How do young Chinese friendship groups make travel decisions? A content and interaction process analysis

# Abstract

Young Chinese tourists form an increasingly important market and they tend to travel in small friendship or family groups. This study examines how young Chinese friendship groups (aged between 18 and 35) make travel decision. Using the observation approach, this study observes the group travel decision making process of ten small groups. Issues, such as *activity, cost, travel timing, transportation, climate, safety,* and *distance,* were found to determine destination choice. The role and function of verbal and non-verbal behaviours in influencing group decision making were also investigated. This study contributes to both general group interaction literature and tourism literature.

**Keywords:** group travel decision-making; interaction process analysis; young Chinese tourists; friendship group; observation

# Introduction

According to Pacific Asia Travel Association, young tourists are frequently defined as people aged between 18 and 35 (PATA, 2015). This young generation of tourists accounts for 54% of the Chinese outbound tourism market (Loi, 2017), forming an increasingly important market for destinations around the world. Compared with previous generations, young Chinese tourists are characterised with a higher level of individualism. In order to enjoy more independence and flexibility in the travel journey, these tourists are less likely to join package tours organised by travel agencies; rather they like to plan and organise their journey by themselves (Loi, 2017; Song, 2015). In addition, young Chinese tourists are likely to perceive less language barriers when travelling overseas, and tend to explore destinations for a longer period of time than previous generations (Loi, 2017). Despite their low interest in travel agency organised package tours, Chinese tourists still like to travel in groups mainly self-organised, and with their friends and family members (Trivett, 2013). According to Hurun Report (2016), 90% of young Chinese wealthy tourists travel with their family or friends, and 57% of them travel within a group of 3-6 people. Another industry report by Boston Consulting Group (2011) also reports that around 41% of Chinese travel with their friends, and approximately 60% of them travel in a party of 2-4 people. Both reports indicate that besides family holidays, travelling with friends in small self-organised groups is popular in China. However, little research can be found on this significant context of young Chinese friendship groups.

The present study focuses on young Chinese (aged between 18 and 35 years old) making small friendship group based travel decisions (3-6 people in a travel party). Presumably in this context, travel decisions are not made solely by one person but jointly by multiple people who form the travel party. In group decision-making, group members need to discuss and interact with each other in order to reach agreed decisions (Fay, Garrod, & Carletta, 2000). However, the existing literature has not paid much attention to the young Chinese tourist market (Loi, 2017), and how groups of young Chinese tourists make travel-related decisions. Based on the preliminary coding scheme developed by Song, Wang, and Sparks (2017), the present paper aims: 1) to examine the role of the discussion topics in influencing international and domestic destination selection; 2) to investigate the verbal and non-verbal group interaction process in both international and domestic travel decision; 3) to expand the coding scheme developed by Song, Wang, et al. (2017), with a focus on the functions and roles of verbal and non-verbal messages in influencing group travel decision-making.

This study contributes to literature from three perspectives. First, the majority of the group travel decision-making studies focused on the Western context, such as UK and Europe, and limited studies have been found on China, an emerging tourism market. This study will be one of the earliest studies to examine Chinese tourists’ small group travel decision-making. Second, even though group communication and group interaction play an important role in forming an agreed decision, researchers have paid little attention to the topic in the tourism context. The present study will provide insights into how group interaction is conducted in the tourism context. Third, previous literature on verbal behaviour in group interaction has mainly adopted Bales’ Interaction Process Analysis (IPA) from general management perspective. Non-verbal behaviours in group communication have been largely ignored in literature, despite non-verbal behaviours could provide supplement information to verbal behaviours. Song, Wang, et al. (2017) was the first study to adopt an IPA model in the tourism literature, presenting a preliminary coding system for studies of travel decision making. However, further understanding of verbal and non-verbal behaviours within a travel decision context is required, with a particular emphasis on participants’ influencing roles or tactics.

