

Understanding the smartphone usage of Chinese outbound tourists in their shopping practices

Abstract

Chinese outbound tourist shopping was a prominent phenomenon in many destinations worldwide before the COVID-19 pandemic, but smartphone usage in it had rarely been addressed. This study draws upon social practice theory and the theory of affordances to examine how Chinese tourists use smartphones during their shopping process in Australia. Based on a combination of participant observations and semi-structured interviews, the study argues that Chinese outbound tourists use smartphones not only to improve their shopping competences but also to regulate the meaning making of their shopping practices. Further, these links are made through the actualised affordances of smartphones including, among others, looking for products based on stored images, accessing product information in Chinese, and communicating with others at home on shopping for them. This study unravels the entanglement of smartphones, Chinese outbound tourists and their shopping practices, and provides directions for maximising the value of smartphones in shopping-related tourism management and marketing, especially to the Chinese market.

Keywords: tourist shopping; smartphone; social practice; affordance; Chinese outbound tourism

Introduction

Shopping is a common activity in which tourists engage during their travel (Timothy, 2005). This is especially true for Chinese outbound tourists, who had become a main group of international travellers worldwide before the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the China Tourism Academy (2020), there were 155 million Chinese tourists spending USD134 billion abroad in 2019, with shopping making up a major proportion of their outbound travel expenditure. Tourism organisations in many destinations developed a series of strategies such as social media marketing to take advantage of this aspect of Chinese tourism (Clark, 2014).

Given its prevalence and importance, Chinese outbound tourist shopping has attracted increasing academic attention in recent years. A review of existing studies in this research area identifies four main themes: shopping motivation (e.g., Correia et al., 2018; Hung et al., 2020; Tsang et al., 2014), shopping satisfaction (e.g., Lee & Choi, 2020; Lin & Lin, 2006; Wong & Wan, 2013), market segmentation (e.g., Choi et al., 2016; Kwek & Lee, 2013; Yeung & Yee, 2012), and product preference (e.g., H. Jin et al., 2020; Li & Ryan, 2018; Zhu et al., 2016). Arguably, most of the existing research on Chinese outbound tourist shopping is conducted from a social psychological perspective, and pertains to the line of inquiry into shopping behaviour, which, in a broad sense, involves activities people engage in before, during, and after the purchase of products or services (Cohen et al., 2014). These studies primarily examined what Chinese outbound tourists say and feel about shopping, but did not reveal much information on their actual shopping process. Most recently, Jin et al. (2020) and Jin et al. (2021a) highlighted the intensive use of smartphones as a distinct feature of Chinese outbound tourist shopping. However, there exists no research that exclusively investigates how Chinese outbound tourists use smartphones to shop on site.

The present study seeks to fill this research gap by examining the smartphone usage in Chinese outbound tourist shopping based on social practice theory and the theory of affordances. Chinese outbound tourist shopping is conceptualised as a social practice, with smartphones being key material elements that constitute this practice. This study aims to address the research question: *How do Chinese outbound tourists use smartphones during their shopping process?* By answering this question, the study attempts to advance the knowledge of Chinese outbound tourist shopping by revealing and explaining the role that smartphones play in this consumption practice. It is among the first study to combine social practice theory and the theory of affordances to unravel the entanglement between smartphones, Chinese outbound tourists and their shopping practices. Practically, this study provides directions for destinations and retail businesses to maximise the value of smartphones in shopping-related tourism management and marketing, especially towards the Chinese market.

Literature Review

Smartphones have penetrated every aspect of modern life, and tourism is certainly not an exception (Wang et al., 2016). It is reported that tourists use smartphones for various activities, ranging from information search and accommodation booking to social networking and making payments (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2011; World Travel and Tourism Council, 2019). These widespread uses of

smartphones have generated great interest in tourism academia, with the research conducted thus far revolving around two major themes: the adoption of mobile technology and the impacts of smartphone usage on tourist experience.

