

A STUDY ON YOUTH TOURISTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SICHUAN AS A TOURISM DESTINATION

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Abstract: *Tourism has become one of the most important sectors of the world's service economy. According to UNWTO research, youth tourism is the fastest developing tourism market. As a rich tourism resource destination the Sichuan province in China has many tourism attractions to ride on this trend, and successfully cater to youth tourists' needs. The aim of this research is to study youth tourists' perceptions of Sichuan as a tourism destination as youth tourism is rapidly growing (WTO 2006). A questionnaire was put together based on the two independent and dependent variables. The data was collected from 356 domestic and international youth tourists (aged 15-30) who were traveling in Sichuan. The Pearson Correlation was used to test the ten hypotheses. The two independent variables are all influencing youth tourists' perception of Sichuan as a tourism destination. Most of respondents' perceptions are positive especially the overall perception of Sichuan. Youth tourists mainly have different perceptions on the transportation conditions in Sichuan. These findings provide tourism marketers with valuable information about youth tourists' characteristics and their perceptions of Sichuan as a tourism destination and about the factors which influence youth perception. They also cast light on the suitable tourism products that can meet the needs of youth tourists and make more young people come and visit Sichuan.*

Keywords: *Youth tourist, Tourism perception, Psychographic factors, Travel patterns*

Introduction

Tourism plays an important role for host countries and local communities through economic and cultural exchanges. In 2004, more than 763.9 million people traveled worldwide, bringing huge profits and creating millions of job opportunities (World Tourism Organization, 2006). The World Tourism Organization (WTO) has issued an inspiring forecast of future international tourism development in the world, claiming that by 2020 the world's international tourist arrivals may reach 1.6 billion, and their average spending per day, excluding international fares, reach US\$5 billion. Still according to the WTO, with 137 million international tourist arrivals and some 100 million outbound tourist departures, China will rank first among the top world's destinations and fourth among the world top tourist-generating countries respectively. (Zhang, Han and Pine 2000). This forecast includes youth tourism which is defined as all travel by young people aged between 15 and 25 years (WTO, 2002).

Clearly, the youth travel market is an

important and growing target market with good future prospects (Kale, McIntyre and Wier, 1997; Reisinger and Mavondo, 2002). According to the WTO, in 2001, about 140 million of the total 700 million international travelers were young people, a number that has been steadily growing since.

That China is expected to become the first tourist destination in the world is the outcome of China's economic reform and open policy initiated in the late 1970s. As an industry, international tourism has become one of the most important foreign exchange earners, playing an increasingly significant role in the country's national economy (China View, 2008).

In terms of total outbound travel spending, China is currently ranked fifth and expected to be the fastest growing in the world in the years to come, jumping into the number two slot for total travel spending by 2015.

What these statistics also point to is the big developing potential of youth tourism in China as both domestic and international youth tourists will greatly benefit the tourism industry.

Youth tourism is the fastest growing tourism segment worldwide. According to surveys by the WTO and WYSE Tourism Confederation, youth tourists tend to spend more, travel more often and want to explore other cultures.

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This paper focuses on youth tourism in one province in China; the Sichuan Province, often nicknamed the “Kingdom of Abundance”. Although the nickname once referred to Sichuan's industrial capacity, today the term applies to its local tourism resources. The 570,000-square-kilometer province boasts many historical sites and beautiful landscapes. The province has three world heritage sites (Mt. Emei-Leshan Giant Buddha, Huanglong Scenic Area and Jiuzhaigou Valley, and Mt. Qingcheng-Dujiangyan Irrigation System) and many other scenic spots. It is famous for rural tours in some ethnic villages, urban tours in Chengdu (pandas, Sichuan snacks), adventure tours among the mountains and rivers, heritage tours, pilgrim tours to name a few. In short, Sichuan attracts millions of tourists each year.

The purpose of this study is to research the potential target market of youth tourism in order to develop it in a sustainable and healthy way. Youth tourism has a bright future and can contribute to Sichuan tourism. Youth tourists are travelling for different purposes based on different situations. They have the most time and more chances to travel in their lifetime by virtue of being young. They may not spend as much as other segments while young and may not bring that much profit to Sichuan tourism but, the impact and influence of youth tourism is most significant in that in the future they could come back and they can also advertise the region for others to come.

