

RESEARCH NOTE

CHINESE TRAVELERS' GROUP DECISION-MAKING

HANQUN SONG,* YING WANG,† AND BEVERLEY A. SPARKS†

*Department of Logistics, Operations, Hospitality and Marketing, Huddersfield Business School,
University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK

†Department of Tourism, Sport and Hotel Management, Griffith Business School,
Griffith University, Southport, Australia

This study investigates Chinese travelers' group decision-making. Small groups were recruited to participate in a simulated travel decision-making task where each group selected either an international destination or a domestic destination for the group vacation. This study examines travelers' group decision-making from the content (i.e., topics) and the process (i.e., verbal and nonverbal interaction process) perspectives. Analysis of the content of group discussions reveals 12 key topics. Participants' verbal behaviors are analyzed following Bales' Interaction Process Analysis, and non-verbal behaviors are examined based on seven nonverbal displays. This study provides insights into understanding group travel decision-making among Chinese travelers.

Key words: Group decision-making; Travel decision-making; Interaction process analysis; Chinese traveler

Introduction

Chinese travelers like to travel within small groups, such as friendship or family groups (Trivett, 2013). It is believed that these travel decisions are made jointly by multiple people within the group, which refers to group travel decision-making. Among the limited group travel decision-making studies, researchers mainly collect data retrospectively by asking travelers to recall and reflect the

decision-making experience after the trip (e.g., Decrop & Snelders, 2004). However, the literature largely ignores the real group interaction process, such as how group members communicate with each other (Song, Sparks, & Wang, 2017). Bales' (1950) Interaction Process Analysis (IPA) is commonly regarded as an established framework for the group interaction process (Burke, 2003). However, the current group interaction literature has generally neglected nonverbal content (Beck & Keyton,

2014), even though both verbal and nonverbal behaviors are important in the interaction process.

As one of the earliest studies to examine Chinese travelers' group decision-making, this study develops a coding scheme for analyzing group decision making. With a particular focus on the destination choice phase of group decision-making, this article aims to 1) identify the key topics discussed by group members, and 2) examine the dynamic interaction process from both verbal and nonverbal perspectives. This study will also contribute to the group interaction literature by incorporating both verbal and non-verbal behaviors together.

Method

The researchers adopt the observation approach to witness group interactive discussion processes of group travel decision-making. Ten small Chinese friendship groups, each with three to four members, were recruited to participate in a goal-oriented exercise of selecting a travel destination. Groups were randomly assigned to either the domestic or international task: "Imagine that you will travel together as a small group within [outside] Mainland China in the next six months; where would you like to go?" Each group had about 30 min to make group decisions. All of group discussions were audio and video recorded. The transcribed textual documents and videos were then imported into NVivo 10 for data analysis. The content (i.e., topics) and the process (i.e., verbal and nonverbal interaction process) perspectives were coded. Discussion topics were coded using an inductive approach, which focuses on the meaning captured in the data analysis. Verbal and nonverbal behaviors were coded using a deductive approach, using a codebook of verbal behavior based on IPA studies (e.g., Bales, 1950; Gorse & Emmitt, 2007), and a codebook of nonverbal behavior based on the work of previous researchers (e.g., Hall, Coats, & LeBeau, 2005; Jones, Gallois, Callan, & Barker, 1999).

Travel Topics in Group Discussion

The researchers identified 12 travel topics discussed by group members (see Table 1). These topics are classified into three categories: important, partially important, and less important based on their

Table 1

Importance of Travel Topics in Destination Selection

Discussion Topic	Importance in Selection
Activity	Important
Climate	Important
Cost	Important
Distance	Important
Safety	Important
Transportation	Important
Travel timing	Important
Travel style	Partially important
Visa application	Partially important
Accommodation	Less important
Dining	Less important
Language	Less important

roles of influencing destination selection. Seven topics (*activity*, *climate*, *cost*, *distance*, *safety*, *transportation*, and *travel timing*) were evaluated as important in the destination selection process as they may lead to rejecting a proposed destination. Partially important topics—*travel style* and *visa application*—were only important for international destination selection, while *accommodation*, *dining*, and *language* were classified as less important in decision-making owing to the lack of influence on destination choice.

