

Chinese Generation Z for European destinations

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of Chinese Gen Z in trip planning to long-haul European destinations. The participants were recruited via social media in March 2024. Interviewees were collected through purposive sampling based on the criteria set ahead: 1) Chinese Gen Z – those born between 1995 and 2010; 2) plan to undertake the first trip to Europe; 3) travel on their own instead of travelling in a package tour. This study follows the five main steps of photo elicitation interviewing. The results provide useful implications for research and industry alike.

Keywords: *trip planning, Generation Z, Chinese independent travelers, Europe.*

1. Introduction

Generation Z (Gen Z) gradually enters the market as the youngest and largest consumers' group. Those born between 1995 and 2010, also known as the digital generation, display unique characteristics from their precedent cohorts. In particular, the use of social media has defined Gen Z. However, the occurrence of this demographic change has not been fully recognized given its effects on tourism demand and structure. Tourism scholars have acknowledged the importance of exploring Gen Zs' behavioural patterns separate from other demographic cohorts, as in various occasions new theorizations emerge from empirical research.

The behaviours of this cohort in China pose a huge challenge for marketers too as they differ not only from their predecessors but also from Western consumers (Chen et al., 2022). Their choice and behaviour are largely influenced by content on social media often created by influencers (Chiu & Ho, 2023). Tourism literature has explored young Chinese's motivation to travel (Jiang & Xu, 2022), emotions during vacations (Choi et al., 2022), and pro-environmental behaviour (Shen et al., 2023), but so far little attention has been paid to trip planning process, in particular the reasoning behind travel to certain destinations. Thus, to advance knowledge on tourists' behaviour, it is important to consider new tourist cohorts.

The Chinese Gen Z cohort brings new behavioral patterns that could redefine or expand existing theory and knowledge in tourists' behavior. Therefore, the aim of this study is to provide a comprehensive analysis of Chinese Gen Z in trip planning to long-haul European destinations.

2. Literature review

Due to the great social, economic and cultural developments in China, the country is experiencing dynamic changes. The Chinese Gen Z is rising to be the future of consumption in China, accounting for 20% of the total population (Yang et al., 2020). From 2020 to March 2023, the proportion of Generation Z consumers among online travelers in China fluctuated in the range of 23% to 29%, signaling the beginning of a reshaping of consumption patterns in the tourism industry. According to the survey, graphic and video-based new media, such as RED, Douyin, Kuaishou and Weibo, have become the primary sources of destination-related information for Generation Z travelers, followed by online travel agencies, search engines and family/friends. The price budget remains the top consideration for Generation Z travelers, as well as the convenience of transportation and safety issues. Although most of Generation Z still choose to book their trips through online travel agencies, the visual-driven media is increasingly becoming an important way for Generation Z to book trips.

Travel planning is considered one of the important behavioural aspects of travel (Kim et al., 2015). Planning a leisure trip is complicated, packed with uncertainty, and a lengthy process (Jeng & Fesenmaier, 2002). A traveller often needs to obtain a substantial amount of information in order to develop a plan for the upcoming trip. Tourists usually face a lot of vacation choice elements such as the choice of destination, accommodation, activities, attractions, travel modes and routes, dining, sub-destinations, etc. (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). For example, independent Chinese travellers plan and buy a lot of vacation elements to enhance the sense of control and mitigate risk perception at the cost of travel flexibility (Xiang, 2013). Understanding many decisions in the choice of a vacation itinerary is central to a consumer's vacation planning (Hyde, 2008). For vacation itinerary planning, travellers need to choose a set of sub-destinations, travel routes, attractions and activities (Hyde, 2008). However, there is scant research centred on the tourist decision process of itinerary planning.

3. Method and data

The participants were recruited via social media – Xiaohongshu (RED) in March 2024. RED was chosen because most users on this platform are young people, especially the Gen Z cohort. It is a platform specialized in lifestyle sharing about experiences of various consumptions. Social media participant recruitment enabled investigators to approach specific hard-to-reach informants. Interviewees were collected through purposive sampling based on the criteria set ahead: Chinese Gen Z who intend to undertake the first independent trip to Europe.