Research addressing the adoption of mobile technology in tourism is primarily based on the technology acceptance model (TAM) or its extensions such as the united theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT) (Fong et al., 2017; Gupta et al., 2018). These studies show that tourists' attitudes towards and intention to (re)use smartphones (apps) are affected by a range of factors mainly including their perception of usefulness, ease of use, risk and social influence. In particular, Park and Tussyadiah (2017) and Dayour et al. (2019) focused on examining tourist perceived risk of smartphone adoption, and its antecedents and consequences, in the context of backpacking and mobile hotel booking respectively. Wang et al. (2014) argued that the smartphone usage of tourists is not only influenced by cognitive beliefs identified in the TAM, but also shaped by their motivations, use of smartphones in previous trips and everyday life, and situational facilitators. However, recent studies (see Cai, McKenna, Wassler, et al., 2021; Pourfakhimi et al., 2020) called for going beyond overused TAM and UTAUT to bring in fresh perspectives of technology use and make stronger theoretical contributions.

In terms of the impacts of smartphone usage on tourist experience, Wang et al. (2012) stated that smartphones enable tourists to become more creative and spontaneous, which results in greater satisfaction. These positive impacts were further highlighted in Wang et al. (2014), where the smartphone was praised as an effective tool to make changes in tourists' travel activities (e.g., easy planning and more flexible) and affective experience (e.g., more informative and less stressful). In contrast to Wang et al. (2012) and Wang et al. (2014), more recent studies started to examine tourist smartphone usage as a double-edged sword (Aye, 2018; Dickinson et al., 2016; Yu et al., 2018). For instance, Yu et al. (2018, p. 585) found that the smartphone used during family vacations can function as an 'interaction generator' for communicating and sharing, but also as an 'interaction inhibitor' causing distractions and conflicts.

Overall, it can be seen that researchers have gained valuable insights into tourist smartphone usage. Nevertheless, the existing body of research is limited, at least in three ways. Firstly, most studies examined tourists' perceptions of and attitudes towards smartphone usage, with their on-site uses of smartphones receiving far less research attention (Kirova & Thanh, 2019). Tussyadiah (2016) argued this is problematic, as understanding how tourists actually use smartphones provides a better foundation to assess the role of smartphones in tourism. The second limitation is that, although shopping is a prevalent tourist activity, there are few studies investigating the smartphone usage in the context of tourist shopping. This lack of research is in sharp contrast to the general shopping literature, where the role of mobile technologies has been extensively discussed (Cavalinhos et al., 2021; Faulds et al., 2018; Fuentes & Svingstedt, 2017). For example, Cavalinhos et al. (2021) provided a comprehensive review of consumer use of mobile devices in-store, with attitudes and behaviours towards the use of mobile devices, the acceptance of mobile technology, and attitudes and reactions regarding mobile marketing being identified as three major research streams. Thirdly, the current knowledge of tourist smartphone usage, similar to that of consumer use of

mobile devices in shopping (Cavalinhos et al., 2021), is predominately generated from Western contexts, and is thus likely to have limited applicability to non-Western tourists. As a response to the abovementioned limitations, this study aims to examine the smartphone usage of Chinese outbound tourists during their shopping process.

Theoretical Background

Social Practice Theory

Social practice theory is a collection of accounts about the workings of social life that centre on social practices. Although there exists no unified practice approach, practice theorists explicitly treat social practices as the basic unit of analysis. As Reckwitz (2002) claimed, ‘the social world is first and foremost populated by diverse social practices which are carried by agents’ (p. 256). In Giddens’ (1984) words, ‘the basic domain of study of the social sciences ... is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of societal totality, but social practices ordered across space and time’ (p. 2). Social practice theory thus provides a new level of analysis that allows for the integration of individual and social levels of causal explanation, helping to transcend the dualisms of agency and structure (Shove et al., 2012).

Shove et al. (2012) put forward an analytical scheme where social practices consist of three elements: materials, competences and meanings. Materials include ‘things, technologies, tangible physical entities, and the stuff of which objects are made’; competences encompass ‘skill, know-how and technique’; and meanings refer to ‘symbolic meanings, ideas and aspirations’ (Shove et al., 2012, p. 14). This scheme has been widely accepted and used to analyse the features of diverse social practices, such as mobile shopping (Fuentes & Svingstedt, 2017) and cruise tourism (Lamers & Pashkevich, 2018). As Shove et al. (2012) stated, the elements that constitute a social practice are interlinked and shaping each other. In Reckwitz’s (2002) terms, a practice forms “a ‘block’ whose existence necessarily depends on the existence and specific interconnectedness of these elements” (p. 250).