This study confirms with the existing individual travel decision literature (e.g., Fesenmaier & Jeng, 2000; Jeng & Fesenmaier, 2002) in that Chinese travelers also focus on similar destination selection attributes (e.g., *activity*, *cost*, *travel timing*, *transportation*, *climate*, *safety*, *distance*, and *visa application*) when making group decisions. *Travel style* (i.e., package tour vs. independent travel) has not been identified in previous destination selection literature, but this study finds it partially important when choosing an international destination. Whether Chinese travelers are able to have an independent travel to an overseas destination depends on what type of visa they can obtain. For example, only permanent residents from selected cities in Mainland China are able to apply for an independent travel document (visa) to certain destinations, such as Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. Other travelers must apply for the group visa. Therefore, ineligibility for independent travels could easily reject an international destination option. *Language* is not a barrier for Chinese travelers visiting overseas

destinations, possibly due to the large amount of online information on overseas destinations in Chinese. The reason why both *accommodation* and *dining* are not identified as key factors influencing destination choice is that *accommodation* is normally discussed in the trip planning process, and *dining* is an en-route decision that is considered during the journey (Fesenmaier & Jeng, 2000).

Verbal Behaviors in the Group Interaction Process

Table 2 reports the frequency and percentage of the 12 verbal interaction categories. Task information dominated the group discussion (76% of the interaction acts), indicating that the decision process involved exchanging information, ideas, opinions, and suggestions. Task-related messages reflect a high frequency of giving answers and a low frequency of asking questions, indicating that most of the discussion relates to providing further information about the topics, with less focus on inquiring about information. The reason could be that in this study the simulation task of selecting a

destination was related to the early phase of decision-making, so decision-making required more points of clarification. Messages asking questions were limited, because asking a question is usually very short and precise, but answering a question involves more elaboration and persuasion. It can also be explained by the structure of conversation in that when a question was raised, multiple members responded with lengthy answers with further discussion of these answers.

Although tourism decisions are often concerned with leisure and holiday experiences, which are strongly associated with positive emotions, social-emotional messages appeared much less frequently than task-related messages. Social-emotional messages constituted 24% of the messages, showing that fewer feelings, positive or negative, were demonstrated by group members. Positive reactions exceeded negative reactions, showing that the decision was made in a generally relaxed, friendly, and supportive atmosphere. This study found that the group travel decision-making process had a much higher percentage in the social-emotional category than other types of group decision-making, such as business and academic decisions (e.g., Gorse & Emmitt, 2007). It seems that group members were fantasizing about a future vacation, possibly eliciting more expressions of emotions and feelings, such as social-emotional messages (Decrop & Snelders, 2004).

Table 2
Verbal Interaction Categories

Interaction Category	No. of Times Coded (%)
Task	
Asking questions	
Asking orientation	755 (9.4%)
Asking opinion	167 (2.1%)
Asking suggestion	109 (1.4%)
Subtotal	1,031 (12.8%)
Giving answers	
Giving orientation	2,157 (26.8%)
Giving opinion	1,893 (23.5%)
Giving suggestion	1,034 (12.9%)
Subtotal	5,084 (63.2%)
Total	6,115 (76.0%)
Social-Emotional	
Positive reaction	
Solidarity	82 (1.0%)
Tension Release	506 (6.3%)
Agreement	957 (11.9%)
Subtotal	1,545 (19.2%)
Negative reaction	
Antagonism	43 (0.5%)
Showing tension	228 (2.8%)
Disagreement	115 (1.4%)
Subtotal	386 (4.8%)
Total	1,931 (24.0%)

Nonverbal Behaviors in the Group Interaction Process

Table 3 shows the frequency and percentage of all nonverbal signals by group members from three functional perspectives: relational, procedural, and informational. *Smiling* (with 28.6%), *laughter* (with 23.6%), and *nodding* (with 22.4%), the top three nonverbal behaviors, were normally connected with positive emotions, because participants were friends anticipating an enjoyable journey together in the near future. The major function of these nonverbal displays was informational—a result consistent with previous studies finding that nonverbal behaviors generally serve to support the verbal communication (Hall et al., 2005). Major informational functions were *gesturing by speaker*, *smiling*, *frowning*, *nodding*, and *head*

