Research Paper

A model of perceived image, memorable tourism experiences and revisit intention

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ABSTRACT

Limited research has investigated the antecedents and consequences of memorable tourism experiences (MTEs) empirically. This study helps fill this gap by developing a causal relationship model among perceived image (including country image and destination image), MTEs and revisit intention. The model's predictive capabilities are explored in international tourism context by using PLS-SEM. The results indicate that country image and destination image influence revisit intention via the mediating effect of MTEs. The 'perceived image-MTEs-revisit intention' model is supported with 43% of MTEs and 28.7% of revisit intention explained. In addition, this study provides a classification framework of destination attributes (i.e. country image and destination image) in international tourism context for future research and destination marketing practice.

1. Introduction

Tourist experiences constitute the essence of the tourism and hospitality industry. With intensifying competition, there is a growing recognition that destinations must create and deliver memorable tourism experiences to their consumers to increase their competitiveness (Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2012, 2015). When consumers decide to travel and seek information to select a destination, they often recall past experiences. Internal information search is the first step of tourist information search process (Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2013; Kerstetter & Cho, 2004; Kim, 2014). Recently, memorable tourism experiences (MTEs) have attracted the attention of researchers and practitioners. Researchers argue that MTEs are the best predictors of future behavior and represent a new benchmark (Chandralal, Rindfleish, & Valenzuela, 2015; Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2012; Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2014).

Destination image is widely recognized to be an important construct that influences tourists' decision-making, destination choice, post-trip evaluation and future behaviors (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Stylos, Vassiliadis, Bellou, & Andronikidis, 2016; Zhang, Xu, Leung, & Cai, 2016). There are many different types of destination, ranging from a city/countryside, to a region or even a country. When the destination is an entire country, country/nation image may be an important factor to influence international tourist perceived destination image and destination choice (Nadeau, Heslop, O'Reilly, & Luk, 2008; Zhang et al.,

2016). Extant studies in general international trade and marketing indicate that consumer perception of country image influences attitude, evaluation and purchase intention of this country's product (Hsieh, Pan, & Setiono, 2004; Lin, Hsu, & Tsai, 2011).

MTEs, destination image and country image are all recognized as important antecedents of future behaviors. However, there is a lack of an integrated model to investigate their relationships, and reveal the mechanism of how these three constructs influencing future behaviors. Extant MTEs literature mainly discusses the essence and structure of MTEs, and develops measurement scales (Kim & Ritchie, 2014; Kim et al., 2012; Kim, 2013, 2014; Tung & Ritchie, 2011a). Researchers call for more studies to test the MTEs scales in new contexts to validate them. Empirical research to investigate the antecedents and consequences of MTEs remains sparse. A few studies explored the relationship between MTEs and guest interactions, sensory impressions, place attachment, recollection, satisfaction, behavior intention, loyalty, eWOM, and revisit intention (Agapito, Pinto, & Mendes, 2017; Barnes, Mattsson, & Sørensen, 2016; Manthiou, Kang, & Chiang, 2016; Semrad & Rivera, in press; Torres, 2016; Tsai, 2016). However, no study has yet examined the effects of two crucial constructs – country image and destination image – on MTEs. This study intends to help fill this gap by proposing an integrated model to explore the relationship among country image, destination image, MTEs, and revisit intention. Based on previous literature about the effects of country image and destination image on satisfactory experience and behavior intention

(Carneiro & Faria, 2016; Kim et al., 2012; Lee, Ham, & Kim, 2015; Lee, Lee, & Lee, 2005; Lu, Chi, & Liu, 2015; Zhang et al., 2016), this study argues that country image and destination image are antecedents of MTEs, and MTEs mediate the relationship between perceived image and future behavior (i.e. revisit intention). If tourists have more impressed perception of the destination country (e.g. friendly people, beautiful natural landscapes), the more likely they feel that they will gain MTEs, which in turn leads to higher revisit intention.

The purposes of this study are firstly to test Kim's seven dimensions MTEs scale in a new context and sample, namely, in the international tourism context, in particular in Korean tourists travelling to China. The reason of choosing Korean tourists to China as research sample is that China is the fourth largest international tourist destination country. Over 133 million tourists visited China in 2015. Korea is the largest source country of Chinese inbound tourists with 4.44 million Korean tourists visiting China mainland in 2015, overweighting the second source country Japan (2.5 million tourists to China mainland in 2015) (China National Tourism Administration, 2016). Secondly, the study intends to develop a causal relationship model to investigate the way country image and destination image affect MTEs and revisit intention, and explore the mediating effect of MTEs. This study adds knowledge to MTEs' antecedents and consequences, and allows a better understanding of the MTE formation process and its important role in determining destination competitiveness.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Memorable tourism experiences

