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PolyU Study Reveals Motivation for Family Vacations with Young Children

Families with young children have rather different motivations for going on holiday than families with older children, according to the findings of a study by Dr Mimi Li, Dr Dan Wang and Ms Wenqing Xu of the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and a co-researcher. Having analysed online travel reviews and blogs, the researchers found that parents believe “travelling as a family contributes positively to family bonding and interaction” and that providing young children with new experiences and lasting memories is the most important part of a successful trip. Tourism promoters should thus take the specific needs of this group into account to better cater to them.

Many parents today work long hours and find it difficult to spend sufficient quality time with their young children. As the researchers suggest, holidays have become a “means of enjoying ideal and happy family time” and can create “sound learning experiences” through fun and entertainment, as well as creating lasting memories. A family holiday is becoming “a necessity rather than a luxury”.

Families are extremely important to the travel industry, and many children are involved in making family holiday decisions, such as where to go and what to do. The researchers recognise that although children “have no buying power”, they often have a strong influence on their parents. They note that children today are allowed quite a lot of freedom with regards to decision making, which may in part be done to assuage parents’ “guilt due to frequent absences in their children’s daily life”. Even if children are not fully involved in the decision-making process, parents still take their children into consideration when choosing holiday activities because they will suffer the negative consequences “if the destination fails to satisfy their children”.

The extent to which children are involved in decision making depends on their ages, with older children having more influence on the overall decisions, partly because they “are able to negotiate with their parents using strategies and techniques”, the researchers argue. Most research on family travel with children has focused on families with older children, perhaps because they “are logically consistent and able to express their own opinions”. Little attention has thus been paid to the travel behaviour of families with young children, who still influence the decision-making process “simply through their presence, regardless of their limited cognitive capacity and language skills”.

The researchers conducted an exploratory study to examine the “vacation motivation of nuclear families with young dependent children” aged 2 to 4 years. They used netnography, a research method that makes use of the growing popularity of user-generated content sites to covertly explore a topic with a “broad geographical spread of participants and a representative sample”.

In this case, the researchers chose to use Mafengwo, one of the largest travel communities in China, where users share their travel experiences and provide helpful information on attractions,

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hotels, restaurants, entertainment and other topics. The site contains 10 million reviews covering 60,000 destinations worldwide. From these, 50 blog posts contributed by 39 members were selected as suitable for inclusion in the study. Five personal travel blogs written by parents with children under the age of 4 were also included; of these, two were maintained by both parents and the other three by the mothers. The blogs contained 47 posts and associated discussions.

The reviews and blog posts were analysed using a procedure that aimed to identify salient categories of information. Following a thorough process of analysis, “five motivation themes emerged from the coding process”: spending quality time with children, creating family memories, learning and development, self-compensation and compensation for the children.

Although all of the children mentioned in the blogs were aged between 2 months and 4 years, the majority were aged 3 and 4. More boys than girls travelled with their parents, and more than a third of the children were frequent travellers. Most of the holidays were taken by nuclear families, although among the Chinese bloggers it was common for the mother-side grandmother to travel with the family. This was not only to give the grandparents a memorable experience, suggest the researchers, but also to provide the parents with reliable help with the childcare so they could also relax and spend time together.

Many of the parents mentioned that they had been “criticised and questioned” before taking their young children on holiday, yet they managed to “create a pleasurable holiday for their children and themselves”. Some of them valued the opportunity to spend quality time with their children, such as one couple who started to travel around the world with their 2-year-old son. The blog described how the experience of travel with their son and witnessing his development had been “a true privilege”. A Canadian mother wrote about how hiking with her children gave her time to bond with them, as they talked about “anything and everything that comes to mind” and helped each other “overcome obstacles like streams, muddy patches, steep hills”.

Many of the parents mentioned that they took their children on holiday to create special memories for them, even though many also acknowledged that the children were probably too young to have lasting memories of their trips. One parent described how her son would look at photos of the trip and remember where they were taken, while another mentioned that when her little girl heard “Singapore” on the television, she would tell her mother that she had been there. Family holidays also created happy memories for the parents, with one father recommending that all families should spend more time with their children on holiday, regardless of whether the children remember their experiences.

The parents also attached great importance to the educational function of travel activities. One mother explained that she enjoyed hiking trips with her children because she believed it would stimulate their interest in nature and science. Others wanted to give their children opportunities to “understand the world better” and to accept and respect other cultures from a very young age.

For many parents, holidays were valuable because they gave them a chance to watch their children learn and develop and to explore their “infinite potential”. The researchers note that

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parents' realisation that holidays made their children "smarter, stronger, healthier and more independent than at home" was perhaps why most of them encouraged others to take a vacation with their children at the end of their posts.

Another theme the researchers identified was that many family vacations were "stimulated by regretful childhood memories". Some parents wanted to provide their children with the kinds of experiences they wished they had received when they were children. As one mother wrote on Mafengwo, "I have decided to travel with him once a year to compensate for my own childhood. I want my baby to grow up without regrets".

Other parents felt they wanted to compensate for having excluded their children from previous holidays. Some had made promises to their children because they felt guilty after holidaying without them. Another motivation was to compensate for the lack of time they spent with their children outside of vacations, which also created a sense of guilt.

The researchers show that the common reasons for travelling do not necessarily apply to nuclear families, especially those with young children for whom "a vacation is but an extension of daily life rather than novelty seeking". Such information will be useful for tourism promoters wanting to develop a child-friendly image and provide "facilities and activities tailor-made for both adults and young children". In particular, immersive activities that families can enjoy together will give parents the quality time that they want to spend with their children on vacation.

Li, Mimi, Wang, Dan, Xu, Wenqing, and Mao, Zhenxing (Eddie). (2017). Motivation for Family Vacations with Young Children: Anecdotes from the Internet. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 34(8), 1047-1057.

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 : www.polyu.edu.hk/htm