Young people are also information hungry and willing to accept new things (WTO and WYSE, 2007). Based on the new internet technology and web2.0, young people are sharing their knowledge, thoughts and experiences at splitting speed. For Sichuan, to target this segment is the right choice to develop tourism and make the most of social networks.

Developing youth tourism, however, requires marketing, building tourism plans, and doing research on youth tourism in Sichuan since not much has been done in this regard yet. Getting the targeted tourists' data will provide useful information to marketers promoting Sichuan for youth tourists.

This research intends to collect and describe data on youth tourists' psychographic factors, travel patterns and their perception of Sichuan as a tourism destination.

- *Research Objectives*

1) To identify youth tourists' psychographic

factors and travel pattern;

2) To identify youth tourists' perceptions of famous tourism/cultural attractions, tourism activities, and tourism infrastructures/services in Sichuan, then, analyze their overall perceptions of Sichuan as a tourism destination: This analysis process provides feedback and first-hand data on youth tourists in Sichuan reveals problems related to youth tourism in Sichuan;

3) To develop youth tourism in Sichuan and provide useful information for marketing Sichuan as a youth tourism destination: By understanding the travel patterns, psychographic factors of youth tourists', their perceptions of Sichuan, the relationships between the youth tourists' psychographic factors/travel patterns and their perceptions of Sichuan, the research can provide useful information on the youth market segment and their specific demands when travelling in Sichuan.

1. Literature Review

- *Psychographic Factors*

Psychographic studies were introduced by Plog (1974) and are used for market segmentation. When doing marketing research and market segmentation, the psychographic factors always include consumer's Activities, Interests, and Opinions. (AIOs. A psychographic profile of various consumer types is developed from their responses when asked if they agree or disagree with AIOs statements.

Paul and Donnelly (2004) also argued that useful information on consumers' activities, interests, and opinions can tell marketers how consumers are grouped together empirically based on their responses.

People in the same demographic group can have very different psychographic characteristics (Kotler and Armstrong, 2005). While demographics, which are also although useful in travel research, do not explain underlying motivations for traveling, psychographics in contrast answers many important questions about the how, what and why of traveling, allowing travel marketers and developers to become more focused and effective in their efforts (Richie and Geoldner, 1994).

- *Travel Patterns*

Consumer behavior is defined by Schiffman and Kanuk (2004) as the behavior

that consumers display in searching for, purchasing, using, evaluating and disposing of products and services that they expect will satisfy their needs. Consumer behavior focuses on how individuals make decisions to spend their available resources (time, money, effort) on consumption related items. That includes what they buy, why they buy it, when they buy it where they buy it, how often they buy it, how often they use it, how they evaluate it after the purchase and the impact of such evaluations on future purchases, and how they dispose of it.

- Perception

In general terms, “perception is the process through which people see the world around themselves.” (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004, page 199) In academic terms, perception is a ‘process by which an individual selects, organizes and interprets stimuli into a meaningful and coherent picture of the world’ (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004).

- Previous studies

While both the research of Wang (2006) and Haahti & Yavas (1983) focus on tourist’s perception of tourism destinations and use questionnaires to collect information from tourists, that of Matzler and Siller’s focuses on youth tourists’ satisfaction and perception of the tourism destination.

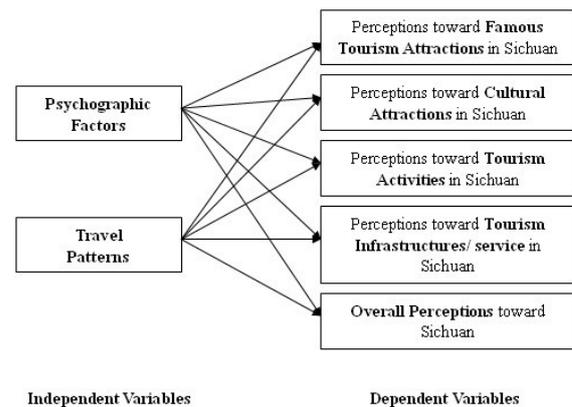
The collected data can be used when marketing the destinations. In addition the results of Matzler and Siller’s study show tourists’ satisfaction rate and preference of various attractions and products in summer and winter. This information not only helps marketers know about a destination’s weaknesses and strengths but also shows the tourists’ demands when travelling in different seasons. It helps to provide information to direct tourism supply, promotion, and planning in this area.

2. Conceptual Framework and Methodology

The framework highlights how personal factors directly influence perception or the decision-making process.