# Literature review

***Small group travel decision-making***

Group decision-making has been well-examined in different disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, and management, for a long period of time. However, there is no consensus on the exact size of small groups and large groups in group decision-making literature. Janis (1982) defined a small group with less than seven people, but a large group with more than 12 people. Du, Fan, and Feng (2014) considered a 6-people party a small group, whereas a 30-member party a large group. Isaac, Walker, and Williams (1994) used another criterion in that a small group has 4-10 people, while a large group has 40-100 people. In the tourism literature, researchers have not used the term of ‘small groups’ to study group decision-making. However, a review of the group travel decision-making studies shows that majority of these studies examined family decisions made by husband, wife, and child (children) (Song, 2015), indicating that the group size of family decision should be more than two people. A study by Decrop (1999) included some information on the group size of friendship groups, which is from two people to seven people. Based on the above tourism literature, it seems that travel decisions by family and friendship groups are normally small group decisions. In terms of small group decisions, two people in group decision-making have a dyadic interaction (Kang & Hsu, 2005), while three people in group decision-making may have a triadic communication style, indicating that a decision made by two people might be different from a decision by three people. In consideration of the current literature on small groups, and group travel decision-making, this study defines a small group with a group size of 3-6 people.

It should be noted that ‘small groups’ are different from large travel groups that often have a size of 20 or more in the case of package tourism (e.g., Y. Wang, Weaver, & Kwek, 2016) and from large corporate and incentive tours that involve hundreds, even thousands of corporate members travelling together (e.g., Mair, Jin, & Yoo, 2016). In terms of the differences between small groups and large groups, smaller groups perform collectively better than larger groups (Baland & Platteau, 1999). Additionally, larger groups may experience disagreement more often during the decision-making process than smaller groups (Marcevova, Coles, & Shaw, 2010).

Previous studies of travel decision-making have adopted an individualistic orientation rather than a group perspective (Cohen, Prayag, & Moital, 2014). However, theories of individual decision-making may not help researchers to fully understand group decision-making. Group decision-making is different from individual decision-making because of the joint nature of decision making, different role specifications for group members in the process of decision making, and the need to interact among group members when making decisions (Koc, 2004; Sheth, 1974). All of these factors make group decision-making more complicated than individual decision-making.

Among the small number of group travel decision-making studies, researchers have mainly focused on three areas: group decision unit, roles of group members, and disagreement solution. In terms of group decision unit, previous literature identified four types of family travel decision-making: husband-dominant, wife-dominant, a joint decision between husband and wife, and a joint decision among the husband, wife, and child (children) (Litvin, Xu, & Kang, 2004; K. C. Wang, Hsieh, Yeh, & Tsai, 2004). Basically, the wife plays an important in family decision-making. A study conducted in South Korea found that the wife plays a dominant role in deciding on the travel arrangement, and the husband usually accommodates the wife (Jang, Lee, Lee, & Hong, 2007). Another study which was conducted in Taiwan showed that decisions related to selecting shopping, accommodation, and travel agency are commonly made by the wife (K. C. Wang et al., 2004). The literature review shows that the majority of the studies examined family groups, except Marcevova et al. (2010) and Decrop (1999) who examined friendship groups.

In terms of the role of group members, the functions of family members who engage in the family travel decision-making process can be divided into six roles: gatekeeper (initiator), information gatherer, influencer, decision maker, purchaser (buyer), and user (Nanda, Hu, & Bai, 2006). Specifically, gatekeepers, who initiate the family decision-making, are the primary information gatherers. Influencers are family members whose opinion and input is sought, and who may affect the decision criteria that will be used in the evaluation of products. Decision makers are the ones who have the formal or informal power to make the final purchase decision. Buyers execute the purchase of products and finally, the users consume the products (Nanda et al., 2006). Some family members may play multiple roles in the group decision-making process (Nanda et al., 2006). The wife is largely viewed as the idea initiator, information gatherer, and final decision-maker for group travel decision-making (Mowen & Graefe, 2006).

