Shopping experiences: International tourists in Beijing’s Silk Market

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Considers international tourists in China — an important and under-studied group.
- Focuses on shopping experiences at the most well-visited Chinese tourist market.
- “Bargaining” can be an experience of “fun” for many tourists.
- Different satisfaction groups represented their experience differently.
- Satisfaction for male tourists was higher than female shoppers.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines international tourists’ experiences in Beijing’s Silk Market, one of the China’s most well-known tourist markets. Tourists’ spontaneous reviews on TripAdvisor were analyzed through Leximancer, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. The study confirms that markets can be major tourism attractions and can provide important experiences for international tourists. Most international tourists were impressed with their Silk Market trip. The dominant narratives of their experiences were the “price” of the items they “bought”, the “fun” of “bargaining”, and the “fake” quality of the products. Further analyses show that different satisfaction groups used somewhat different narratives to represent their shopping experiences and that male international tourists enjoyed the Silk Market experiences more than their female counterparts.

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1. Introduction

As Timothy (2005) observes, shopping by tourists has multiple goals and takes many forms. Tourists may spend considerable discretionary holiday time in searching for bargains for themselves, hunting for gifts for others or simply ‘window shopping.’ For international tourists, the process of purchasing goods and local products is often an interesting social process representing a specific form of engagement with local citizens. Further, the shopping environment and context in which the purchase is made may be a critical stimulus to spend money. For example, in Asia, traditional markets and tourists shopping streets are prime places of engagement for tourists and local vendors. Shopping has been and is, therefore, a fertile subject of exploration for tourism researchers, not just in an economic sense but also in terms of tourists’ motives and social encounters.

In the contemporary tourism world, China attracts much attention from destination marketing organisations and tourism researchers because it generates large numbers of tourists with high expenditures for many other destinations (UNWTO, 2013). The growing size of the Chinese middle classes, their increasing mobility and, most importantly, their considerable ability to consume have been widely acknowledged (Arlt, 2013; Sparks & Pan, 2009; Xu & McGehee, 2012). At the same time, China is also an important tourist receiving country. In 2012, China attracted 57.7 million international arrivals and was ranked as the third highest tourist receiving destination. It is fourth in terms of tourism receipts (US$ 50 billion) (UNWTO, 2013). However, little research about international tourists’ experiences and expenditures in China has been undertaken. This research addresses this topic by exploring international tourists’ shopping experience in Beijing’s Silk Market — the most visited tourist market in China.
2. Literature review

In this section, three sets of ideas will be reviewed: literature on tourist shopping, Chinese inbound tourism, and undertaking tourism experience research in the digital era. The first two pertain to the subject of the research whereas the third has implications for the research methods that are adopted. Research opportunities will be identified in each part of review and then will be synthesized as the basis for the current research. Research aims will then be identified at the end of this section.

2.1. Tourist shopping

Tourist market studies can be separated into two main types. The first is concerned with the vendors, their livelihoods and their interactions with tourists (Cukier & Wall, 1994; Henderson & Smith, 2009; Ishii, 2012; Steel, 2012; Timothy & Wall, 1997). This set of studies is tangential to the present work although it confirms the importance and popularity of markets in certain economies, especially in Asia. The second theme focuses upon the tourists in the markets and is particularly germane to the current study. Night markets have attracted the interests of a number of scholars. For example, Chang and her colleagues in Taiwan assessed the leisure motives of local residents for eating out in night markets (Chang & Hsieh, 2006) and also noticed the attractiveness of night markets for international visitors. The motivations of American and Japanese tourists visiting Taiwanese night markets were explored and separated into segments, e.g. conservative tourists, moderate novelty-seekers, and well-planned explorers among Japanese tourists (Chang & Chiang, 2006; Chang et al., 2007). They also examined the key motivations for Hong Kong Chinese visitors visiting Taiwanese night markets. The leading motives for this group were eating out, everyday shopping and novelty seeking (Hsieh & Chang, 2006). Tourists’ interests in night markets have also been explored in Singapore (Henderson, 2000; Ibrahim & Leng, 2003) and Thailand (Bishop & Robinson, 1999). Other types of markets have also been the subjects of research; for example, street markets in New Zealand (Kikuchi & Ryan, 2007), craft markets in Africa (Kissel & Ras, 2010), the photographic representation of the Pike Fish Market in the USA (Aiello & Gendelman, 2008) and open-air markets in Hong Kong (Tsang et al., 2011).

Our assessment of the literature suggests that there is a growing interest in research on shopping by tourists but studies on tourist markets are usually narrowly focussed. The research in Taiwan has emphasized night markets and tourists’ motivations and experiences in them. Opportunities exist for studying other types of tourist markets in other contexts, including mainland China.