The photo elicitation interviews were conducted online via Tencent Meeting between March and July 2024, with audios recorded after obtaining informed consent. Webcam use was not required. Photo elicitation allows participants' own understanding of the subject and its meaning in the context of their particular view of the world. There are various methods to conduct photo elicitation interviews, including researcher-based

and respondent-based approaches. This study adopted a subject approach in which the participants are asked to collect visuals that represent the intended sites and destinations in when visiting Europe in the near future. This participatory approach facilitates asking participant questions, ease rapport between researcher and interviewee and prompt emotional connections to memories, thus providing more meaningful accounts. This study follows the five main steps of photo elicitation interviewing: identify a topic for investigation; identify and invite participants to the study; researchers or participants take pictures relevant to a particular question or topic; use images to guide interviews and elicit dialogue; analyze data and report findings.

4. Findings

4.1. Descriptive analysis

The interviews were conducted online, each lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. In the end, 16 young Chinese belonging to Gen Z (born between 1995 to 2010) were interviewed as they intended to travel to Europe on their own for the first time. Participants recruited showed a balance in gender and a diversity in geographical region and trip planning stage. The city where a participant comes from matters because there are huge cultural and economic differences in China. The participants were at different planning stages as six decided to undertake the trip over the summer season, three planned to travel to Europe over Chinese National Holiday in October, six were in the early stages of planning with their departure date further out, and one participant was about to depart.

4.2. Empirical analysis

The Schengen visa played an important role in the order of destinations visited. In fact, Chinese nationals wishing to travel independently in European countries must obtain an individual tourism visa, permitting entry into the Schengen area for short-stay visits for tourism purposes. The choice of the initial Schengen country, serving as the anchor point, is influenced by factors such as the price of the flight, the ease and likelihood of obtaining the visa, and the attractiveness of the landing city. The final decision is the result of coordinating these factors comprehensively.

Once the anchor point was chosen, other destinations were arranged in the travel itinerary by taking the distance, price of various travel services, confidence of the language, and the appeal of the place into account. For example, as the Summer Olympics takes place in Paris, one participant would like to visit the city over his stay in Spain for not missing this once-in-a-lifetime chance. This global event largely increased the appeal of the city. However, some participants were willing to leave some days open to embrace the spontaneity or experience something out of expectation.

Participants uses various channels to get trip-related information and inspiration. In planning their first independent travel to Europe, online word of mouth – the Moments

on WeChat (literally meaning friends circle) was crucial in shaping travel inspiration and decisions. Pictures and posts published by friends who actually visited the place served as an important source of travel inspiration because they were created without any commercial intent, making them more authentic and credible. In addition, the graphic and video-based new media mainly RED and Douyin become core channels for anticipating or planning the first trip to Europe. The visual content such as images and short videos, together with text created by influencers and micro-celebrities were seen as useful, updated and a reliable source for travel tips. A few participants also use Bilibili, a popular video-sharing platform, for travel-related inspiration. In a few cases, although blocked in China, Instagram or Twitter were used by participants as these international media might contain more information about European destinations.

It is worth noting that traditional travel applications (like Ctrip, Qunar) are rarely used as information sources among this generation. They are often perceived as outdated and not trustworthy, failing to meet the dynamic needs of young travellers. Search engines were occasionally utilized to obtain information.

5. Conclusions

This study investigated the decision process of travel itinerary planning among Chinese Generation Z using photo-elicitation interviews. This young generation meticulously plans their European trips to secure a Schengen visa, choosing their initial destination based on flight costs, visa ease, and city appeal, and then organizing subsequent destinations by distance, costs, and attractions. Chinese Gen Zers use various channels, especially social media like WeChat Moments, RED and Douyin, to get authentic and reliable travel information and inspiration, while traditional travel apps are largely disregarded.

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