Empirical analysis of the cross-cultural information searching and travel behavior of business travelers: A case study of MICE travelers to Qatar in the Middle East

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A B S T R A C T

Very few tourism geographers have investigated the way meetings, incentives, conventions, and exhibitions (MICE) travelers search for information and their travel behavior based on cultural background and country of origin. In addition, little attention has been paid to examining the factors that affect MICE travelers’ decisions to visit a certain destination. To address this knowledge gap, this paper aims to examine the impact of cultural factors on the information acquisition and travel behaviors of MICE tourists. It also examines the factors that affect travelers’ decisions to visit a certain destination in cross-cultural settings. The primary data, related to the impact of cultural aspects of MICE travelers on their information searching and travel behaviors, were collected through a self-administered survey. The survey tool was composed of key elements—the country of normal residence, behaviors in information searching, the arrangement of the present trip, travel behaviors, significant effects on tourists’ choices and satisfaction, and the socio-demographic characteristics of MICE travelers. The sample population was composed of Chinese-, Arabic-, and English-speaking MICE travelers at one of the top Middle Eastern MICE tourism destinations, Doha, Qatar. The relevant data were collected from MICE travelers at the Doha Exhibition and Convention Center, which is considered the main MICE sector setting in Doha. To test the proposed hypotheses, which concern categorical variables, a series of chi-square tests for independence or relatedness were conducted. These tests are appropriate for analyzing the relationship between two categorical variables. The study revealed notable differences between the three respondent groups. This paper proposes that destinations marketers should develop targeted marketing strategies based on the information and travel behavior of each cultural group. Particular marketing implications for Doha are discussed.

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1. Introduction and background information

On a global scale, it is forecasted that business tourism will increase at a yearly rate of 3.6% by 2019, with expenditures exceeding US $1.12 trillion (Global Business Travel Association, 2013). Business tourism is vital to the economic development of many destinations across the world (Lee & Back, 2005). Business tourism includes individuals traveling for purposes connected to their careers (Davidson, 1994). Consistent with this approach, MICE travelers are "people who undertake personal or employer-funded trips to attend meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions, both at home and overseas" (Chiang, King, & Nguyen, 2012, p. 104). According to the International Association of Professional Congress Organizers (IAPCO), MICE trips are defined as trips where the main purpose is business and in which generally large groups are brought together for a particular purpose. Although MICE is defined as a segment of business tourism, it can also involve a leisure component. However, since different sources provide different definitions of MICE, it is difficult to provide a consistent indication of the volume and the value of MICE (Centre for the Promotion of Imports from Developing Countries, 2016). However, business travel generated 14% of the world’s international tourist arrivals in 2012 (World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], n.d.).

MICE tourism can contribute considerably to the growth of a tourism destination (Centre for the Promotion of Imports from...
developing countries, 2016). MICE is a swiftly evolving component of the tourism sector. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) in 2015, MICE tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors of tourism, with a growth of 4.0% since 2014 and total expenditures across the globe reaching US$ 1.2223 trillion in 2015. The tourism industry is a key factor in the development of national economies with respect to jobs, GDP and taxes. MICE visitors are acknowledged as highly beneficial for a destination (Locke, 2010). The development of MICE can give a destination access to great advantages, such as an improvement of the tourism economy, specifically in the off-peak season; the development of an enhanced tourism infrastructure; and higher tourism spending, because MICE travelers tend to spend more money compared to leisure travelers in a smaller period of time. In addition to the conversion of MICE travelers into leisure travelers, MICE travelers can extend their stay and be accompanied by their spouse or revisit the destination of the event with their family or friends (Center for the Promotion of Imports from Developing Countries, 2016). Furthermore, MICE visitors are identified as being high-yield visitors, with minimal detrimental environmental and socio-cultural influence. They also assist in overcoming issues related to seasonality within destinations (Locke, 2010).