2.2. International tourists in China

As mentioned above, China receives many international tourists. For financial and political reasons, the Chinese government, made inbound tourism an early priority when it opened its doors to the world in 1978 (Lew, Yu, John & Zhang, 2003; Yang, Lin, & Han, 2010). Domestic tourism and outbound tourism was not encouraged until 1999 when the system of three week-long holidays was introduced (Chen & Pearce, 2012).

Reviews of research on tourism and hospitality research in China were consulted in order to place the current study in context. Twelve review articles were found, with two focusing on Chinese outbound tourism (Cai, Li, & Knuston, 2007). None of the remaining ten review articles identified inbound tourism as one of the categories resulting from their content analyses. A contemporary review article on the “current state of China tourism research” was published online by Leung, Li, Fong, Law, and Lo (2013). They searched for China tourism-related research through ScienceDirect (http://www.sciencedirect.com) and EBSCOHost Hospitality and Tourism Complete (http://search.ebscohost.com), which are two of the largest and most popular online databases and search engines (Buhalis & Law, 2008). They gathered 147 articles published between 2010 and 2012 and grouped the studies into 24 categories based on the research content. Their review confirmed Tsang and Hsu’s (2011) assessment of publications from 1978 to 2008 in key tourism journals that research on tourists’ behaviors, motivations and experiences is gaining in popularity. Leung, Law, van Hoof, and Buhalics (2013) and Leung, Li, et al. (2013) identified 43 publications on tourists’ experiences and 16 motivation articles about China tourism published in 2010–2012.

These 99 articles were potentially relevant to the current research. However, it was found that the domestic tourists’ travel experiences (33/59) and Chinese outbound tourism (20/59) has attracted most academic interest. Of the 59 publications, only nine explored international tourists’ experiences in China and, of these, three only incorporated international tourists in their research sample when looking at events, hotel, and entertainment experiences in China (Boo & Gu, 2010; Hsu, Oh, & Assaf, 2012; Huang,
Two of the articles tested the media’s influence on international tourists’ images of China (Green, Lim, Seo, & Sung, 2010; Shani, Chen, Wang, & Hua, 2010), although the respondents in these two studies may not necessarily have actually been to China. In summary, only four works (published in 2010–2012) were identified with a sole focus on international tourists’ experiences in China. Chen and Chen (2011) explored the motivations and expectations of international volunteer tourists in China; Li and Wang (2011) studied the image of China in the eyes of western travelers as represented in travel blogs; Luo and Lu (2011) focused on business tourists and factors influencing their shopping behavior during the Canton Fair, and Kim, Ao, Lee, and Pan (2012) assessed the motivations and images of Shanghai perceived by international tourists who attended the Shanghai EXPO.

It is concluded that there is a growing research about Chinese tourism, covering a wide range of topics. In particular, studies of tourist behavior are gaining in importance (Leung, Law, et al., 2013; Leung, Li, et al., 2013; Tsang & Hsu, 2011) and there is considerable growth in studies of Chinese outbound tourists (Pearce, Wu, & Osmond, 2013). In contrast, research on inbound tourism to China, is still limited and not commensurate with the size of the market.

### 2.3. Tourism experience research in the digital era

The digital era has markedly influenced many tourism phenomena and has also produced novel sources of information that can be interrogated by the researcher (Leung, Law, et al., 2013; Pearce, 2011; Sigala, Christou & Gretzel, 2012). The digital tourist era is the product of Web 2.0 technology. The internet has evolved from being largely a broadcasting medium to a participatory platform which allows people to collaborate and share information (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Leung, Law, et al., 2013; Leung, Li, et al., 2013). The internet, especially social media, has not only changed dramatically the way people search for information and make decisions (Hudson & Thal, 2013; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), but it also influences the trip itself as well as reflection during the post-trip stage (Wu & Pearce, 2013). The information that tourists generate is generally considered to be unbiased, and capable of providing insights and real voices from the insiders’ perspectives (Kozinets, 2010; TripAdvisor, 2013; Yoo & Gretzel, 2008). Content generated by online users can have substantial influence on other internet users, in this case potential tourists (Mauri & Minazzi, 2013; Rong, Vu, Law, & Li, 2012).

In comparison with a pre-designed questionnaire survey, online user generated content places them in a central role and they are free to report whatever they think is relevant to a particular experience (Levine, 2013). Such information is free from obvious bias and is very helpful in understanding new markets, new activities and sometimes sensitive topics (Langer & Beckman, 2005; Wu & Pearce, 2013). In addition, such information is inexpensive and efficient to collect (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). As a result, more and more researchers have found it valuable to examine online user generated content (Banyai & Glover, 2012; Li & Wang, 2011; Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012). The present study, while acknowledging that caution needs to be exercised when analyzing these kinds of data, takes advantages of the availability of readily accessible online generated content.

