Consumer information technologies in intercultural tourism: a case study of Chinese outbound backpackers

Wenjie Cai
School of Hospitality and Tourism Management
University of Surrey, United Kingdom
E-mail: w.cai@surrey.ac.uk

&

Brad McKenna
Norwich Business School
University of East Anglia, United Kingdom
E-mail: b.mckenna@uea.ac.uk

Introduction

Backpacker sociality is a networking sociality, which is created through intersecting movements between physical and virtual space (Castells, 2002). Interweaving with physical sociality, Chinese backpackers (CBs) are highly active on their virtual world. This study, focuses on connectedness of CBs and their daily social networks through Information Communication Technologies (ICTs). CBs with embedded Chinese values therefore tend to practice and perceive information services uniquely. This paper aims to explore the relationships among cultural values, information services perceptions and adoption, as well as how these service affect CBs perception of the value of technology. To achieve this aim, we investigate the use and acceptance of information technologies by Chinese outbound backpackers in Europe, by exploring their perceptions, practice and preferences of different types of ICT services in an intercultural context.

Literature Review

The Confucian value of Harmony, has been regarded as the foundation of Chinese values (Bond, 1986; Fan, 2000) and significantly impact the pattern of social interactions (Chen, 2002). The influence mainly reflected in the determination of built up connections called '*guanxi*', which is a fundamental factor in Chinese society

(Lin, 2011). Chinese believe the establishment of *guanxi* in the initial stage of group communication has vital impact on the harmonious interactions.

According to Reisinger and Turner (1998), Chinese cultures are regarded as high power distance, low uncertainty avoidance and collectivistic cultures whilst Western cultures are opposite. In terms of power distance, Chinese society tends to be more socially hierarchical, obedient and cooperative. Furthermore, with the influence of collectivism, Hsu (1971) emphasizes Chinese are social and psychological dependent on others and have a strong group orientation; therefore individualistic behaviour is regarded as expense to others. Reisinger and Turner (1998) conclude that in Chinese culture, there are more rules of obedience, avoidance of conflict, and 'face' issues, it is essential to maintain harmonious relations, and Chinese tend to control and restrain emotional expressions. Chinese culture and values influence significantly on the formations of attitudes, perceptions and behaviours, leads the distinct characteristics of CBs.

CBs rely highly on ICT during travel (Lim, 2009). Molz (2006) argues the visibility in this social relation incorporated by online travel websites: On one hand, online audience can see the world through travellers' gaze by formats of photography, video and texts; on the other hand, backpackers make themselves visible through various ways. The issue of surveillance has been addressed in discussions between mobilities and ICT (Molz, 2006, Green, 2002). Backpackers are watched by their audience through social media or online forums, which brings both positive and negative repercussion for mobile social relations (Cooper, 2002). Having a constant presence online can be seen as positive, which allows continual communication for backpackers, who are hypermobile and do not follow planned itineraries. However, this constant presence might also make backpackers feel oppressive. For some backpackers, with the influence of one-child policy, they are expected to keep updates in order to appease worried relatives and friends. These updates thus become supplied surveillance from their parents to know where they are and know whether they are safe or not, which to some extent limit their freedom of travelling. Travellers can always be contacted by any means of social media or instant messengers, therefore, they can never hide or escape from this implied surveillance. Molz (2006) suggests the expectation of visibility and availability by audience through online social networks may exacerbate rather than appease.

It therefore becomes necessary for us to understand how ICT is being used in this context. To better understand how consumers perceive and derive value from the ICT services they use, McKenna et al. (2013) derived a model (Figure 1) which combines the Theory of Organizational Information Services (TIOS) (Mathiassen & Sørensen, 2008) with the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) (Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, & Davis, 2003).