The independent variables, which are related to tourists’ personalities, influence perceptions, which are the dependent variables (on the right side). All the dependent and tourist. They help to determine the independent variables are unique for each relationships between tourists’ psychographic

Figure 1 - Conceptual Framework



Created by the author for this study

factors, travel patterns and perceptions of Sichuan. And they will finally help to find out the preferences of different consumers in the youth tourism market and do marketing and promotions.

The Research Hypotheses have been divided into two groups: Youth tourists’ psychographic factors/ perceptions and Youth tourists’ travel patterns/perceptions

Group one:

Ho1: *There is no relationship between youth tourists’ psychographic factors and perception of famous tourism attractions in Sichuan.*

Ha1: *There is a relationship between youth tourists’ psychographic factors and perception of famous tourism attractions in Sichuan.*

Ho2: *There is no relationship between youth tourists’ psychographic factors and perception of cultural attractions in Sichuan.*

Ha2: *There is a relationship between youth tourists’ psychographic factors and perception of cultural attractions in Sichuan.*

Ho3: *There is no relationship between youth tourists’ psychographic factors and perception of tourism activities in Sichuan.*

Ha3: *There is a relationship between youth tourists’ psychographic factors and perception of tourism activities in Sichuan.*

Ho4: *There is no relationship between youth tourists’ psychographic factors and perception of tourism infrastructures/ service in Sichuan.*

Ha4: *There is a relationship between youth tourists’ psychographic factors and*

perception of tourism infrastructures/ service in Sichuan.

Ho5: There is no relationship between youth tourists' psychographic factors and overall perception of Sichuan as a tourism destination.

Ha5: There is a relationship between youth tourists' psychographic factors and overall perception of Sichuan as a tourism destination.

Group two:

Ho6: There is no relationship between youth tourists' travel patterns and perception of famous tourism attractions in Sichuan.

Ha6: There is a relationship between youth tourists' travel patterns and perception of famous tourism attractions in Sichuan.

Ho7: There is no relationship between youth tourists' travel patterns and perception of cultural attractions in Sichuan.

Ha7: There is a relationship between youth tourists' travel patterns and perception of cultural attractions in Sichuan.

Ho8: There is no relationship between youth tourists' travel patterns and perception of tourism activities in Sichuan.

Ha8: There is a relationship between youth tourists' travel patterns and perception of tourism activities in Sichuan.

Ho9: There is no relationship between youth tourists' travel patterns and perception of tourism infrastructures/service in Sichuan.

Ha9: There is a relationship between youth tourists' travel patterns and perception of tourism infrastructures/service in Sichuan.

Ho10: There is no relationship between youth tourists' travel patterns and overall perception of Sichuan as a tourism destination.

Ha10: There is a relationship between youth tourists' travel patterns and overall perception of Sichuan as a tourism destination.

This study uses descriptive research method to explore and identify youth tourists' perceptions and determine the relationships between youth tourists' psychological factors, travel patterns and perceptions of Sichuan as a youth tourism destination. Descriptive research, as its name implies, describes the characteristics of a population or phenomenon (Zikmund, 2004), which for this study consists of youth tourists' perceptions of Sichuan as a tourism destination. It seeks to determine the

answers to who (youth tourists), what (perceptions of Sichuan), when (when they travel in Sichuan), where (Sichuan as a destination for youth tourism) and how (youth tourists with different psychographic factors and travel patterns perceive Sichuan differently due to their different perceptions and internal relationships). First, descriptive surveys are used to identify the characteristics of the target youth tourists by describing their psychological factors and travel patterns. By using questionnaire and collecting data on youth tourists' perceptions, the researcher can get information on how youth tourists perceive Sichuan differently. The various perceptions of youth tourists and their different characteristics (psychological factors and travel patterns) are used to describe them. The results show the clear internal relationships between youth tourists' unique characteristics and their perceptions, which accord with the research objectives and problem.

Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Based on the research objectives, the findings can be summarized as follows:

Hypothesis 1: I there is a moderate positive correlation between youth tourists' psychographic factors and their perception of famous tourism attractions in Sichuan.

Hypothesis 2: there is a moderate positive correlation between youth tourists' psychographic factors and perception of cultural attractions in Sichuan.

Hypothesis 3: there is a moderate positive correlation between youth tourists' psychographic factors and perception of tourism activities in Sichuan.

Hypothesis 4: There is a relationship between youth tourists' psychographic factors and perception of tourism infrastructures/services in Sichuan.