Such content, as unstructured textual data, can be analyzed both manually and by computer-assisted processes (Kozinets, 2010). Kozinets suggested that a manual process works: (1) for a small data set; (2) when thick description and narrative depth is valued; and (3) for researchers with impressive, and well-developed filing skills. On the other hand, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software can be useful when: (1) there is a large data set for investigation; (2) there is potential to make statistical evaluations and structured accounts of the data; and (3) manual analysis is challenging organizationally. Computer-assisted analysis follows similar steps in manual coding, but it can be time-saving in analysis, powerful in presentation due to sophisticated visualization options, and also avoid some of the biases of human interpretation (Angus, Rintel, & Wiles, 2013; Indulska, Hovorka, & Recker, 2011). However, a computer-assisted approach can only be useful when the researcher maintains closeness to the data (Kozinets, 2010; Smith & Humphreys, 2006). Thus, care and caution are required.

### 2.4. Research opportunities

The substantial literature which underpins this study has roots in tourist shopping studies, tourist behavior research in and about China, and research on tourists’ experiences in the digital era. When the above themes are juxtaposed, research opportunities are revealed. A small amount of research has explored tourists’ experiences in markets and there has been a paucity of research assessing international tourists’ experiences in China, although the country is ranked third globally in the number of tourists received.

Online content provides information with which to address such topics.

More specifically, this study examines international tourists’ shopping experiences in one of China’s most well-known tourist market: the Silk Market in Beijing. The reviews posted by international tourists on TripAdvisor provide the information to explore this setting. Three empirical research aims are identified: 1) to explore international tourists’ overall representations of their Silk Market experience; 2) to identify whether or not groups of international tourists with different satisfaction rating had different experiences in the Silk Market; and 3) to assess whether or not international tourists’ experiences in the Silk Market are influenced by demographic factors.

### 3. Research context and method

#### 3.1. Beijing’s Silk Market

The research context for this study is China’s most well-known market among international tourists, the Silk Street Pearl Market in Beijing (hereafter called the Silk Market). The Silk Market is in close proximity to the Jianguo Hotel, China’s first joint-venture hotel which attracts an international clientele, and can be accessed by the adjacent Yong'anli subway station. This market receives more than 15 million tourists every year, with more than 80% of them being international tourists. The Silk Market has gained such popularity that it is now considered as a major Beijing attraction along with climbing the Great Wall, visiting the Forbidden City, and eating the Peking roasted duck (the Silk Market, 2013).

The Silk Market is a six story shopping center in the center of Beijing. It occupies 28,000 square meters and there are 1500 stalls in the market. It offers a great variety of goods, including clothing, shoes, bags, fashion accessories, leather goods, traditional Chinese crafts, calligraphy, carpets, home fabrics, paintings, hand-knitted dresses, toys, trinkets and souvenirs, fine jewelry, custom made tailored suits, as well as a variety of food and beverage outlets. Unlike most other shopping centers in Beijing, bargaining is a prominent part of transactions in the Silk Market. Most of the vendors can introduce their products and bargain with simple skills in foreign languages, often using the assistance of a calculator to showing prices on the screen.

The bargaining culture in the Silk Market has its origins in the Silk Market’s history. It takes its name from Silk Street where it once operated. The Silk Market was first established in 1980 as a street...
linned with vendors with only a few stores and stalls selling traditional Chinese souvenirs. Their main customers were the foreign staff working in the nearby embassies. It gained popularity and grew into 250 stalls by the middle of 2004. Due to its increasing popularity, the outdoor market along the street was closed down for 10 months, while a new modern six-story building was built. Though it looks much like any other modern shopping center in Beijing, the bargaining culture has been retained.

The Silk Market was once very well-known for high quality fake products of international, especially clothes, watches, and bags. The management team has now grasped the issue of intellectual property and is working hard to transform the market into an upscale tourist market with its own brands. In 2012, the Silk Market terminated contracts with 12 stalls selling fake brands and replaced them with some domestic brands. At present, there are 98 independent trademarks in the market, with another 16 on the waiting list to be registered (the Silk Market, 2013).