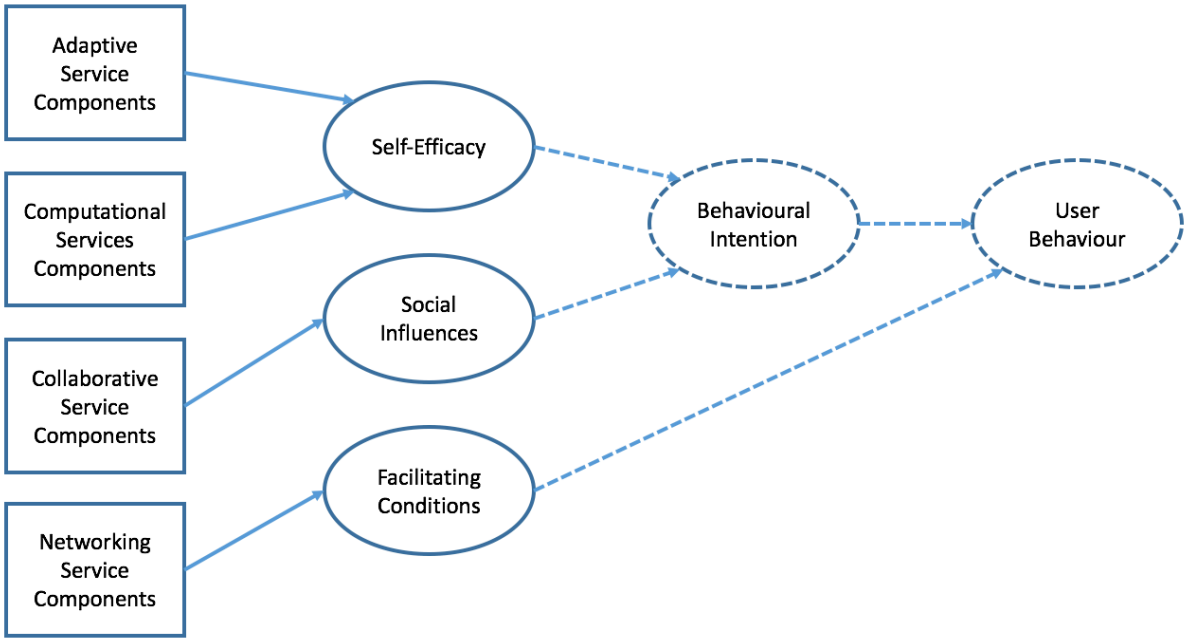

Figure 1: Research model of McKenna et al. (2013)

The model was created based on several propositions, and the actual mapping of services to the variables (dashed lines) has not been explored. This paper gives us the opportunity to explore these relationships in an intercultural context.

The model proposes that when particular ICT service types are being used by consumers, that certain use and acceptance variables also apply to the use of that ICT service. TIOIS defines the service types as follows:

- *Computational service* components support users in transforming available and formalized information into stimuli by following standardized and repeatable patterns of information processing.
- *Adaptive service* components interpret and transform available and emergent information into stimuli by adapting patterns of information processing to specific contexts.
- *Networking service components* aid users in producing information on phenomena in an environment by following standardized and repeatable patterns of information processing.
- *Collaborative service components* support users in producing information about phenomena in an environment through interpretation of the specific context (Mathiassen & Sørensen, 2008; McKenna, Tuunanen, & Gardner, 2013).

The UTAUT model defines the variables as follows:

- *Self-efficacy:* the judgment of one's ability to use a technology to accomplish a particular job or task.
- *Social influence*: the degree to which an individual perceives that important others believe that he or she should use the new system.

- *Facilitating conditions*: the degree to which an individual believes that an organizational and technical infrastructure exists to support use of the system (Venkatesh et al., 2003).

Methodology

To achieve an understanding of CBs perception and practice of ICT, a mobile ethnographic study was adopted. Three ethnographic studies were undertaken between June 2014 to December 2014 by following three different groups of CBs in Europe using participant observations and in-depth interviews. Data was also collected through China's biggest online travel forum Qyer.com, instant messenger, social networking applications such as Wechat, as well as everyday practice of ICTs.

The data was applied to the model of McKenna et al. (2013). A task based analysis was performed to determine how CB use different service types. This involved understanding the steps involved in using a service. The tasks were then able to be mapped to each of the four service types from the model. This then further enabled us to explore the use and acceptance variables for each service type.

