

Shopping Alone Not Enough for Mainland Visitors

Hong Kong's tourism industry must offer mainland visitors more than just shopping opportunities, argues the SHTM's Professor Cathy Hsu in a recently published co-authored research article. While not downplaying the significance of Hong Kong as a "shopping paradise", the researchers show that also significant are the promotion of novel local attractions and a focus on the need for relaxation.

Significance of Mainland Tourism

One of the most important features of world tourism today is the rapid growth in outbound Chinese tourists. The researchers note that these people "are more likely to be young and middle-aged individuals, and most of them are well educated and earn a decent monthly income". Industry stakeholders who understand how such travellers behave will have a distinct advantage as competition to attract tourist spending intensifies.

In a broader sense, given that half of all mainland travellers to Hong Kong in 2004 were repeat visitors, it is essential to understand what helps to shape a mainland visitor's intention to return, because that intention is usually a precursor to an actual revisit.

To achieve this aim, the researchers set out to measure tourist motivation, the experience of visiting Hong Kong and perceived constraints on returning as autonomous factors influencing a revisit. These factors, they posited, would influence the attitude towards a revisit and the intention to actually revisit. It is important to highlight a subtle distinction here – an attitude is an emotional state and an intention is a prelude to action.

The researchers note that travel experience can influence attitude "both positively and negatively", but most often influences revisit intention positively. Tourist satisfaction also, and understandably, has a positive

influence on revisit intention. However, little attention has been paid to the link between tourist satisfaction and tourist attitude. The researchers thus separated the experience of having visited Hong Kong into just the fact that an outbound tourist had visited and overall satisfaction based on all visits.

Having considered these more positive elements of revisits, the researchers determined to account for "perceived constraints" against returning. Yet they also note that such constraints might affect an individual's intention to return but not their attitude about revisiting.

A Beijing-Focused Study

The researchers targeted Beijing residents because the city is the largest long-haul mainland tourism market. After convening 3 focus groups with 23 of the city's residents, they developed a questionnaire that was used in two pilot studies of around 200 respondents each. The final survey, conducted by telephone, involved 501 successful interviews.

Of the interviewees, just over half were women, just under half were aged between 20 and 29, approximately 60% were married and just over one third earned a monthly personal income of between RMB1,500 and RMB3,499. A word of caution is necessary about these income levels. The researchers write that "bonuses and irregular payments in addition to salary are common in China". This, they note "could explain why a seemingly low income group of people can afford to travel".

Generally Satisfied Visitors

Overall, the interviewees were "satisfied with their past experience of visiting Hong Kong", had favourable attitudes towards visiting again and intended to do so in the future. Yet the intensity of the intention to revisit

varied between interviewees, suggesting that Hong Kong could lose the opportunity to attract some tourists outbound from Beijing.

Another interesting finding was that although a greater number of visits positively influenced the interviewees' intention to return, it did nothing to change their attitudes about returning to Hong Kong. Rather, attitudes about returning were influenced by satisfaction with previous visits. Understandably, satisfaction also positively affected the intention to actually revisit.

The parallel importance of past visits and satisfaction creates an interesting scenario. The researchers note that the association of satisfaction with attitude suggests the importance of "emotional ties with the destination" based on a "general impression" of earlier experience. In contrast, the equally strong influence of past visits on revisit intention may reflect that revisits are "rational planned behaviour". Knowing more about how these two behavioural dimensions influence revisits would be very useful to organisations such as the Hong Kong Tourism Board.

Broadening the Revisit Experience

Of immediate practical concern amongst the researchers' findings is that visitors do not become less likely to seek out new experiences when they visit Hong Kong more. The expectation that tangible activities such as shopping become more appealing was not borne out by the interviewees' responses. Although still very interested in shopping, the more experienced visitors were also motivated by the search for new attractions and the need to relax.

Because repeat visitors naturally find novelty elusive, the researchers suggest that destination marketers and managers should "engage in tourism development and marketing strategies" which make new experiences more accessible. For instance, as many of Hong Kong's beaches and outlying islands are inaccessible without local knowledge, the Hong Kong Tourism Board could conduct a promotional campaign to highlight their novelty for mainland visitors.

Turning to relaxation, the interviewees were not looking for opportunities to do as little as possible but rather were keen to spend carefree time with people close to them while in Hong Kong. The researchers suggest that the Tourism Board could use marketing campaigns that feature "happy moments with family and friends and their joy of being away from daily problems". They also mention a possible emphasis on "relaxing shopping environments", bolstered by free shopping guides at major entry points and "a sufficient number of Mandarin-speaking retail service staff in areas frequented by mainland travellers".

Guarding Against Disinterest

The researchers conclude with a caution – of all the possible revisit constraints, only disinterest was significant. Tourism industry stakeholders should pay attention to this situation because "repetition itself could lead to disinterest". The objective should be to "foster sustainable visitation interest among visitors from mainland China".

Points to Note

- Mainland Chinese repeat visitors are a cornerstone of the Hong Kong tourism industry.
- Generally, these visitors are satisfied with their experience of visiting Hong Kong.
- Novelty and relaxation should be promoted along with shopping to encourage revisits.
- The possibility of disinterest amongst repeat visitors should be combated to ensure sustainable revisit intention.

Huang, Songshan and Hsu, Cathy H.C. (2009). Effects of travel motivation, past experience, perceived constraint and attitude on revisit intention. *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 48, No. 1, pp. 29-44.