for some research respondents, RVs, due to their novelty in China, are associated with good taste, success, adventure, being brave and other positive social characteristics that people admire. The father of the 2 year old boy summarized five advantages of a RV trip. Key points he noted were economy, flexibility, independence, good facilities and “having the chance to enjoy a luxury camping life.” In addition to the push and pull factors, there are some links between these two kinds of motive items which make the trip a reality. Such links include special airline tickets, recommendations from friends and relatives, influential travel blogs posted by online members, and personal travel experiences. In brief, Vivian’s case has its own special elements but reflects many of the themes of the broader RV group.

Discussion

The dilemma facing a busy destination manager when a new trend appears in their work world is one of how can I quickly begin to understand the new market, business or tourism product? This case study suggests that accessing the travel blogs of an opinion leader is a fast, accessible and powerful tool to build an initial understanding of a new direction. The first information collected can then be supplemented by reviewing further online instances reporting this behaviour or trend. Importantly, the individual experiences reported on-line are influential accounts in some markets, including that of China, where they act as a key guide which many thousands of others may read and are potentially motivated to follow. The detail inherent in the special case profiled in this work and the more general principles revealed in assessing a wider set of influential blogs has much to offer researchers. In this way the personal travel not only becomes public tourism but is also of interest to the travel professional.

Discussion Questions

- Why does the study of one individual from such a vast population matter to researchers?
- What do you think of the netnographic method approach adopted in this study? Suggest some strengths and weaknesses.
- Who are the dominant RV markets in your region or country? What are the differences between the Chinese outbound RV tourists and the traditional mature RV markets?
- Why are the Chinese tourists interested in driving an unfamiliar vehicle in an unfamiliar country? Please use the pull-push fac-

tors to identify the reasons.

- Why is it important for the destination marketing organizations and tourism industry to understand Chinese outbound tourists?
- The Chinese RV market is generally profitable for local tourism and relevant industries. What communication and marketing strategies can you undertake to grow this market? Please employ the motives of Chinese RV tourists outlined.
- Can you identify another new or emerging market (either for a destination or for an activity) where you could use this blog based approach to understand the travelers’ interest and needs? By quickly scanning a set of relevant travel blogs do your stereotypes about the interests of this identified group seem to apply?

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