

Prepared for the online abstract submission system
2nd World Research Summit on Tourism and Hospitality
Orlando, Florida December 2013.

1500 WORDS (count here is 1488)

Title

The role of mundane authenticity in international tourists' experiences; evidence from Chinese tourists to Australia

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of understanding tourists' experience is a growing interest area in tourism and hospitality study. The interest in experiences was boosted by the work of Pine and Gilmore (1998) and their widely cited work on the experience economy. Pine and Gilmore, as business researchers, have subsequently written about the authenticity of experiences as a further key concept in the conceptual toolkit for understanding consumers (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). In this trajectory of work they are following paths of inquiry already traversed by a number of tourism scholars (Cohen, 1979, 2007, 2011; MacCannell, 1976, 1990; Wang, 1999).

Importantly, much of the work commenting on authenticity, whether deriving from the business or tourism tradition, is conceptual rather than informed by evidence and data. The present study seeks to use the data rich world of online travel reporting to provide insights into the reporting of experiences. More specifically, it seeks to assess the kinds of experiences reported by international tourists when they write blogs and record their photographs. The context for the study is Australia, and the international tourists whose blogs are considered are Chinese.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION/LITERATURE REVIEW

The background literature for this study brings together an interest in assessing tourists' experiences, the role of authenticity; the power of social media to serve as a data base for tourism study, and the rise of Chinese tourists as a globally influential market.

Authenticity. Erik Cohen (2011) offers a comprehensive analysis which identifies multiple contemporary meanings of the concept of authenticity. Cohen assembles six current views; authenticity as customary practice or long usage; authenticity as genuineness in the sense of an unaltered product; authenticity as sincerity when applied to relationships; authenticity as creativity with special relevance to cultural performances including dance and music; and authenticity as the flow of life in the sense that there is not interference with the setting by the tourism industry or other managers. Cohen suggests that the uninterrupted, flow of life approach to authenticity best fits MacCannell's (1976) original work.

A key term in this literature is subjective authenticity which derives more directly from postmodern perspectives on social and cultural life. It can be understood as a

negotiated and socially constructed personal view. The term existential authenticity is used by some researchers as a special variant of subjective authenticity (Cary, 2004; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). This expression may be conveniently reserved for the most uplifting, dramatic and numinous traveller experiences where there are distortions of time and heightened meanings attached to the event. Such experiences may have consequences and insights for the travellers' views of their everyday world. This paper argues that there is also a mundane subjective authenticity; a term which recognises that everyday activities such as noting how others dress, eat, play and behave are real and genuine travel experiences with a different kind of authenticity power (Pearce, 2012). The term mundane authenticity can be added to the lexicon of expressions as a way of identifying non-transforming but still worthwhile insights into local sights and cultures. There has been limited attention to researching the extent and scope of this kind of tourist experience.

Travel blogs including photographs. Tourism has been very well documented as an information intensive business (Sigala, Christou & Gretzel, 2012). The importance of travel blogs and visual material to both reflect and influence tourists' destination images has been suggested by multiple researchers (O'Connor, Wang & Li, 2011; Rakic and Chambers, 2012). Travel blogs are now ubiquitous features of the travel world. These general assertions are supported directly by the empirical work of Ye and Tussyadiah (2011) who established that photographs do inspire visits. Additionally, they noted that tourists with different views of desirable experiences selected and preferred photographs which suited their underlying reasons for visiting any destination. These results are consistent with the theatrical metaphor used by Ryan (2005). He suggested that photographs depict the stage where tourists may, in future, act out their own personal performances or, alternatively, the visual records may serve as reminders of the stages on which they performed.

Chinese tourists and their reported experiences.

The emerging scale and global reach of the Chinese market is well recognised. Chinese outbound tourism has been growing quickly since 2001, with an annual growth rate of more than 20% every year. The total number of outbound tourists was 82 million in 2012. This figure makes China the largest tourist generating country in the world (China Tourism Academy, 2013). The influence of social media and its role in shaping Chinese tourist behaviour is worthy of special mention. The Chinese market, especially the independent travel market, is well connected and active online (Shao, *et al.*, 2012). In a recent released report, The China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) (2012) documented that there are 538 million "netizens" and the number is still climbing.

Building on these conceptual points the research initiated in this program of work uses the data rich world of online travel reporting to dissect international and, in this study, Chinese travel experiences. It specifically seeks to assess the role of mundane authenticity in the experiences reported by these international tourists.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

One hundred and eighty nine blogs written by Mainland Chinese tourists about their international travel experiences in Australia were sampled using a systematic selection process based on richness of detail, recency and their popularity amongst other readers. The blogs were identified from two key Chinese online communities: Qyer.com and Sina.com. The destination for these Chinese tourists was Australia's leading road trip route: the Great Ocean Road in the state of Victoria. It is a location

which attracts one third of all Chinese visitors to that part of Australia. Over 10,000 photographs from the 189 blogs were reviewed and coded. A team of coders were involved in the studies with 96% agreement being achieved on the assignment of the photographs to the categories which the researchers developed.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The descriptive components of the findings are provided in Table 1 which identifies the major categories and the specific elements used to sort the photographs.