The Theory of Affordances

The theory of affordances originated in the field of environmental psychology, where Gibson (1979) defined the affordances of an environment (e.g., substances, surfaces and objects) as what it offers to its inhabitants. Gibson (1979) argued that affordances are neither physical nor phenomenal, but are properties taken with reference to the observer. Affordances can be seen as perceived action possibilities (Raymond et al., 2017). For instance, a bench on a wilderness trail offers a range of possible affordances which differ depending on the people who come into this environment, their circumstances and goals. It may offer a simple place for a tired walker to sit, for someone seeking a way to manage anxiety it may offer a quiet place to meditate, for a family with a baby it offers a good surface to change a diaper. The bench has many physical features that offer a range of different possible actions for different people in the setting. In the words of Heft (1989), these possible actions are ‘potential affordances’, while what people actually do with the bench are ‘actualised affordances’. This distinction between potential and actualised affordances is crucial, as an environment has a variety of potential affordances, only a subset of which are utilised in

conjunction with a particular intentional goal at any given time (Heft, 1989).

The theory of affordances has been applied to many research fields to understand technology use, such as the information systems (Waizenegger et al., 2020), tourism (Cai, McKenna, & Waizenegger, 2020), and the sociology of technology (Bloomfield et al., 2010). Especially, this theory offers a third way to conceptualise technologies between the opposing poles of technological determinism and social constructivism. Technological determinism argues technologies cause social changes to come about, while social constructivism emphasises the interpretations of actors using technological artefacts (Bloomfield et al., 2010). An affordance results from the relationship between an individual and a technological artefact, and is not solely independent of the features of the artefact or an intentional representation of the individual (Borghini et al., 2021). Although the affordances of technology have been widely explored in the literature (Cai, McKenna, & Waizenegger, 2020; Canhoto, 2021; Waizenegger et al., 2020), only a small number of studies, through an affordance lens, investigate smartphone as an integrated and portable device with multiple functional features and communicative capacities.

The present study draws upon social practice theory and the theory of affordances to examine how Chinese tourists use smartphones during their shopping process in Australia. It conceptualises Chinese outbound tourist shopping as a social practice, with smartphones constituting a distinct material element of this practice. More specifically, this study attempts to unravel the smartphone usage of Chinese outbound tourists by showing how smartphones are linked to other constitutive elements (competences and meanings) of their shopping practices. It extends the application of social practice theory in tourism research from describing the features of elements that comprise tourism practices to examining the linkage between these elements. Further, the study elaborates the linkage between smartphones and the elements of competences and meanings by identifying the affordances of smartphones, which are actualised by Chinese tourists to facilitate their shopping performances. Accordingly, the theory of affordances provides novel explanations of how the material element of social practices are linked to other elements, and responses to the call for shifting from a human-centric focus to the neglected materiality in tourism studies (Cai, McKenna, & Waizenegger, 2020).

Methodology

The present study took a qualitative approach, building upon the epistemological orientation of interpretivism (Bryman, 2016). Data for this study were collected by the first author, who is from China, through participant observations and semi-structured interviews. The author acknowledges the role of researchers as part and parcel of the construction of knowledge (Bryman, 2016). Two techniques were implemented to enhance the trustworthiness of this study. The first technique is data triangulation. Both observation and interview data were collected in the study. This use of multiple sources of data helps to make the findings more trustworthy. Meanwhile, the lead author continuously examined and reflected on his values and behaviours when collecting data, with reflexive notes being kept throughout the fieldwork. This self-reflexivity also contributes to increasing the credibility of the present study. The procedures of data collection and analysis are explained in detail as below.