### 3.2. Research method

#### 3.2.1. The information source: TripAdvisor

People are increasingly seeking insider tips and recommendations from online review sites when planning travel and, as argued above, such sites are potentially valuable sources of information for researchers. Before finalizing the review platform, the authors assessed some key websites, including TripAdvisor, WOMO (Word of Mouth Online), Lonely Planet, and Google reviews, before deciding on the information source for this study. High traffic is an important criterion in site selection. On 27th July, 2013, TripAdvisor attracted 217 reviews in various languages, which was far more than the second most popular review site (11 on Google reviews). Thus, TripAdvisor was selected as the source of data. However, before moving to data collection, TripAdvisor’s terms of use were checked to ensure that the study is in accordance with its rules. TripAdvisor prohibits several activities (TripAdvisor, 2013) and indicates that “the website is provided solely to assist customers in gathering travel information, posting opinions of travel related issues, engaging in interactive travel forums and for no other purposes.” However, using the information for research is allowed.

#### 3.2.2. Collecting the data

International tourists’ reviews in English about their experiences in the Silk Market were collected for this study. Reviews submitted between 2008 and July, 2013, were included. The year 2008 was chosen as a cut-off point because the market was highly promoted at that time to welcome those attracted by the Beijing Olympic Games. In addition to the titles and contents of the reviews, information on the reviewers’ gender, origins, their satisfaction rating and their review experience (following TripAdvisor’s classification) in the TripAdvisor community were also collected. Age cohorts, travel companion and travel purpose were not collected due to a high percentage of missing data. Each review was coded as a case in an excel document. In all, 149 review items were collected, amounting to 32,606 words. Table 1 shows basic information about the structure of these reviews. The reviews were well distributed across the considered factors.

Due to the language skills of the researchers and the ability of Leximancer (the software used in data analysis – see below) in analyzing certain languages, only reviews in English were selected. Forty-three reviews posted in Japanese, Korean, traditional Mandarin (usually by overseas Chinese), German and other languages were not included in this study. This is a limitation of the current research, as it reduced the sample sizes of Asian and European tourists. Furthermore, studies of visitors to other markets have found differences in value orientation among Asian and European tourists. Studies of visitors to other markets have found differences in value orientation among Asian and European tourists when visiting the Victoria Market in Wellington, New Zealand (Kikuchi & Ryan, 2007) and Japanese and American tourists differed in their novelty-seeking scores at night markets in Taiwan (Chang & Chiang, 2006).

#### 3.2.3. Analyzing the data

Leximancer text analytics software (4.0 edition) was used to analyze the international tourists reviews about their Silk Market experiences. Leximancer is a relatively new method for transforming lexical co-occurrence information from natural language into semantic patterns in an unsupervised manner. The procedures behind Leximancer are based on Bayesian statistical theory where fragmented pieces of evidence can be used to predict what is happening in a system (Smith & Humphreys, 2006).

Leximancer is designed to assist in the analysis of text “from words to meaning to insight” (Leximancer, 2013). In essence, Leximancer uses a quantitative approach to conduct qualitative analysis (Indulska et al. 2011). Leximancer employs two stages of co-occurrence information extraction - semantic and relational - using a different algorithm for each stage. The algorithms used are

### Table 1

Attributes of the international tourists visiting the Silk Market.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Number (N = 149)</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction level</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>23.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very good</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>39.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Poor or terrible</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year of posting</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>41.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2013 (until July)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>28.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>43.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>46.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourists’ origins</td>
<td>North America</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>32.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oceania</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>22.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other parts of the world</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviewers’ status in TripAdvisor’s online community</td>
<td>Top contributors (&gt;50)</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>35.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Senior contributors (21–50)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>26.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contributors (11–20)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Senior reviewers (6–10)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reviewers (3–5)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New reviewers (1–2)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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statistical but they employ nonlinear dynamics and machine learning (Smith & Humphreys, 2006). Fig. 1 presents the semantic pattern extraction process and also illustrates the three most important units in Leximancer analysis: word, concept and theme. In Leximancer, the analysis is built by using word occurrence and co-occurrence frequency to produce a word co-occurrence matrix from which concepts are identified. Leximancer then groups the concepts into themes based on how often they appear together in a block of text (in this case, the Silk Market reviews).

Visual concept maps and statistical outputs are generated that can help analysts efficiently gain insights and comprehension of natural language (e.g. reviews, interviews and focus group discussion) through the process of: (1) conducting semantic information retrieval of key themes and concepts; (2) viewing bodies of data in a graphical format (a concept map), and (3) navigating through the concepts whilst mining the text for deeper contextual associations (Cretchley, Gallois, Chenery, & Smith, 2010). As a result, researchers can use Leximancer to carry out the following tasks: (1) determining the main topics within a text; (2) highlighting how topics relate to each other; and (3) indicating which source files (or individual authors/speakers) contain particular topics (Angus et al., 2013).

