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Raise a Glass to Wine Tourist Diversity

Not all Chinese wine tourists are the same. Although wine tourism is becoming more popular in China according to a study published recently by a group of researchers including SHTM professors Hanqin Qiu Zhang and Brian King, there is wide variation in tourists' level of involvement in wine-based activities. Drawing on the findings of a survey measuring levels of involvement in and perceptions of wine tourism, the researchers provide useful information for marketers aiming to develop targeted trips and marketing strategies.

Interest in wine tourism has increased worldwide as tourists seek “authentic and individualistic experiences” while on vacation, the researchers state. Chinese consumers' increased interest in wine tasting and general wine consumption is particularly notable, probably developing as new opportunities to experience wine culture have emerged. For instance, in 2012 the Australian government introduced a number of measures to increase the number of Chinese wine tourists, including Chinese-language websites and wine tours with Chinese-speaking staff.

Indeed, the researchers observe that although the emergence of Chinese wine tourism has “elicited considerable industry attention”, little effort has been made to understand and segment this new market. To develop effective marketing strategies, they claim, destination marketers need information about differences in consumer behaviour, motivations and attitudes. For instance, wine tourists may be “motivated by wine, lifestyle experiences that involve food and wine” or by the “passive enjoyment of the natural beauty of wine regions”.

Central to understanding these sorts of consumer behaviours is the concept of “involvement”. The level of tourist involvement in an activity or product is influenced by many factors, such as their perceived importance and risk and their anticipated pleasure.

The researchers contend that including the concept of involvement in market segmentation studies provides more sophisticated information than merely measuring socio-demographic and behavioural factors. Hence, they set out to differentiate Chinese wine tourists based on their involvement, travel behaviour and demographics.

Following interviews with 19 tourists attending wine tasting events in China, Hong Kong and Australia, and a pilot study, the researchers developed the Wine Tourism Involvement scale. They then incorporated this scale in a survey of Chinese tourists in Australia between December and February, a peak period for visits.

The 503 tourists who completed questionnaires after winery visits were mainly aged between 18 and 55, and about 60% were female. More than 60% were from the mainland, and the rest were from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan. Just over half had visited the country before, but only 36% were “serious wine tourists”. Still, more than 60% indicated that they were looking forward to “experiencing excellent wine”.

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In analysing their findings, the researchers identified the four key dimensions of Interests and Importance, Risk Importance and Possibility, Risk Avoidance, and Status Value. Just over 20% of the respondents scored low in all four dimensions and were classified as “low involvement wine tourists”. More than half of these came from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, and they regarded wine tourism as an incidental activity. Indeed, they were more interested in the overall experience than in trying excellent wine.

In contrast, 27% of respondents scored high on all four dimensions and were classified as “highly involved wine tourists”. For many of these, who originated in “diverse locations across Mainland China” according to the researchers, wine tourism and tasting excellent wine was their main purpose of visit, and they were highly involved in the activities on offer.

The third category was the smallest, representing 18% of the respondents, who again were more likely to come from the Chinese mainland. This group of “interest-driven wine tourists” scored highly on the Interests and Importance dimension, with almost 80% saying that they were mainly interested in tasting excellent wine.

The fourth and biggest category, accounting for almost 34% of the respondents and largely comprising Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and Beijing residents, were “high wine-risk perception wine tourists”. These respondents reported low levels of involvement but high levels of risk perception and avoidance. They were concerned, for instance, that they might be disappointed if they bought wines that did not live up to their expectations. Hence, they were likely to choose familiar or famous wines to avoid making the wrong decision.

The researchers note that tourists in the fourth category were quite similar to those in the “low involvement” category. For them, wine tasting was only an incidental part of the trip and they were less involved in wine-related activities.

Even so, the four categories of Chinese wine tourist were quite distinct, which would not have been as obvious had the researchers adopted a more conventional route to understanding market segments. Comparison of the four tourist groups showed “more similarities than differences” in their demographic and socio-economic characteristics, which are far more commonly measured.

The findings, then, will provide marketers with a better basis for targeting wine tourists with different strategies and destinations. For instance, only a minority of the respondents considered wine to be the focus of their trips. This reflects the recent emergence of interest in wine among Chinese consumers, but also works against any presumption that wine is the primary motive for wine tourists. Indeed, marketing organisations promoting tours should be aware that Chinese tourists usually include visits to wineries only as part of what the researchers describe as “a wider mix of attractions”.

Moreover, the respondents noted that sharing their experiences with others was an important motivation for undertaking wine tourism. The researchers interpret this as suggesting that

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marketers could design activities “in an interesting way” to provide opportunities for tourists to “show off their lifestyle and taste within their social circle”.

The perception of risk amongst respondents could also provide an opening for marketers. Although many of the respondents considered wine a “good quality gift”, an equally large number perceived it to be rather risky, as buying the wrong wine could mean losing face. To reduce their concern, marketers should emphasise the features and qualities of different wine regions and categories. Even more importantly, the researchers suggest, service employees could “develop an understanding of consumer demands and of Chinese gift-giving culture” so that they could provide more appropriate information and assistance.

Concerned with helping to “establish future marketing strategies and destination positioning”, the researchers ably demonstrate the heterogeneity of Chinese wine tourists. Yet they note the market’s dynamism, pushed by “the combined forces of globalisation and the Internet”, and conclude with a call for further investigations in the area. Wine consumption and culture are, after all, evolving rapidly among Chinese consumers.

Gu, Qiushi, Zhang, Hanqin Qiu, King, Brian and Huang, Songsan (Sam). (2018). Wine Tourism Involvement: A Segmentation of Chinese Tourists. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 35(5), 633-648.

Press contact : Ms Pauline Ngan, Senior Marketing Manager
School of Hotel and Tourism Management

Telephone : (852) 3400 2634

E-mail : pauline.ngan@polyu.edu.hk

Website : <https://shtm.polyu.edu.hk/>