The participant observations in this study were conducted in Cairns, Australia, in August 2016. Specifically, these observations were carried out in five shopping venues: a duty-free store, a supermarket chain, night markets, the airport (domestic terminal) and a local market. Cairns was one of the most popular cities that Chinese tourists visited in Australia, and the selected venues cover a variety of shopping places where they primarily patronised (H. Jin et al., 2020). When doing observations, a passive participation strategy was adopted to capture Chinese tourist shopping performances as unobtrusively as possible (Spradley, 1980). Upon perceiving the subjects as Chinese tourists, the author did not disturb them, but started to watch their shopping performances, with the relevant smartphone uses received particular attention. A total of 110 observations were recorded during the fieldwork, and the field notes were written immediately after each observation. In these notes, tourists involved in each observation were coded as Ta, Tb etc, and shop assistants as SAa, SAb, etc. The method was approved by the relevant institutional human research ethics committee as the selected venues are common public places and the observation of the shopping behaviours of tourists without their consent at a distance in these situations was not expected to cause any harm (Angrosino, 2007).

The semi-structured interviews were carried out in China in May 2017. The authors employed a purposive sampling method to select participants, who had travelled to Australia since 2015 with various demographic characteristics (such as gender, age, and occupation) and travel types (mode of travel and time of visit) to get rich and up-to-date information on Chinese tourist shopping practices. As a result, data saturation was reached when a total of 32 Chinese citizens were recruited as the interview participants, whose profile is presented in Table 1. Each interview consisted of two parts: in the first part, the author established rapport with the participants by collecting the general information on their travel to Australia; the second part proceeded by asking them detailed questions about their shopping experiences in Australia, including the relevant smartphone uses. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or through phone calls with an average length of 49 minutes. All of them were recorded with consent and then transcribed verbatim, with the participants being coded from I-01 to I-32.

[Table 1]

The analytic process in this study started with extracting the data relevant to the research questions from all observation field notes and interview transcripts. Then the data were coded in NVivo 11 by following Braun and Clark's (2006) guide to performing theory-driven thematic analysis, which was guided by social practice theory and the theory of affordances. Specifically, the coding process was divided into three phases. Firstly, the first author familiarised himself with the data by reading and re-reading them, and produced initial codes of actualised affordances of smartphones. The second phase was about searching for themes that could reveal the linkage between smartphones and other constitutive elements of Chinese tourist shopping practices. The author went through all the codes, thought about the relationships between them, and then sorted them into different themes. In the third and final phase, the author reviewed and refined the themes. Patton's (2002) two judging criteria – internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity – were employed to make sure that data within themes cohered together meaningfully, while there are clear

distinctions between themes. The themes were also checked and refined to ensure that they accurately reflect the meanings evident in the data. As a consequence, a final thematic map was generated, with Table 2 providing examples of data extracts and coding categories.

[Table 2]

Findings

Improving Shopping Competences

Competences, as key elements of a social practice, primarily encompass the knowledge and skills needed to carry out the practice (Shove et al., 2012). For Chinese tourists, the performance of shopping practices in Australia requires not only general shopping competences accumulated at home but also specific knowledge and skills associated with shopping in the destination, which many of them are not familiar with (H. Jin et al., 2020). Interestingly, this group of consumers improve their shopping competences on-site through the actualisation of affordances of smartphones, which mainly include: looking for products based on stored images, getting product information in Chinese, comparing prices between home and the destination, and doing translations.

Looking for Products Based on Stored Images

Knowing what to purchase is an integral part of shopping competences. It is commonly observed that Chinese tourists look for products, especially healthcare products, based on images stored on their smartphones. In this case, the storage feature of smartphones affords Chinese tourists to find the products to be purchased. If a product on site is the same as the image saved on smartphones, Chinese tourists would choose the product without hesitation. As recorded in Observation 83:

Ta, Tb and Tc are all looking for healthcare products based on the product images stored on their smartphones at the airport. Tb shows Ta a product image on her smartphone and asks Ta where it is on the shelf. Ta finds the product and points at it for Tb. Then Tb picks two boxes of the healthcare product.