In terms of disagreement solution, previous studies mainly focused on the strategies for solving conflicts or reaching agreement. In terms of solving conflicts, Kozak (2010) found compromise is the top strategy to solve disagreement when a couple make a vacation or eating out decision, showing that the couple makes decisions through mutual concession. Marcevova et al. (2010) also found that compromise is the most commonly employed conflict resolution strategy by friendship groups when disagreements resulting from different preferences of individual group members occurred. In addition, Bokek-Cohen (2011) examined three types of strategies (reward, coercive, and emotional) during the couple’s vacation decision-making, and found that couples used reward strategies the most. Song, Sparks, and Wang (2017) identified that Chinese cultural values (i.e., reciprocity and conformity) influence young Chinese travellers’ disagreement resolution. Specifically, reciprocity relates to resolution strategies, such as compromising, problem solving, and delaying, whereas conformity refers to forcing and accommodating. In terms of reaching agreement, discussion between family members is the most common approach (Jang et al., 2007; Kang & Hsu, 2004, 2005). However, the importance of group discussion in terms of reaching agreement has been briefly raised in the tourism literature. Issues such as how group members discuss, negotiate, and ultimately arrive at an agreement in group decision-making has been largely ignored (Cohen et al., 2014). Therefore, a close examination of group discussion, such as the group interaction and communication process, could contribute to the theories of group decision-making.

***Group decision-making***

Group decisions are normally made jointly by all members of a party, so members have to engage in a communication and discussion process to reach decisions (Fay et al., 2000). In face-to-face group communication, both verbal and non-verbal messages are important components. Verbal communication is the primary means of expressing opinions, formulating arguments, and exchanging information (Stasser & Taylor, 1991), and non-verbal behaviour serves as a supplement to the verbal message (Hall, 2006).

Bales’ (1950) model for interaction process analysis (IPA) has been commonly adopted for analysing group communication (Burke, 2003). The IPA is a way to classify group interactions act by act, with act defined as a simple sentence (Bales, 1950; Burke, 2003). Each act can be coded into the two broader themes of *task* and *social-emotional* communication (Burke, 2003). Specifically, the task theme includes *asking questions* and *giving answers;* and the social-emotionaltheme includes *positive reactions* and *negative reactions*. The IPA framework has been used to examine the interaction process within different types of groups in various contexts, such as university student groups, family groups, jury, nursing teams, and military groups (D. Beck & Fisch, 2000; Hirokawa, 1988; Hirokawa et al., 2012; Nam, Lyons, Hwang, & Kim, 2009). Poole and Folger (1981) noted that the IPA model has outperformed other models (i.e., the decision proposal system and the Pattern variable system) in representational validity as it effectively reflects the meaning of communication for group members in the group context. Therefore, IPA is commonly regarded as an established and foundational methodology for the group interaction process.

It has been noted that “IPA coding favors verbal over nonverbal communication” (S. J. Beck & Keyton, 2014, p. 42). This has resulted in group discussion being examined predominantly from the perspective of verbal messages, and non-verbal content being largely neglected in the literature of group communication, even though non-verbal cues can enhance or alter verbal acts (S. J. Beck & Keyton, 2014). A review of the non-verbal behaviours in disciplines such as communication and language psychology reveals a range of diverse non-verbal cues that are used to interpret communication, such as gesturing by the speaker, touching others, smiling, frowning, nodding, head shaking*,* and laughter (Carney, Hall, & LeBeau, 2005; D’Agostino & Bylund, 2011; Forbes & Jackson, 1980; Hall, Coats, & LeBeau, 2005; Jones, Gallois, Callan, & Barker, 1999).

Keyton and Beck (2010) found that laughter, one of the non-verbal displays, has three types of functions (i.e., relational, procedural, and informational) to influence group communication. The relational function refers to conveying interpersonal attitudes and emotional states among different group members to develop, maintain, and challenge. The procedural function refers to evaluating procedures and moving forward the process of completing the group travel decision-making. The informational function refers to fulfilling task and informational needs. Song, Wang, et al. (2017) identified that non-verbal behaviours generally have three functions in group decision-making, however without providing detailed interpretation of these functions.