The book *The Experience Economy* by Pine and Gilmore (1999) stresses that the world economy is transforming from service economy to experience economy. This message naturally triggered people's attention to consumer experience and initiated the development of tourist experience research. Researchers explore the essence and classification of tourist experience from different discipline perspectives, such as psychology, anthropology, consumer behavior, phenomenology, and sociology. Promoting tourist experience research is becoming an important crossdisciplinary research area. In the marketing field, concepts of tourist experience are constantly evolving, from early satisfactory experiences and experience quality to lately extraordinary experiences and memorable tourism experiences. Memorable tourism experiences and tourist experiences are two concepts interrelated with each other, yet different in connotation and extension. Tourist experience is defined as the subjective mental state felt by participants during a service encounter (Otto & Ritchie, 1996). It has been widely recognized that tourists' interpretation of the meanings of products, activities, and tourism destinations is subjective (Knobloch, Robertson, & Aitken, 2017; Ryan, 2002; Uriely, 2005). Kim et al. (2012) summarized 19 experiential components that various researchers had identified to help understand tourism experiences. These include involvement, hedonism, happiness, pleasure, relaxation, stimulation, refreshment, social interaction, spontaneity, meaningfulness, knowledge, challenge, sense of separation, timelessness, adventure, personal relevance, novelty, escaping pressure, and intellectual cultivation. Not all tourism experiences can be necessarily translated into MTEs. Instead, MTEs are those experiences that are selectively constructed from tourist experiences and can be remembered and recalled after a trip. MTEs are more important because only remembered experiences would influence tourist future decisionmaking (Kerstetter & Cho, 2004; Kim, Ritchie, & Tung, 2010). When making a decision, tourists rely on previous experiences and memories to formulate future trips (Lehto, O'Leary, & Morrison, 2004; Wirtz, Kruger, Scollon, & Diener, 2003).

Qualitative and quantitative studies have been done to investigate the essence of MTEs and what kind of tourist experiences can become MTEs, but the results are incongruent (see Table 1). Tung & Ritchie (2011a, 2011b) identified four key dimensions of MTEs (i.e. affect,

expectations, consequentiality, and recollection) and five characteristics of MTEs (i.e. identity formation, family milestones, relationship development, nostalgia reenactment, and freedom pursuits) respectively in two qualitative studies. Chandralal et al. (2015) explored MTEs by travel blog narratives and extracted seven experiential themes: local people, life and culture, personally significant experiences, shared experiences, perceived novelty, perceived serendipity, professional guides and tour operator services, and affective emotions. Some quantitative research has examined the effect of tourist experience on memory (Ali, Hussain, & Ragavan, 2014; Ali, Ryu, & Hussain, 2016; Kim et al., 2010; Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2013). Their results indicate that the experience dimensions of educational, esthetic, entertainment, escapist, involvement, hedonism and local culture influence tourists' memories significantly and become memorable experiences. So far, there is no general agreement with what constitutes MTEs.

Recently, Kim et al. (2012) developed a measurement scale specifically for MTEs. They identified seven dimensions of MTEs, and conducted a crosscultural study to verify it. These seven dimensions are hedonism, refreshment, local culture, meaningfulness, knowledge, involvement, and novelty. Hedonism is believed as pleasurable feelings that excite oneself (Dunman & Mattila, 2005). Refreshment is the state of being refreshed (Howard, Tinsley, Tinsley, & Holt, 1993). Local culture refers to good impression about local people and closely experienced local culture (Kim et al., 2012). Meaningfulness is a sense of great value or significance, namely doing something important and valuable (Wilson & Harris, 2006). Knowledge refers to information, facts, or experiences known by an individual (Blackshaw, 2003). Involvement is the degree an individual is involved in tourist experience (Kim et al., 2012). Novelty refers to psychological feeling of newness resulted from having a new experience (Farber & Hall, 2007).

These seven experience dimensions are considered to be the MTEs that individual recalls most frequently. Although the crosscultural comparison study between American and Taiwanese university students shows that the scores on particular dimensions are different, the seven-dimension structure of MTEs is confirmed in both samples (Kim, 2013, Kim & Ritchie, 2014). Tsai (2016) also confirmed the seven-dimension structure of MTEs in a context of local food experiences of Taiwan domestic tourists. Just as Kim and Ritchie (2014) suggest that this seven dimension MTEs scale need to be verified in more contexts and new samples, this study uses their MTEs scale to measure the MTEs of Korean tourists traveling to China, and tests the generalization of MTEs scale in this new sample. Besides validating the MTEs scale, this study further explores the antecedents of MTEs and formation process, namely explores the effect of country image and destination image on MTEs.

2.2. Country image and destination image

Country image is defined in different ways and considered as a multidimensional concept in existing studies, ranging from social psychology and political science to communication and business. Recently, Buhmann (2016) and Carneiro and Faria (2016) discussed the conceptualization of country image from international public relations and business respectively. In the international trade and marketing area, country image is usually defined as the total impression, belief and perception that consumers hold about a given country (Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009). Compared with other related concepts such as product image, product-country image and image of country of origin, country image represents a more comprehensive and overall image, including consumers' perception and evaluation of the destination's people, history, geography, culture, politics, economy, and technical development (Allred, Chakraborty, & Miller, 1999; Carneiro & Faria, 2016; Costa, Carneiro, & Goldszmidt, 2016).

There are many destination image definitions. The following are well-recognized: 'the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination' (Crompton, 1979, p.18); 'the perceptions of