All three Chinese tourists in this observation have made shopping preparations in advance such that their search for the healthcare products to a large degree is targeted. With the images of products under consideration stored on smartphones, the process of selection is simplified as comparing the products on site with, and choosing these identical to, the saved images. Most Chinese tourists are capable of doing this kind of selection, even if they do not know much about the products or cannot read English. That is to say, the actualised affordance of smartphones in storing and sharing product images improves their shopping competences by dumbing down the requirements to select the right products.

The affordance of smartphones in storing and displaying product images is also leveraged by Chinese tourists to bridge the language barrier. Although some Chinese tourists cannot speak English, such affordance enables them to communicate with the English-speaking shop assistants, and accomplish the task of purchasing the same products as the stored images. Again, as noted in Observation 83:

... Tc holds a bottle of healthcare product and goes towards an English-speaking SAa. She talks to SAa in Chinese, but SAa cannot understand what she said. Then she hands the product and her smartphone to SAa, with the saved images showing on the screen. SAa zooms in the image and compares it to the product. Then SAa nods and says, 'Yes!'

As the case of Tc and SAa in Observation 83 shows, some of Chinese tourists and shop assistants in Australia still do not have language in common. The shopping practices of these monolingual tourists are hard to proceed if they rely on using Chinese to communicate with the English-speaking shop assistants. Under this circumstance, the product images stored on smartphones function as mediums of communication between the two parties, which effectively avoid the language barrier.

Getting Product Information in Chinese

Chinese tourist purchases of products in Australia can not only be targeted as discussed above, but also be improvised. In fact, Chinese tourists frequently emphasised in the interviews that they bought much more products than they had planned. There are many products that were originally not included on their shopping list, but they decided to purchase them on-site. In this case, the search feature of smartphones affords Chinese tourists to get product information in Chinese on site to improve their shopping competences. As can be exemplified by the following interview transcripts:

Interviewer: Are the products you took home the same as those you planned to purchase?

I-08: A lot more. When we (I-08 and his wife) were in the store (Chemist Warehouse), we found this product is good and that one is good too, so we bought much more than we had planned.

Interviewer: How did you know these products are good?

I-08: We searched as we browsed.

Interviewer: How did you search?

I-08: We used our phones. If you searched these products on Taobao (a Chinese mobile app for online shopping), you would definitely find the introduction about them at some stores. So you can have a general idea of what they are. There are also consumer ratings and reviews available for reference.

Product attributes, such as brand and benefits, and consumer ratings and reviews are two major types of information that Chinese tourists looked for. Further, this information is mainly accessed on smartphones from two sources: Chinese mobile apps for online shopping and Chinese search engine. With the rapid development of online shopping in China, there are increasingly more overseas products available on various e-commerce platforms, where provide detailed descriptions of these products and/or numerous consumer reviews in Chinese. More broadly, if an overseas product is searched on the Internet, a lot of images and articles relevant to the product, and links to purchase it will show up. Arguably, Chinese tourists in general prefer to read product information in Chinese rather than that in English while shopping in Australia. It takes much less time to digest the Chinese version of product information, and based on this, they can get a better understanding of what a product is and how to use it. The search engine on

smartphone affords Chinese tourists to instantaneously get the Chinese information of overseas products on the Internet in general, and this on e-commerce platforms in particular, such that this information is commonly used as reference to guide their shopping enactments on site.

Meanwhile, the actualised affordance of using smartphones to search product information in Chinese may well increase Chinese outbound tourists' unplanned spending. As quoted earlier, I-08 and his wife bought 'a lot more' than they had planned, because while browsing on site, they searched with their smartphones and found 'good' products to purchase. This experience is shared by many other interview participants in the study. The frequent exposure of food safety incidents in China makes Chinese customers generally show trust towards and preference for Western products (Zhu et al., 2016). As Jin et al. (2021b) found, Chinese tourists describe products made in Australia, especially food and health-care products, as safe and trustworthy, but associate the counterparts made in China with low quality and untrustworthiness. Against this backdrop, Chinese tourists are very likely to find more 'good' products like I-08 did than they originally knew with the assistance of smartphones.