Table 3
Nonverbal Behaviors

Behavior	Relational	Procedural	Informational	Total
Smiling	56 (7.8%)	172 (24.0%)	489 (68.2%)	717 (100%)
Laughter	301 (50.8%)	44 (7.4%)	248 (41.8%)	593 (100%)
Nodding	8 (1.4%)	114 (20.2%)	441 (78.3%)	563 (100%)
Head shaking	19 (8.9%)	48 (22.4%)	147 (68.7%)	214 (100%)
Gesturing by speaker	7 (3.3%)	27 (12.9%)	176 (83.8%)	210 (100%)
Frowning	23 (18.1%)	19 (15.0%)	85 (66.9%)	127 (100%)
Touching others	21 (24.1%)	31 (35.6%)	35 (40.2%)	87 (100%)

shaking, showing that these nonverbal behaviors were mainly displayed to support the verbal communication. *Touching others* both directly (procedural function) and indirectly (informational and relational function) influences the travel decision-making process. For example, *touching others* could stop the discussion, which could directly influence the decision-making process. However, *touching others' shoulders* shows a close relationship, which could indirectly influence the decision-making process.

Implications

In order to attract Chinese travelers, destination management organizations (DMOs) in China and other countries should promote some key information. As travelers mainly provided and exchanged task information in the verbal communication to make an agreed-upon decision, and they mainly used verbal messages, an informational function, to support the verbal messages, reliable and influential task information played a significant role in the group. Important destination selection issues such as *activity, climate, cost, distance, safety, transportation, and travel timing* should be actively promoted in the marking materials. Overseas destinations targeting Chinese travelers should keenly work with the Chinese Government to deal with *visa and travel style* issues to reduce Chinese travelers' concerns on both issues. In addition, social-emotional messages (from both verbal and nonverbal messages), mainly about positive and negative feelings, are also vital to the success of group travel decision-making; thus, DMOs should aim to creating positive feelings among group members in the

promotional materials and the real journey. After understanding the target market's travel interests, DMOs should include some tourism activities that might enhance group cohesiveness (e.g., a group of Chinese travelers tasting the local food and wine together) in the promotional materials.

Acknowledgment

We would like to acknowledge the financial support provided by Griffith University and Griffith Institute for Tourism.

References

- Bales, R. F. (1950). A set of categories for the analysis of small group interaction. *American Sociological Review*, *15*(2), 257–263.
- Beck, S. J., & Keyton, J. (2014). Facilitating social support: Member-leader communication in a breast cancer support group. *Cancer Nursing*, *37*(1), E36–E43.
- Burke, P. J. (2003). Interaction in small groups. In J. DeLamater (Ed.), *Handbook of social psychology* (pp. 363–388). New York, NY: Kluwer-Plenum.
- Decrop, A., & Snelders, D. (2004). Planning the summer vacation: An adaptable process. *Annals of Tourism Research*, *31*(4), 1008–1030.
- Fesenmaier, D. R., & Jeng, J. (2000). Assessing structure in the pleasure trip planning process. *Tourism Analysis*, *5*(1), 13–27.
- Gorse, C. A., & Emmitt, S. (2007). Communication behaviour during management and design team meetings: A comparison of group interaction. *Construction Management and Economics*, *25*(11), 1197–1213.
- Hall, J. A., Coats, E. J., & LeBeau, L. S. (2005). Nonverbal behavior and the vertical dimension of social relations: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, *131*(6), 898–924.
- Jeng, J., & Fesenmaier, D. R. (2002). Conceptualizing the travel decision-making hierarchy: A review of recent developments. *Tourism Analysis*, *7*(1), 15–32.

- Jones, E., Gallois, C., Callan, V., & Barker, M. (1999). Strategies of accommodation: Development of a coding system for conversational interaction. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 18*(2), 123–151.
- Song, H., Sparks, B. A., & Wang, Y. (2017). Exploring disagreement prevention and resolution in travel decision-making of young Chinese travelers. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing, 34*(2), 257–273.
- Trivett, V. (2013). *Rise of the Chinese independent traveler*. Retrieved from <http://skift.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/skift-chinese-traveler.pdf>