Hypothesis 5: The correlation mean of .657 shows that there is a moderate positive correlation between these two groups.

Hypothesis 6: There is a relationship between youth tourists' travel patterns and perception of famous tourism attractions in Sichuan.

Hypothesis 7: The number (0.543) shows that there is a moderate statistical relationship between youth tourists' travel patterns and perception of cultural attractions in Sichuan.

Hypothesis 8: There is a relationship between the youth tourists' travel patterns and

perception of tourism activities in Sichuan.

Hypothesis 9: there is a low positive relationship between youth tourists' travel patterns and perception of tourism infrastructures/services in Sichuan.

Hypothesis 10: there is a moderate positive relationship between youth tourists' travel patterns and overall perception of Sichuan as a tourism destination.

3. Discussion and Implications

- Youth Tourists' Psychographic Factors and Travel Patterns

The results are as follows: youth tourists agree that travel is a good way to relax and escape from work and study pressure; they may change their attitudes toward a tourism destination based on their own travel experiences; they are willing to accept new things and like to make friends of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds when traveling; they are interested in communicating with local people which is their way of thoroughly exploring the destination; and they consider outdoor activities to be the most popular attractions.

Youth tourists display a spirit of adventure and are not adverse to risk-taking. Many of them for example don't feel like making reservations before traveling. They don't care much about the tourism infrastructures and services. Their choices in terms of accommodations and transportations are also very flexible based on their changeable travel plans. The most frequent travel motivation among youth tourists is the desire to explore destinations, and different cultures. Youth tourists don't pay much attention to "word of mouth" with regard to destinations. However, most of them do go online for tourism information when planning their trips to certain destinations. Price influences youth tourists tourism plans the most.

All these findings relating to youth tourists' psychographic factors and travel patterns help to understand youth tourists and their expectations when traveling in the Sichuan Province.

- Youth Tourists' Perception of Sichuan as a Tourism Destination and perception of its famous tourism attractions

All the famous tourism attractions are listed by the Sichuan government as the "must see" ones in Sichuan. One of them is cuisine. As the result shows, most of the respondents

agreed that Sichuan cuisine is delicious. World heritage sites in Sichuan attracted a lot of youth tourists, most notable because they are famous. But, the fact that Sichuan is the hometown of pandas did not get recognized by the respondents. When youth tourists think about pandas, they think about Beijing and Shanghai not Sichuan. And though, Sichuan has rich adventure attractions, the perception of adventure attractions is also not as positive as that of other famous attractions.

- Youth tourists' perception of cultural attractions in Sichuan

To widely explore destinations' different cultures is the number one motivation for youth tourists when traveling. Cultural attractions are also considered to be one of the most attractive features. In this research, most of the respondents agreed that "Sichuan is a culturally rich destination" and they had heard about its famous cultural heritage before. But, based on their own travel experiences in Sichuan, they found those cultural attractions not to be as interesting and enjoyable as they expected.

There may be some reasons for this. Though, Sichuan has a lot of cultural resources, youth tourists may not know about its unique culture. When they travel, they just see the physical sites without knowing the culture behind them. And cultural attractions without something else interesting to youth tourists are perceived as too boring for youth tourists to visit.

- Youth tourists' perception of tourism activities in Sichuan

As the study results show, youth tourists' perception of the climate and environment in Sichuan is very positive. They think the weather conditions in Sichuan are very good for outdoor activities. They also feel very relaxed when traveling in the Sichuan Province. Sichuan as a tourism destination can satisfy youth tourists' needs for relaxation. Still, the respondents also think that the tourism activities in Sichuan are not interesting and attractive enough, especially at nighttime. They gave very negative answers regarding that aspect of their stay in Sichuan.

Given the premium placed on meeting and making friends, night is a very important element for youth tourists. After visiting tourism sites in the daytime, they are ready for an exciting nightlife and for sharing some good time with their friends. If they have to

spend the evenings staying in hotels or hostels, youth tourists will be bored and this will become a big problem in terms of attracting them to the area.

- Youth tourists' perception of tourism infrastructures/services in Sichuan

Tourism infrastructures/services are the basic tourism products which the destinations provide to tourists. Though, youth tourists don't pay much attention to accommodation and transportation conditions as much as other tourism segments do, they still think the tourism infrastructures/services in Sichuan should be improved. The most important finding is that there are language barriers for youth tourists traveling in Sichuan. Even domestic youth tourists feel it is hard to understand the dialect there. There are few people who can speak English. Since youth tourists are interested in communicating with local people as a way of exploring the destination, the language barrier becomes the biggest problem for all stakeholders.