Leximancer has been used in various areas of social science research, for example qualitative health research (Cretchley et al., 2010) and literature reviews of particular concepts (Dann, 2010; Indulska et al., 2011). Leximancer has also recently gained the attention of some tourism scholars. Scott and Smith (2005) were among the first researchers to adopt Leximancer. They analyzed the images in newspaper reports about the perceptions of ‘schoolies week’ in Australia. It has since been employed in analyzing backpackers’ attitudes towards a sustainable travel style (Murphy & Brymer, 2010), in assessing the perceptions of disability service provision amongst hotel accommodation managers (Darcy & Pegg, 2011), for examining outcomes of internships in different learning streams (Hughes, Mylonas, & Bendwendoff, 2012), and in exploring tourists’ motivations and satisfaction with heritage sites in New Zealand (Trinh, 2013).

As Leximancer is word-based software, it does not record the number of key incidents, which is usually interpreted in several sentences. For example, in the Silk Market case, Leximancer picks up the most frequently used words and their relationship with other words. It, however, does not provide accurate information about the number of reviews that offered tips for bargaining or which discussed the prices paid. Given this situation, manual counting was used as a supplement to determine the frequency of such key incidents. In addition, SPSS 20.0 was used to check some of the output, for example, comparisons of different profile groups’ satisfaction with their Silk Market experiences.

4. Findings

Forty-four concepts were identified by the Leximancer program at the first stage as being present in the reviews. Not all of these concepts are presented in the subsequent results for it is necessary to fine tune the major concept list (Crofts & Bisman, 2010). This was not conducted arbitrarily but, rather, was based on co-occurrence frequency as well as a careful assessment of the meaning of the identified concepts. In detail, words or concepts from the analysis...
that were simply destination labels (e.g. China, Beijing, Silk Market), that were not meaningful (e.g. visit, day, take, sure) or that were too generic (e.g. market, markets) were deemed to be unhelpful in addressing the research questions. Also some similar concepts were merged (e.g. buy, bought, buying; pay, paid; bargain, bargaining, barter, haggle; shop, shops and store; RMB and yuan).

The final list consisted of 32 major concepts (Figs. 2-4).

4.1. Overall representations of the Silk Market experience

A first concept map was produced to reveal the most common themes and concepts found in the reviews, as well as the frequency of their occurrences and co-occurrences (see Fig. 2). This map includes concepts (shown as small gray nodes) which are grouped into themes (indicated by the larger colored bubbles). (in the web version) “Price”, “buy”, “bargaining”, “fun”, “fake” and “RMB” were identified as six dominant themes representing international tourists’ shopping experiences in the Silk Market. The connectivity rate for these six themes were 100%, 98%, 78%, 37%, 9% and 8% respectively. In Leximancer, the connectivity score indicates the relative importance of the themes (the most important is the top theme at 100%). This score is calculated using the connectedness of concepts within that theme as a way to measure the importance of a theme within the data set (Leximancer, 2013).

“Price” is the strongest theme in the narratives of international tourists to the Silk Market. This single word was mentioned 233 times in the 149 reviews. It is well connected with other concepts, for example, the need to bargain, the strategy to cut down the price (by (pretending) to walk away, by taking one’s time) and the best price paid. Indeed, a large number of international tourists were very happy with the prices they negotiated. A manual check of the reviews found that as many as 97 out of 149 tourists indicated the price they paid for items that they bought in the Silk Market. A typical quotation of “price” is,

I laughed and said I am not going to bother but she insisted I bargain with her so I offered her 100 she pointed at the door and said go. As I was walking away from the store said ok last price 300, I just kept walking.

“Buy (merged with bought)” is the second largest theme. “Buy” is the second most frequently used word in the 149 reviews, with 169 counts. This theme incorporates the items bought, the quality of the goods, the goods that are available to buy in the market, and detailed information of the store/shop where products were purchased. Some typical reviews are:

However, I only realized the very inferior quality after we reached the hotel. I bought the LV wallet for 30 Yuan down from 180 and the COACH wallet for 25 Yuan also down from 180. Then I go and get a coffee before I dive in and start to bargain, Pick a store with as many things as you want because the more you buy the better leverage you’ll have. First thing to remember – they are never losing money on a deal with you.

“Bargaining” emerged as an important theme during the tourists’ experience in the Silk Market. “Bargaining”, together with “bargain”, “barter” and “haggle”, were mentioned 172 times. Indeed, as one of reviewer summarized, the Silk Market is “touristy, bargaining & knock-offs, but that’s the point”.