***Chinese tourists’ destination selection***

Destination selection, as one of the most vital stages of a travel decision-making process, has been received much attention in the literature. A review of the current literature shows that there are two major variables affecting tourists’ destination selection, individual and holiday-related. Individual determinants refer to travellers’ personal characteristics, such as psychological factors and travel behavioural factors (Decrop & Zidda, 2006; Jeng & Fesenmaier, 2002). Psychological variables, such as personality, lifestyles, and values, have a major influence on the selection of vacation destinations, activities, travel styles (independent travel versus package tour), and souvenirs (Barlés-Arizón, Fraj-Andrés, & Martínez-Salinas, 2013; Decrop, 1999; Decrop & Zidda, 2006). Travel behavioural factors mainly refer to prior travel experience (e.g., the number of trips in the past), and the experience (in variety and intensity) of each vacation sub-decision. People who have prior travel experience are more likely to revisit a destination (Huang & Hsu, 2009), and then influence their future destination selection process. Travellers who have experiences in variety often have extensive vacation activities in different destinations; whereas travellers who have experiences in intensity often go to the same destination, always around the same time, in the same type of accommodation and for the same type of activities (Decrop, 1999).

Holiday-related factors relate to the factors on the holiday and destinations. Bargeman and van der Poel (2006) found a list of variables that influence travel decision-making, such as the length of stay (short break versus long vacation), travel style (independent travel versus package tour), travel party composition, type of vacation, type of accommodation, and travel mode influence the decision-making process (Bargeman & van der Poel, 2006). In addition, Sirakaya and Woodside (2005) found that the experiences of vacation activities, expenditures, destination, distance travelled, and frequency of travel are considered variables that influence the travel decision-making process.

Slightly different from the two major factors of destination selection, a review of Chinese tourists’ destination selection studies indicates that the attributes affecting Chinese tourists’ destination selection can be grouped into two categories: individual factors (e.g., income, age and gender) and holiday-related factors (e.g., safety, accessibility, attraction, culture, trip expenditure, and length of stay during the trip) (e.g., Corigliano, 2011; Kim, Guo, & Agrusa, 2005; MacLaurin, 2004; Marcevova et al., 2010; Qu & Li, 1997). Previous studies examined Chinese destination selection mainly from an individual perspective, rather than a group perspective. It should be noted that attributes affecting Chinese tourists’ destination selection might be different in the contexts of an individual or group. In order to address the knowledge gap, the current study examines Chinese tourists’ destination selection in a group context.

# Method

This study implements the approach of observation to examine group travel decision-making by young Chinese tourists. Considering the complexity and dynamics of the group travel decision-making process, an approach enabling these complexities to be witnessed was considered necessary. The observation technique is a method where the researcher can observe and examine the behaviour of the study sample in order to gain a deeper understanding of the complex phenomenon being examined (Creswell, 2009). Specifically, group members’ behaviours can be observed during interaction (or simulated interaction) in order to generate idiosyncratic patterns (Lee & Collins, 2000; Lee & Marshall, 1998). It is commonly agreed that observation is an appropriate technique to study group discussions (Langley, 1999). Owning to the fact that actual travel decision normally takes a long time (Decrop & Snelders, 2004), it is unlikely to observe the whole decision making process. Therefore, this study adopts simulations to study group travel decision-making.