- Youth tourists' overall perception of Sichuan as a tourism destination

The results are showing a bright future for Sichuan to develop youth tourism and attract more youth tourists. Most of the respondents would like to suggest to their friends and family members to visit Sichuan. Besides, Sichuan is considered to be a good tourism destination for youth tourists, they think that the "value of money" in Sichuan is acceptable and the Sichuan cuisine fantastic.

The only negative point pertains to the perception of safety. Because of the earthquake, some youth tourists still think raveling in Sichuan is still not very safe. Some of them probably visited tourism sites still under rebuilding, or may have seen some of the earthquake remains which may have caused them to feel unsafe.

Conclusion

As youth tourism has become a global trend, destinations can no longer ignore this segment. This research aims to help the Sichuan tourism authorities know more about the youth tourism segment and benefit from the development of youth tourism. Youth tourists' positive overall perception of the province provides for a bright future. Since Sichuan is considered to be a good destination for youth tourism, youth tourists are willing to

suggest their friends and family members to visit.

Youth tourists' preferences clearly displayed a strong liking for cultural and outdoor activities; hiking, mountain climbing, diving, eco-tourism activities and adventure tourism activities in particular. They are interested in destinations' cultures and outdoor activities, willing to accept new things, make friends when traveling, and communicate with local people. Most youth tourists use the internet to search for information about destinations. They care about price and rely on "words of mouth" about destinations. They mostly travel to explore other cultures, relax, and escape from work and study pressure.

As indicated in this research, youth tourists of different social-demographic factors show some commonness of psychographic factors and travel patterns with very small distinctions of location, nationality and time.

Specifically, the Sichuan-style food, world heritage sites, the climate and environment in Sichuan were very positively perceived by the respondents, regardless of their origin. Surprisingly enough, though, pandas, adventure tourism attractions and nightlife for which Sichuan is known and famous for were not recognized by the respondents. Clearly, youth tourists prefer less restricted, more spontaneous, and people-mingling activities.

It is also worth noting that youth tourists surveyed transportation conditions and language barriers as major growing problems for Sichuan tourism.

Most respondents, considered Sichuan to be a safe and welcoming destination for youth tourists. The high "value of money" in Sichuan was also identified as very positive by the respondents, who are thus likely to introduce friends or family and encourage them to travel there. Most of the respondents agreed that on the whole Sichuan was a good destination for youth tourists and were satisfied with their travel experience there.

In addition, the research results reveal that the youth tourists' psychographic factors and perceptions of this sample were developing in the same direction. The dependent variable (youth tourists' perceptions) was influenced by youth tourists' psychographic factors as is the case with travel patterns which also influence the perceptions of Sichuan. Though the

relationship between youth tourists' travel patterns and perception are moderate, the inferences by youth tourists' psychographic factors are stronger.

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Appendix One

Table 1: Summary of Hypothesis Testing

<i>Null Hypothesis</i>	<i>Correlation</i>	<i>Significance</i>
H1o: There is no relationship between youth tourists' psychographic factors and perception of famous tourism attractions in Sichuan.	0.552	0.000
H2o: There is no relationship between youth tourists' psychographic factors and perception of cultural attractions in Sichuan.	0.699	0.000
H3o: There is no relationship between youth tourists' psychographic factors and perception of tourism activities in Sichuan.	0.649	0.000
H4o: There is no relationship between youth tourists' psychographic factors and perception of tourism infrastructures/service in Sichuan.	0.339	0.000
H5o: There is no relationship between youth tourists' psychographic factors and overall perception of Sichuan as a tourism destination.	0.657	0.000
H6o: There is no relationship between youth tourists' travel patterns and perception of famous tourism attractions in Sichuan.	0.517	0.000
H7o: There is no relationship between youth tourists' travel patterns and perception of cultural attractions in Sichuan.	0.543	0.000
H8o: There is no relationship between youth tourists' travel patterns and perception of tourism activities in Sichuan.	0.554	0.000
H9o: There is no relationship between youth tourists' travel patterns and perception of tourism infrastructures/service in Sichuan.	0.352	0.000
H10o: There is no relationship between youth tourists' travel patterns and overall perception of Sichuan as a tourism destination.	0.566	0.000