Fig. 3. Different satisfaction rating groups’ representations of the Silk Market experience.
Bargaining is a rich theme, covering information on how the tourists negotiated with the “aggressive” “sellers” in some specific “shop.” It is highly connected with the “price” theme, especially with bargaining strategies. Illustrative reviews about bargaining in the Silk Market follow:

“We walked in to a shop selling business shirts. They started off by asking 300 RMB for a shirt and eventually after much bargaining came down to 40 RMB.”

“Have fun and don’t take what’s said in the bargaining personally. We found it entertaining and enjoyed the stall keepers.”

Highly connected with the “bargaining” is the “fun” tourists had in the Silk Market. The word “fun” was picked up 77 times out of the 149 reviews. Some tourists considered visiting the Silk Market to be a distinctive “shopping” “experience”:

“This is a very fun place. Unbelievable variety over six floors.”

“I was prepared for the aggressiveness and for that experience I guess it was a fun “check the box.” The new Silk Market is very modern, clean, easy to find and the shopkeepers — at least on the Sunday morning that I visited — were pleasant and friendly.”

The next theme is “fake”, which is connected with the products sold in the Silk Market. The word “fake” was used 72 times by the 149 reviewers. Some tourists assumed that many “goods” (including “clothes”) sold in the six “floor” Silk Market are fake brands. Typical reviews include:

“What a mad couple of days we spent in here. The last time we visited many years ago, the silk market was outdoors, now, it is five floors of every kind of fake goods you can imagine.”

“Got a carry-on bag for less than $50. I avoided the electrical stuff as it’s all fake and not very good at that.”

The last theme is “RMB”, which is the Chinese currency unit. It was merged with “yuan”, another name for RMB. It is a theme highly associated with “price” and “buy.” Because “RMB” was picked up so many times (111 times in the 149 reviews, the number of $ were not counted), it became an independent theme. In comparison, $ was counted 48 times. It was usually stated simply as in the following:

“We bought Armani and Polo shirts for 60 to 40 RMB each.”

The findings show clearly that this shopping experience involves the purchase of products that are considered to be cheap and often fake brands: bargains are available and must be bargain for by international tourists who may not be very familiar with this process. For many, this is thought of as being part of the fun.

4.2. Different satisfaction rating groups’ representations of the Silk Market experience

In this section, we will identify whether or not various satisfaction rating groups of international tourists have different narratives about their Silk Market experiences. The four satisfaction ratings (see Table 1) were selected as mapping concepts. In this set of analysis, five themes were identified: “buy”, “price”, “fun”, “fake” and “RMB”. The previous “price” and “bargaining” themes of Section 4.1 were merged into one theme as “price” (see Fig. 3).

Data analysis confirmed that the four satisfaction groups considered their Silk Market experience very differently. Fig. 3 indicates that particular concepts and themes are more closely linked to certain satisfaction groups than others. The more often these concepts are mentioned in the tourists’ reviews, the closer it appears to a satisfaction group in the figure. The group who rated their Silk Market experience as “excellent” was strongly linked to the “fun” and “experience” of “bargaining” with “aggressive” “sellers” when purchasing “fake” products in the six “floor” market. A TripAdvisor senior contributor titled her experience as “bargain and have fun”. She further commented,

“This was quite a fascinating and humorous experience. My husband had been here a year ago and knew that the name of the game was bargaining! You can find almost anything you are looking for! Be warned 99% fake, but then again, you don’t go to a place like this to buy the real deal. In order to have an enjoyable experience and walk away with some good deals, you must bargain and negotiate with the sellers - you can have quite a bit of fun doing it.”

Those who rated their Silk Market experience “very good” formed the largest group (59/149).

This group’s comments were well linked with the “price” theme. The most relevant concepts are “pay” (56% of likelihood of usage), “walk” (54%), “bargaining” (53%), “sales” (52%), “price” (47%), “times” (47%), “goods” (45%), “fun” (44%), “best” (42%), and “buy” (41%). A British lady who visited the Silk Market in July 2013 and titled her review as “a must for any tourist - but not if you don’t like to barter”, commented,

“If you have the patience and inclination the market can be a fun place to buy nice decent quality items at a reasonable price. Always go down in price by at least 75% and work your way up, and trust me, the minute you start to walk away, they will drop their price!”

The group who rated their experience as “average” was also most sensitive to the “fake” theme. However, they also see the “fun” of selective “buying” in the market. A gentleman from Singapore observed,

“Huge indoor market over six floors, selling all manner of trinkets, costume jewelry, fabrics, clothes, fake goods, fake electronics, curios and such. The strategy is to be selective, there is such a variety of stuff. … Haggling is a must. Do have a maximum price in your mind before you engage. … It’s quite a lot of fun. I stay away from the fake stuff, and you can get reasonably nice locally produced goods like clothes and table cloth.”