Results

Our findings are illustrated in Figure 2. In the example services, the bolded and underlined text represents ICT service tasks that are typically carried out by CBs. The remainder of the tasks are for backpackers generally. Our findings show that CBs mostly use collaborative services throughout their trips. Collaborative services are highly linked with social influences, which aligns with collectivistic values of Chinese culture. These services produce information by sharing travel information and updating safety status in backpackers' social circle. Chinese collectivistic culture and high uncertainty are main motivations of small group travel. CBs look for travel companions online to avoid uncertainty of the foreign environment.

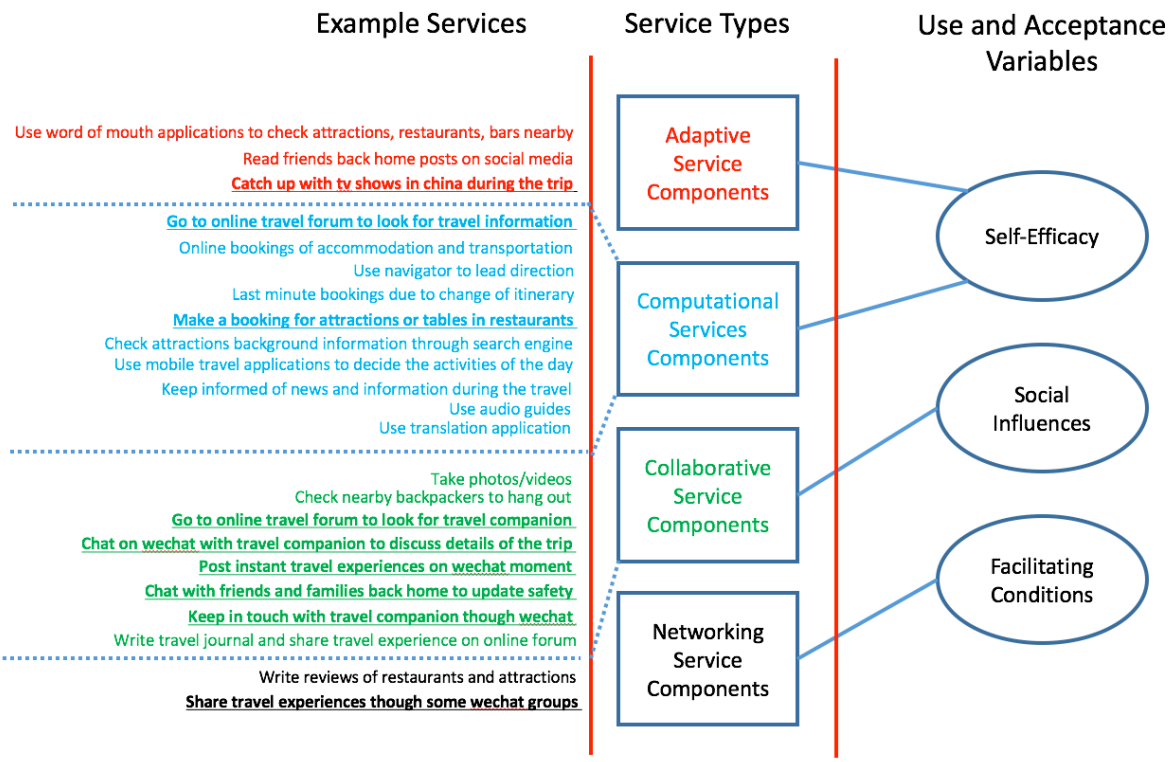

Figure 2: Results of the study

The maintenance of '*guanxi*' largely affects Chinese usage of information services. On one hand, CBs want to maintain the status of connectedness with their social circles, on the other hand, some CBs took detailed considerations about frequencies and the content of their posts. Constantly posting on Wechat during the trip is a preferable way for CBs to keep family members and loved ones who worry about their safety informed. In Chinese culture, relationship between generations is comparatively close; furthermore, in the past thirty years, Chinese one-child policy had enormous social impacts that the new generation become the core of the family. As a result, 'excessive attention' from parents (Zhu, 2009) leads the prior concern of safety when their kids undertake a long-haul journey.