To determine to construct a distinctive identity and unique image, marketing is the main tool to distinguish it from competitors (Draper, 2016). In the current hostile tourism market, it is highly important to have knowledge of the sources and ways tourists use to acquire information on their travel prior to and during their vacations (Kambele, Li, & Zhou, 2015). Tourism scholars have focused on the strategies of information seeking by travelers (Dey & Sarma, 2010;Fodness & Murray, 1998; Gursoy & McCleary, 2004; Gursoy & Terry Umbreit, 2004; Kambele et al., 2015). Information searching as a main factor of destination choice has been explicitly examined by researchers (Fodness & Murray, 1998). Information searching is generally perceived as a phenomenon imperative to marketing in tourism, and it may potentially provide invaluable inputs into the development of effective strategies when understood thoroughly (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004). Information searching often improves the quality of trip experiences by decreasing traveler uncertainty about forthcoming trips (Jun, Vogt, & MacKay, 2007). The results of such inquiries are crucial because they influence the decision-making process of the marketing management department in the development of highly functional communication campaigns and provision of services. More importantly, a proper grasp of the information-searching behavior of tourists will aid tourism firms in making more informed decisions in terms of the allocation of their limited budgets for marketing, ensuring the proper application of marketing dollars (Gursoy & Terry Umbreit, 2004; Kambele et al., 2015). Such studies provide valuable knowledge for targeting certain customer segments (Chiang et al., 2012; Gursoy & Terry Umbreit, 2004; Gursoy & McCleary, 2004). Because the information search signifies the initial step in a traveler’s process of decision making, destination managers, marketers, and other tourism businesses can target communications in marketing more efficiently (Gursoy, 2011; Kambele et al., 2015).

Tourism geographers have heavily focused on the significance of understanding tourists’ behavior in searching information as a valuable input into the process of designing an effective marketing strategy (Chiang et al., 2012). Remarkably, the available empirical data on the behavior of information searching by tourists have concentrated almost exclusively on recreational travelers. There is a need to determine whether information search behaviors have a significant impact on the travel behavior of MICE tourists. Geographers have started to recognize the significant and contingent roles of cultural characteristics whenever information search behaviors are investigated (Farahani, Mohamed, & Som, 2011). Research has stressed that an enhanced recognition of the impact of cultural characteristics on travel behaviors is a valuable tool in strategy development. Studying cross-cultural factors based on the country of origin, in particular, can help in the identification of behavioral differences (Chiang et al., 2012; Collins-Kreiner, 2010). Different from previous studies, Su, Wan, Hu, and Cai (2016) focused on the differences with tourists’ country of origin to capture the local influential factors of tourists’ destination preferences. It was suggested that geographical preferences of tourists vary with their country of origin. The differences with respect to tourists’ country of origin is an issue that is largely overlooked in previous tourism studies particularly, in investigating the information searching and travel behavior of MICE tourists. Information searching and travel behavior are believed to be influenced by tourists’ origins and cultural characteristics of MICE travelers. By providing insights on these themes with empirical methods, it is hoped that both destination marketing practitioners and governments will acquire a foundation to pursue the required actions.

As discussed earlier, an inadequate amount of information is available regarding the role of cultural differences in the behaviors of information acquisition and travel of MICE tourists. This deficiency of consideration towards the concerned topic also includes no record of an investigation of any form of searching for information, internal and external, in specific destination environments. The evident gap in the MICE tourism literature is addressed in this paper by examining the travel and information searching behaviors of travelers to Doha in Qatar for business purposes based on their country of normal residence and spoken language. The paper also examines the impact of cultural aspects on MICE travelers’ decision to visit a particular destination. Three language groups are identified in this study: English, Chinese, and Arabic speakers.

2. Literature review

2.1. Overview of MICE tourism in the Middle East

Despite the political unrest in recent years, the Middle East has been identified as one of the world’s fastest growing tourism regions. The Middle Eastern countries have witnessed an average yearly growth rate of 10% in international tourist arrivals since 2000, outpacing the rate of increase in other top regions (UNWTO, 2016). According to a report issued by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), travel and tourism’s direct contribution to GDP in the Middle East in 2014 was USD 73.7 billion, which is 2.7% of the total GDP. Travel and tourism created 2,255,000 jobs directly in 2014 (Tourism and Travel Middle East, 2016). International tourist travel arrivals increased 3% to 54 million in the Middle East in 2015 (Zaidan, 2016a). Despite the challenging situations the world is facing due to geo-political conflicts, economic crises, and travel health notices to many parts of the world, the tourism industry in the Middle East continues to thrive, remaining one of the fastest growing tourism regions worldwide (Kovjanic, 2014). Although some Middle Eastern countries, such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya, had no tourists arriving in the last years due to political instability, other countries in the region, such as Qatar and the UAE, experienced a noticeable increase (Avraham, 2015). According to a report issued by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), the economic impact of travel and tourism in the UAE, for example, in 2015 was USD 36.43 billion, which is 8.7% of the total GDP. The report also indicates that 7.3% of total investments in the UAE were related to tourism projects, at USD 7.46 billion.

Another example of a well-developed MICE tourism market in the Middle East is Turkey. However, the country is becoming increasingly involved in regional conflicts, such as the Syrian civil
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