Similarly, a Californian lady commented,

“You don’t have to be a genius to figure out everything sold here is fake, especially brand names. … I didn’t buy fake stuff because it was illegal and I didn’t think it was worth it to get in trouble with customs and immigration. I only bought some Chinese souvenirs that were locally made.”

The last group who rated their market experience as “poor” or “terrible” was substantial in number, accounted for 21% of the whole sample. This was the group who “bought” least in the Silk Market, as they found it is hard and stressful to “bargain” and they usually found “better” priced and “quality” goods in other districts of Beijing or other parts of China. For example, a New Zealand lady suggested “don’t go there, there are much better markets in Beijing”. A Canadian gentleman summarized “not worth the stress, really.” He further wrote,

First off, I am not a novice when it comes to markets or bargaining. However I found this market to be over the top in a very bad way. I have been to aggressive markets where they really want you to buy, but the vibe is still positive and fun. The silk market was mean spirited. The prices started so high that you have almost no chance of getting the real price, never mind a
good deal. ... Some people may enjoy this experience and file it under "local color". I just found it annoying. There are many smaller markets and shopping areas that are fun, vibrant and bustling without the mean spirited vibe.

Thus, while the majority of international tourists have an enjoyable experience at the Silk Market and find items to purchase at prices that they deem to be very reasonable, a substantial minority find the experience, particularly, the bargaining, to be stressful.

4.3. Demographic factors and representations of the Silk Market experience

This section of results assesses the influence of demographic factors on the international tourists' shopping experiences in the Silk Market. Some demographic factors were independently analyzed and also recoded to facilitate testing of possible relationships. For example, tourists’ origins were recoded into Western and Asian. A series of independent samples t test, one-way ANOVA, and cross tabulation analyses were undertaken using SPSS 20.0 between satisfaction ratings and other factors (e.g. gender, origins, year of visiting, and review experience) suggested that only gender was a significant influencing factor ($t = -2.06, df = 131, p = .04$). The satisfaction ratings employed in this part of the analysis were drawn from the summary rating scores for the attraction provided on TripAdvisor. The range of this scale was 1 = excellent, 2 = very good, 3 = average, 4 = poor and 5 = terrible. Male visitors tended to rated their Silk Market experience more positively than their female counterparts (mean scores were 2.11 and 2.48 respectively).

Responding to the above results, both the satisfaction rating levels and gender were inserted as mapping concepts into the Leximancer analysis. Fig. 4 presents the output of this mapping. Consistent with the SPSS statistical analysis, male and female visitors reported quite different Silk Market experiences. Both groups were dispersed across all of the satisfaction ratings; nevertheless, a much higher percentage of male visitors were more positive regarding the Silk Market experience. One third of the male tourists rated the experience as excellent, while only 17% of female tourists considered it to be so.

In summary, of the items that could be used as possible explanatory variables of differences in satisfaction with Silk Market experiences, only gender provided additional insights with males being more likely to be more satisfied than females.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The role of shopping as a leisure activity and as an important component of many tourist experiences has been widely acknowledged (Getz, 1993; Swanson & Timothy, 2012; Timothy, 2005). Various tourist shopping experiences have been studied in a variety of locations (Murphy et al., 2011; Park et al., 2010; Xu & McGehee, 2012). This study contributes to the literature in four ways: it examines one of most popular international tourism
destinations where few studies of visitors’ motivations and satisfactions have yet been undertaken; it emphasizes international tourists’ experiences in a highly visited tourist market in China; it is based on international tourists’ spontaneously generated reviews rather than data whose existence is stimulated by the researcher; and it adopts Leximancer, a computer-assisted quantitative approach to do the content analysis of qualitative data.

This study confirms markets can be major tourism attractions for a destination and can provide important experiences for international tourists (Kikuchi & Ryan, 2007; Ooi, 2002), because of the type or range of goods that they offer and because they may also provide special experiences. In the Silk Market case, one frequently reported experience is bargaining. Falk and Campbell (1997) indicated that bargaining can greatly enhance the shopping experience, as it offers monetary benefits (Lee, 2000) and because obtaining a lower purchase price is likely to generate a sense of pride, intelligence and achievement (Cox et al., 2003; Darke & Dahl, 2003; Tsang et al., 2011). For most of those in the current study, the pleasure of bargaining was well-supported, as “fun” was identified as a theme very closely linked with “bargaining”. In addition, nearly two thirds of tourists reported the price they paid for certain items they bargained for in the Silk Market. Nevertheless, more than one third of the international tourists rated their Silk Market experience as “average”, “poor” or “terrible”, in part because of their lack of comfort with bargaining as well as the prevalence of fake products. This is not a satisfactory score for any tourism attraction, let alone a major attraction in a noted destination. Nevertheless, this finding is consistent with those of Heung and Cheng (2000) who found that service quality, product value and product reliability are critical to shopping satisfaction for tourists in Hong Kong. Interaction with aggressive staff, the provision of low quality goods and paying more than the product value will all result in unsatisfied visitors. An issue worth special attention is the one of the identified dominant themes: “fake”. The Silk Market has endeavored to upgrade its reputation by incorporating more independent and traditional brands, but the selling fake branded products has prevailed, as revealed in one of the dominant themes identified in this study. Although the availability of cheap “knock-offs” is a major attraction to many customers, the word “fake” is usually a pejorative term that may engender negative word of mouth/mouse messages (Rong et al. 2012).