The next most used service type was computational services which are highly linked to self-efficacy. This service type allows backpackers to fulfil the trip smoothly and relates to how CBs use technologies to assist themselves for travel related activities. This relates strongly to general backpacker culture which suggest independence and learning new skills throughout the trip. One key characteristic of backpackers is they are relatively information sensitive. With availabilities of the Internet, they are able to apply multiple tools and technologies to assist them to accomplish various tasks. For CBs, they particularly prioritise 'learning through backpacking'.

Our findings also show that the least used services are adaptive and networking services. Adaptive services, which are also linked to self-efficacy, allow the CBs like

to use technologies which enable them to integrate their daily lifestyle (from home) into their trip. These types of services need to be easy to use without the user needing to ask for help. Maintaining connectedness also enable CBs to get access to their mundane lives. Although most informants expected to escape their daily lives when backpacking, they faced challenges of this escapism when the Internet was connected.

In networking services, CBs are able to create networks to link together geographically separated travellers. In these networks, backpackers are free to produce information of travel tips, experiences and reviews available for others to use as a travel reference. CBs try to avoid uncertainty and risk by gathering travel information from multiple sources before the trip. This information is in high demand by other CBs therefore there are many popular platforms available to produce information in various forms. Therefore, facilitating conditions are important for this activity as Internet based platforms are available for backpacker communities to share, exchange, and obtain travel information through digital formats such as chat groups and online discussion forums.

Conclusion and Implications

This study has explored the role that culture values play the research model by examining the the relationship between service types and use and acceptance variables. This study contributes in several ways. It is the first paper to explore the relationship between the service types and the use and acceptance variables by applying the model in an intercultural tourism context. The study also found that Chinese prefer to use mostly collaborative services which proves that Chinese collectivist values can be implemented through ICT.

References

Bond, M. H., & Hwang, K. K. (1986). The social psychology of Chinese people. Oxford University Press.

Castells, M. (2002). The Internet galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, business, and society. Oxford University Press.

Chen, G. M. (2002). The impact of harmony on Chinese conflict management. Chinese conflict management and resolution, 3-17.

Cooper, G. (2002). The mutable mobile: social theory in the wireless world. In Wireless world (pp. 19-31). Springer London.

Fan, Y. (2000). A classification of Chinese culture. Cross Cultural Management: An International Journal, 7(2), 3-10.

Green, N. (2002). Who's watching whom? Monitoring and accountability in mobile relations. In Wireless world (pp. 32-45). Springer London.

Hsu, F. L. (1971). Psychosocial homeostasis and jen: Conceptual tools for advancing psychological anthropology. American anthropologist, 73, 23-44.

Lin, L. H. (2011). Cultural and organizational antecedents of guanxi: The Chinese cases. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *99*(3), 441-451.

Lim, F. K. G. (2009). 'Donkey Friends' in China: The Internet, Civil Society, and the Emergence of the Chinese Backpacking Community.

Mathiassen, L., & Sørensen, C. (2008). Towards a Theory of Organizational Information Services. Journal of Information Technology, 23(4), 313-329.

McKenna, B., Tuunanen, T., & Gardner, L. (2013). Consumers' Adoption of Information Services. Information & Management, 50, 248-257.

Molz, J. G. (2006). Watch us wander': mobile surveillance and the surveillance of mobility. Environment and Planning A, 38(2), 377.

Reisinger, Y., & Turner, L. (1998). Cultural differences between Mandarin-speaking tourists and Australian hosts and their impact on cross-cultural tourist-host interaction. Journal of Business Research, 42(2), 175-187.

Venkatesh, V., Morris, M. G., Davis, G., & Davis, F. (2003). User Acceptance of Information Technology: Toward a Unified View. MIS Quarterly, 27(3), 425-278.

Zhu, X. (2005). A Probe into the Characteristics of Backpackers and Their Influences on the Development of Chinese Tourist Destinations [J]. Tourism Science, 3, 007.

Zhu, X. (2009). Theoretical and Empirical Study on Backpacker Tourism, China Travel and Tourism Press.