Comparing Prices between Home and the Destination

The price advantage of brand-name products in the destination over these in China is a primary reason why shopping dominates Chinese outbound travel (Zhu et al., 2016). Chinese tourists generally count purchasing these products at a relatively low prices as good value for money. Using smartphones to compare product prices on site to those on the e-commerce platforms at home makes up a pervasive action of Chinese tourists during their shopping process. For instance, I-28 and her husband bought a Beats headphone and explained, 'The main thing is that it is cheaper (than that at home). I did not know how much it was at the domestic shopping malls. At least, it was 100 RMB cheaper than that on JD (a Chinese app for online shopping)'. Further, she added, 'When I bought it, I looked at the price (on site) first. Then I immediately used my phone to check how much it was at home. We all calculated prices on the phones.'

Like I-28, Chinese tourists can search a specific product directly on e-commerce platforms to compare the price difference. It is also observed that Chinese tourists use their smartphones to scan barcodes on product packages, and then they will be promptly directed to the same products on the e-commerce platforms they open. In either way, smartphones afford Chinese tourists to quickly compare prices between home and the destination in real time so that they are able to assure themselves that their purchases are good value for money. Additionally, doing price comparisons includes a step of converting the price from Australian to Chinese currency. As indicated by I-28, this conversion can be made by using the calculator on smartphones.

Doing Translations

The dictionary app on smartphones affords Chinese tourists to translate product information from English to Chinese. Such affordance is typically actualised by those Chinese tourists who can read some English. They use mobile dictionary app as an assistant tool when they meet new words during their shopping process. For instance, I-27, who worked at a foreign company, mentioned that as he speaks English at

work, his English is good overall, but he still needs to look up some words about ingredients while purchasing healthcare products in the pharmacies. When he was further asked how he looked up these words, he answered:

Use Youdao (a popular dictionary app in China) on my phone. For example, when selecting a product that assists sleep, I want to know whether there are chemicals such as melatonin contained in it. I looked up its ingredients, and found that they are all plant extracts. So it's good.

The Youdao dictionary app is not only used by some Chinese tourists like I-28 to look up English words, but also employed by others to translate paragraphs of texts about product introduction. There is a function called 'photo translation' on the app so that if Chinese tourists take a photo of English texts on a product package, the app will translate the texts in that photo immediately to Chinese equivalences. In either way, this dictionary app affords Chinese tourists to convert unfamiliar information into the familiar, and accordingly, their shopping competences in Australia are improved.

The actualised affordances of smartphones stated above establish tight links between this technological artefact and Chinese tourist shopping competences in Australia. These affordances allow Chinese tourists to store, access and process information in new ways, which contributes to overcoming information asymmetries that characterise traditional tourist shopping (cf. Timothy, 2005). Smartphones thus become tools that enhance the empowerment of Chinese tourists, making them more informed and independent customers in the non-ordinary retail settings. As the shopping practices of Chinese outbound tourists essentially are carried out in unusual environments, the actualised affordances of smartphones identified above and those mentioned in previous mobile shopping studies have more differences than similarities (Cavalinhos et al., 2021; Fuentes & Svingstedt, 2017). For instance, most of the above-stated affordances are to varying degrees utilised by Chinese tourists as a way to bridge the language barrier, which does not exist in daily shopping contexts.

Regulating Meaning Making

Meanings, as essential components of a social practice, represent the social and symbolic signification of participating in the practice (Shove et al., 2012). In this study, smartphones are used by Chinese tourists to regulate the meaning making of their shopping practices, especially in the maintenance of *guanxi* (relationship) (H. Jin et al., 2020). The actualised affordance of smartphones is manifested in communicating with others at home on shopping for them.

Chinese society is largely based on collectivistic culture, where people, in either business activities or personal lives, pay much attention to maintaining *guanxi* (Bian, 2019). Although outbound travel means Chinese tourists are temporarily away from home, their emphases on social networks continue, with products brought back by them functioning as material carriers of *guanxi* maintenance (H. Jin et al., 2021b). Smartphones are found to be extensively used by Chinese tourists as a communication tool in the purchase of these products. As shown in Observation 105, which was recorded at the duty-free store.