In addition to the empirical implications, this study also provides insights into undertaking behavioral studies of tourists doing tourist using social media, especially online reviews, as an information source. Levine (2013), a popular travel writer, recently provided ten insider tips for navigating TripAdvisor reviews. Some of her tips are applicable to research through social media and they were followed in the current research. For example, it is critical to have a reasonable sample size across an extended period of time, in this case, all the reviews in English posted after year 2008. More importantly, it is vital to identify the characteristics of the reviewers whenever possible: in the Silk Market case, their satisfaction level, their gender, their origins, and their review experience were ascertained (see Table 1). This kind of extra information may offer interesting insights. Furthermore, the spontaneously generated content of social media may be an emic source of information for certain topics, thereby permitting the generation of a richer and deeper information base.

Nevertheless, this study has had only limited success in explaining differences in satisfaction with the shopping experiences obtained at the Silk Market. Of the limited number of variables explored, only gender was found to be an influential factor at a statistically significant level, with more males than females expressing more satisfaction. It is likely that tourists’ origins will influence market shopping satisfaction, as some cultures are more used to bargaining than others (Lee, 2000; Pizam & Sussmann, 1995) and this is a prominent part of Silk Market transactions. Though comments about the stress of dealing with the aggressive vendors in the Silk Market are commonplace, no statistical differences were found among different tourist origins in this study. This may partly due to the sample size of this study (149 in total) and the limited incorporation of some Asian and European nationalities who commented in languages other than English. Perhaps visitors to the Silk Market are self-selected on this feature, those who are averse to bargaining electing to shop elsewhere. It may also have something to do with possible commonalities among the contributors to the database. Yoo and Gretzel (2008) surveyed 1197 TripAdvisor review writers and found that the majority of them are well-educated and with considerable travel experience. This feature of the reviewers has also been observed in some specific countries and regions (Rong et al., 2012; Wu & Pearce, 2013). An on-site survey conducted in the Silk Market could possibly overcome this potential weakness in our investigation.

One noteworthy limitation in using the TripAdvisor data lies in not being able to determine consistently the social composition of the tourists’ travel party. As a western based reviewer of this article pointed out from their personal experience of visiting the Silk Market, bargaining may differ if an individual is accompanied by a Chinese companion. In these circumstances the sense of threat and concern about being sold inferior goods may be reduced and the social interaction enhanced through a mini-theatrical event involving three players. The value of a Chinese companion and their role in the shaping the tourists’ experience in the Silk Market (and other settings) could repay further study using the terms and techniques pioneered by Goffman and embodied in studies of rule following and rule breaking behavior (Argyle, 1986; Goffman, 1971).

Although we have no information on the international tourists’ shopping expectations and behavior in their own country and, therefore, cannot compare their motivations and satisfactions when at home and away, the situation in which they find themselves in the Silk Market is paradoxical. Many residents of western countries have become increasingly accustomed to consuming imports from China which often compete successfully with more expensive home-made products, albeit with some concerns about product and service quality. Meanwhile, their governments attempt to protect jobs, patents and copyrights from what may be perceived as unfair and inappropriate competition, while negotiating free-trade agreements and encouraging exports and investments overseas. At the same time, many western international tourists derive great pleasure from acquiring quality fakes at what may be regarded as bargain prices. For many, but not all, the prospect of doing so is an attraction and the negotiation of an acceptable price may be part of the fun. Furthermore, the experiences available at the Silk Market emphasize the challenges of using such a complex and slippery concept as authenticity. For many international tourists, the Silk Market may be the quintessential shopping experience in China’s capital city but this reputation is based substantially on the sale of counterfeit products. But this, and the associated prices, is the attraction! Most of the patrons are not duped: many are happy to purchase ‘genuine fakes’ if the price is right!

References