Table 1: Chinese tourists' overall visual representations of the Great Ocean Road

Visual representations 1: Nature			
Coastal scenery- 12 Apostles	180/ 97.3%*	Sandy beaches	128/ 69.2%
Coastal scenery- Loch Ard George	66 / 35.7%	Surf/ocean	170/ 91.9%
Coastal scenery- London Bridge	106/57.3%	Ancient rainforests	93/50.3%
Coastal scenery- coastline	150/81.1%	Inland views/farms	85 / 45.9%
Visual representations 2: Australian wildlife			
Wildlife	142/76.8%	Interaction with wildlife	44/ 23.8%
Visual representations 3: Scenic driving experiences			
Driving experience	110/ 59.5%	Road signs	126/ 68.1%
Types of vehicles	103/55.7%	Driving maps	49/ 26.5%
Roads and paths	149/ 80.5%		
Visual representations 4: Food and wine			
Food (specified)	77/41.6%	Winery	2/1.1%
Restaurants/café	53/28.6%		
Visual representations 5: Outdoor activities			
Scenic flights	52/ 28.1%	Cycling	3/1.6%
Walking and hiking	4/2.2%	Camping	3//1.6%
Golf	27/14.6%	Horse-riding	1/0.5%
Visual representations 6: Accommodation			
Types of accommodation	94/50.8%	Service features	36/ 19.5%
Interior of accommodation	76/41.1%		

Visual representations 7: History, heritage and arts			
Aboriginal history and culture	10/5.4%	Lighthouses and shipwrecks	89/ 48.1%
Maritime history	2/1.1%	Heritage buildings	29/15.6%
Local arts	7/3.8%		
Visual representations 8: Australian lifestyle			
Pets culture	39/ 21.1%	Driving culture	47/ 25.4%
Australian kids playing	42/ 22.7%	Sports culture (surfing)	76/41.1%
Wellbeing (public facilities)	38/ 20.5%	Living cost	32/17.3%
Visual representations 9: Relationship experience			
Chinese solo pictures	96/ 51.9%	Interaction with western tourists	38/ 20.5%
Group pictures	56/ 30.3%	Observation of western tourists	97/ 52.4%

Examples of the content provided in the photographs in category eight appear in Figure 2.

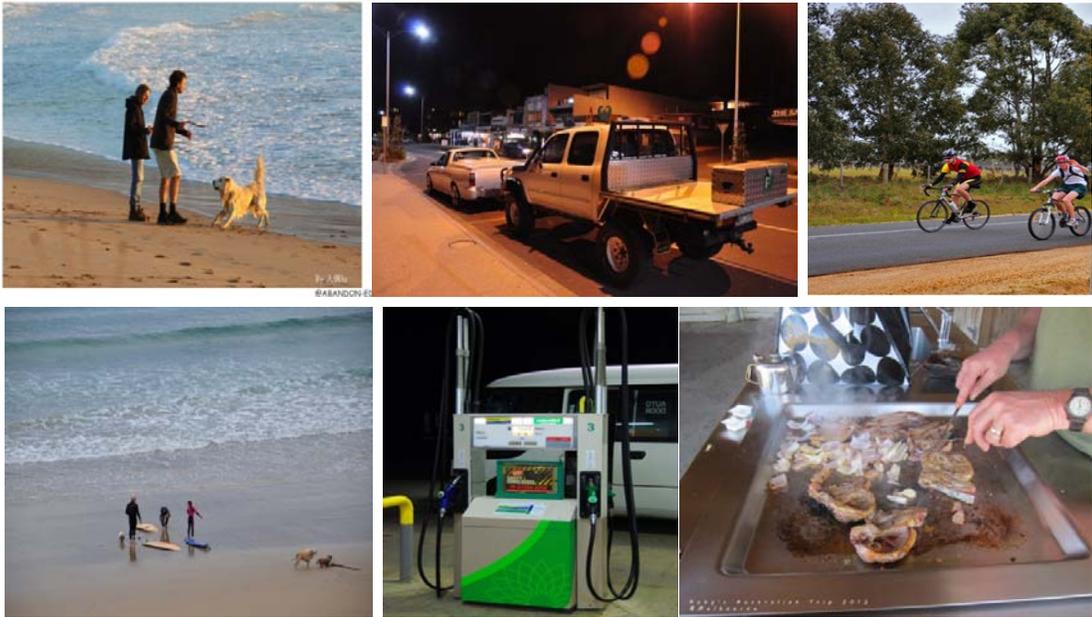


Figure 2 Visual images of Australian lifestyle

CONCLUSION /IMPLICATIONS

Two photographic representations, Australian lifestyle and relationship experiences, can be highlighted from the views of Australia depicted by the Chinese market. In total, one-third of the presented pictures were concerned with one or more of these issues. More specifically, over 3,000 images from the total of 10,912 photographs presented the various aspects of Australian lifestyle, including the pet culture (e.g. walking dogs on the beach and footpaths, the presence of cats in and around houses), driving culture (e.g. different types of vehicles - utes, SUVs, trucks and cars), sports culture (e.g. surfing, fishing, and walking), living costs (e.g. petrol/diesel prices, food in the meals in the restaurants, and prices for some activities), well-being (the quality of the public facilities), as well as the cheerful Australian kids at play. These lifestyle issues may sound ordinary to western observers. Nevertheless, they featured prominently in the photographic records of the Chinese tourists.

The results reinforce the applicability of the concept of mundane authenticity- the appeal and the prevalence of tourists observing the ordinary and small everyday behaviours and features of the places they visit. These kinds of interests are also specifically reported in studies of Chinese tourists in Germany (Fugmann & Aceves, 2013). The full paper develops the implications for both destination marketing and the tourism community which are generated by the new waves of international tourists taking great interest in the mundane and everyday aspects of the places they visit.