Ta starts a video call with his wife on WeChat and says, 'I want to buy a handbag for you.' He points

the camera at a handbag on the shelf and asks his wife, 'How about this one?' Then they communicate about the colour, price and brand of this handbag. All of a sudden, the video call is dropped. Ta sends his wife a voice message on WeChat, explaining, 'I had a bad connection. There's no 4G network here. I will take photos of the handbags and send them to you to choose.'

WeChat is the most commonly used social networking app, on which Chinese tourists communicate with others at home to shop for them. This app supports Chinese tourists to connect with non-present others in many ways, including sending messages, sharing photos, and making calls. Accordingly, as Ta in Observation 105 did, Chinese tourists are able to instantly contact others at home on product selection and purchase whenever needed. This not only helps ensure that Chinese tourists can purchase the right products for others, but also makes their shopping process more flexible. Nevertheless, it should be reminded that good network infrastructure is a prerequisite for customers to actualise the affordance of smartphones in communicating with their important others at home. If Chinese tourists, like Ta in Observation 105, experience poor Internet connections, their shopping performances would be adversely affected.

The connectivity of smartphones not only affords Chinese tourists to actively communicate with others on product selection and purchase, but also opens a door for others to request these tourists to shop for specific products. For example, I-25 was asked by her relatives to buy healthcare products and described, 'They knew (I was travelling in Australia). We all post photos on WeChat, right? Once you posted your photos, they knew you were there. Then they would contact and ask you whether there was something available over there.' It is obvious that I-25's travel information shared on the social networking app acts as a trigger for her relatives to make shopping requests. In general, Chinese outbound tourists would not directly refuse the requesters as this is likely to damage, or even break, the *guanxi* between them (H. Jin et al., 2021b). But accepting others' requests often means that Chinese outbound tourists need to spend extra time and effort looking for, selecting and purchasing the requested products, with the process of these involving communication, compromise, or even displeasure. As a result, shopping upon requests is described by some interview participants as a burden. In the words of Arnold (2003), smartphones are 'Janus faced', with contrary performances and implications being co-present.

The actualised affordance in communicating with others at home on shopping for them shows how smartphones are linked to the meaning making of Chinese tourist shopping practices. Although it is recognised in the wider retail literature that consumers contact family and friends via mobile apps during their shopping process (e.g., Fuentes & Svingstedt, 2017), the main purpose of this activity is to ask for advice, not to shop for non-present others, either as gifts or as per requests. In this sense, Chinese outbound tourists have utilised the connectivity of smartphones to shop in ways that satisfy their particular social needs. Given the importance of *guanxi* maintenance for this group of customers (Bian, 2019), it can be argued that the actualised affordance in communicating with others on shopping for them makes a strong link between smartphones and the meaning making of Chinese tourist shopping practices.

Discussion and Conclusion

Chinese outbound tourist shopping was a prominent phenomenon in many destinations worldwide before

the COVID-19 pandemic, but the smartphone usage in it had rarely been addressed. Based on a combination of participant observations and semi-structured interviews, the present study draws upon social practice theory and the theory of affordances to examine the smartphone usage of Chinese outbound tourists during their shopping process, with the key findings being summarised in Figure 1.

[Figure 1]

This study finds that Chinese outbound tourists use smartphones not only to improve their shopping competences but also to regulate the meaning making of their shopping practices. It demonstrates that, smartphones, as material elements of Chinese tourist shopping practices, are closely linked to other constitutive elements of these practices (i.e., competences and meanings). Further, this study argues that the links between these elements are made through the actualisation of affordances of smartphones. The affordances of smartphones, which Chinese tourists actualise to improve their shopping competences, include looking for products based on stored images, accessing product information in Chinese, comparing prices between home and the destination, and doing translations; the actualised affordance of smartphones for regulating meaning making is manifested in communicating with others at home on shopping for them. In this way, the study unravels the entanglement between smartphones, Chinese outbound tourists and their shopping practices.

