

EXPLORING THE DIMENSIONALITY OF TOURIST-HOST SOCIAL CONTACT AND THE TYPOLOGY OF TOURISTS

Introduction

Tourists are surrounded by the social environment when entering a destination. They cannot avoid interactions with local residents, though the extent of interaction can vary greatly. Such kind of contact is stated to have the power to influence tourists' intercultural sensitivity, intergroup prejudice, travel attitude, behavior and long term perception toward the destination (Allport, 1954; Binder, Zagefka & Brown, 2009; Cohen, 1972; Kirillova, Lehto & Cai, 2015). Nevertheless, considering the importance of social contact, limited research has been conducted to explore the underlining mystery of social contact. Social contact has long been treated as a qualitative and abstract concept rather than a measureable one. Though some scholars intended to quantify the concept of social contact, few studies can be found to deliver a systematic and convincing solution. Tourist-host social contact, as the most common form of face-to-face intercultural contact (Berno & Ward, 2005), gets even less attention in the tourism academia. Thus, the objectives of the current study are to explore the dimensions of tourist-host social contact and to further classify tourists according to their characteristics in tourist-host social contact. Hong Kong tourists traveling to mainland China were selected as the study context.

Methods

For the sake of generating primary and rich data, in-depth, face to face interview was adopted. According to the purpose of the study, all interviews were conducted in Hong Kong with Hong Kong permanent residents. The interviewers stopped to invite new informants when the information saturation was reached. As a result, 23 qualified informants were interviewed. Each session was between 26 and 88 minutes. Textual data from the transcripts were interpreted and analyzed with the thematic analysis. The software of NVivo 10 was applied to technically code and organize the transcripts.

Results/Discussion/Implication

Building on Cohen's tourist typology, the current study revealed the purpose, determinants, activities, intensity, impacts and attitudes of social contact between tourists and hosts via qualitative approach and a tourist typology was established, namely Dependents, Conservatives, Assessors, Explorers, and Belonging Seekers. The contributions of the current study is twofold. Theoretically, this study systematically investigated the dimensionality of social contact in tourism and five types of tourists were revealed accordingly. The findings provide new insights to the body of social contact research in tourism in general. Practically, the result of the current research can provide a clear picture of tourist-host social contact including its determinants and impacts, which can be used by both the tourism operators and government officials to boost positive and favorable contacts between two regions in residents' level.