This study advances the knowledge of Chinese outbound tourist shopping by uncovering how Chinese tourists use smartphones during their shopping process in Australia. It is among the first to exclusively investigate the role that smartphones play in tourist shopping in general, and in Chinese outbound tourist shopping in particular. More importantly, the study conceptualises smartphones as material elements of Chinese outbound tourist shopping from a social practice perspective (Shove et al., 2012). By elaborating the smartphone usage of Chinese tourists in their shopping practices, it depicts a detailed picture of the linkage between different elements that constitute a social practice. Accordingly, the study extends the application of social practice theory in tourism research from describing what the features of elements that comprise tourism practices are to revealing how these elements are linked.

Further, the theory of affordances offers a new explanation for how the material elements of a social practice, such as smartphones examined in this study, are linked to other constitutive elements of the practice. This theory neither privileges smartphones as technological objects nor focuses on the interpretation of Chinese outbound tourists as subjects, but balances objective properties of technology and subjective interpretation in actual uses. The study thus contributes to rectifying the human-centric examinations of the technology usage that can be commonly found in the tourism literature (Cai, McKenna, & Waizenegger, 2020). Meanwhile, this study, consistent with Yu et al. (2018) and Duffy (2019), confirms that smartphones for tourists are a double-edged sword, and it is important to apprehend this paradoxical nature of smartphones, if we are to more fully understand the roles that they play in tourist behaviours and experiences.

More broadly, the synthesis of social practice theory and the theory of affordances exemplified in this study offers an innovative and integrated approach to unravel the materiality of social life including

tourism. Social practice theory emphasises the importance of materiality by treating materials, such as technologies and tools, as one of the constitutive elements of social practices (Shove et al., 2012). However, this theory can hardly explain the links between materials and other elements of social practices, and why these elements are linked the way they are. The theory of affordances is complementary to social practice theory, in that affordances focus on the enabling and constraining features of materials and the action possibilities they offer to people (Bloomfield et al., 2010; Raymond et al., 2017). It is through social practices that we as researchers can identify which affordances of materials are (not) actualised, and examine what interventions are required to optimise the actualisation of affordances. Accordingly, the synthesis of these two theories sheds new light on the entanglement of materials, people, and social practices.

The findings of this study have practical implications for shopping-related tourism management and marketing, especially to the Chinese market. Firstly, retail businesses at tourist destinations are recommended to have decent network coverage and provide free Wi-Fi connections. These information communication and technology infrastructures contribute to smoothing the shopping processes of Chinese outbound tourists, given their wide uses of smartphones as indicated in this study. In the words of Lee and Choi (2020), these infrastructures function as ‘dissatisfiers’, which would induce tourist shopping dissatisfaction, if not provided. Secondly, it is imperative for retailers to reconsider how to train shop assistants to cater to the Chinese tourists equipped with smartphones. As with retail businesses in general, customer service is of great importance to the shopping provision for tourists (Timothy, 2005). Only if shop assistants know the way how Chinese tourists use smartphones to shop, can they more actively engage with, and provide better service for this group of customers. Moreover, it is suggested that retailers devote more attention to mobile marketing. Mobile marketing utilises multiple distribution channels to promote products and services via mobile devices (see Faulds et al., 2018). As Chinese shoppers commonly carry their smartphones with them, mobile marketing has the potential to influence and even (re)shape their shopping process, expectations and demands. For example, QR codes should be available for customers to scan to get the latest product and promotion information through smartphones. Location-based services can also be provided to send customers greetings, coupons, and notifications.

The present study has certain limitations. Firstly, this study is confined to examine how Chinese outbound tourists use smartphones at shopping venues. It does not take into account their smartphone usage beyond the venues, which might be relevant to their product selection and purchase. It is thus worthwhile to investigate how Chinese tourists’ on-site and off-site smartphone uses for shopping are connected during their outbound travel. It should also be noted that the data in this study were collected before the outbreak of COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic has suspended Chinese outbound tourism, and is expected to affect the interests and preferences of Chinese outbound travellers in the future (X. C. Jin et al., 2021). More research, therefore, would be warranted to examine and extend the findings of this study.

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