Observations were undertaken in China’s Yangtze River Delta region, one of the most affluent regions in China. Recruiting whole groups of friends aged between 18 and 35 was challenging and time-consuming, thus researchers utilised snowball sampling to select quality participants efficiently and appropriately. One of the authors, being Chinese, used his personal connections in China to recruit appropriate participants. This author telephoned his personal connections aged between 18 and 35, and invited them to select three to five people from their existing friends to form a group that could travel together in the future. Participants were also asked to recommend other people to participate in this study. Each group was randomly allocated a simulated group decision-making exercise, either a domestic or international destination. The task was: “*Imagine that you will travel together as a small group within [outside] Mainland China in the next six months; where would you like to go?*” Each group had approximately 30 minutes to identify, discuss, and agree on a destination. This phase was audio and video recorded. Participants’ demographic information was collected at the end. The number of groups observed in this study followed the guidelines of theoretical saturation, the point in data collection when no new or relevant information emerges with respect to the research topic (Shank, 2006). Observation was terminated at the conclusion of the tenth group decision-making session as saturation was achieved. A total of ten groups participated in the study. Seven groups had three participants, and three groups had four participants. Three groups had mixed genders, five had males only, and two had females only.

The audio recordings were transcribed into textual documents in Chinese by one of the Chinese authors. The textual documents and videos were then imported into NVivo 10 to allow full examination of different aspects of group discussion. The data analysis focused on two perspectives: discussion topics and the interaction process. Overall, the discussion topic was content analysed based on the importance of the topics in influencing destination selection. The interaction process was coded according to the role of verbal and non-verbal behaviours in influencing decision making. The non-verbal data were coded based on the relationship between non-verbal and verbal behaviours, and the role of non-verbal displays in influencing group decision-making. The final codebook was developed on the basis of existing studies (e.g., Bales, 1950; Gorse & Emmitt, 2007; Keyton & Beck, 2009; Song, Wang, et al., 2017) and revised on the basis of further discussions among the three researchers. In order to ensure the validity of the coding process, two researchers separately coded the data of one group from the discussion topic and interaction perspectives. Then, three researchers had three rounds of meetings to discuss the direction of data analysis. As this study also aims to examine the similarities and differences between international and domestic destination selection, the frequency of codes was entered to an Excel sheet in order to run the Chi-square test.

# Results

## Overview of the group travel decision-making process

Selecting a travel destination was the major task for group travel decision-making. Table 1 lists the destinations that were proposed and selected by all ten groups. All groups successfully selected one destination (e.g., Maldives) or multiple destinations (e.g., several countries in Europe). Group members proposed 3 to 17 destination options for each group, and they discussed these proposed destinations on two levels: 1) little or no discussion; and 2) comprehensive discussion. One to ten destination options were proposed in each group, but these options were largely ignored by other group members, thus these topics received little or no discussion. In addition, group members for each group comprehensively discussed two to nine destinations in order to select the final destination.

Please insert Table 1 here

## The role of the topics in international and domestic destination selection

Participants discussed *activity, cost, travel timing, transportation, climate, safety, distance, travel style, visa application, language,* *accommodation,* and *dining,* in group travel decision-making. These topics were further evaluated by whether they could attract or dissuade travellers from visiting a destination. Some destination options were rejected by group members due to some topics. Table 2 shows the importance of these twelve discussion topics in each of the ten groups. According to the role of the topics, these twelve topics were grouped into three categories: 1) important, 2) partially important, and 3) less important topics for destination selection.

Please insert Table 2 here

**Important topics** are vital for both international and domestic destination selection. Almost every group considered *tourism**activity* an important factor to influence the destination selection. For example, one group member rejected mountain destinations, leading to exclusion of this type of destination from further discussion. *Travel timing*relates to the travel time from origin to destination and includes the length of stay in the destination. In this study, the long journey time was a direct reason for rejecting some distant destinations. Distant destinations were often dismissed because of the long transit time to the destination, as this considerably reduces the time participants have to explore the destination. As individuals had different availability, some destinations (e.g., New York, Xinjiang, and Tibet) with long travel journey time were quickly rejected by group members.

High *travel costs* could influence group members to reject a proposed destination. Evidence in this study shows that group members’ first impression or stereotypical image about the cost of the proposed destinations was based on issues such as airfare and the cost of living in the destination. Participants believed that travelling to some nearby or rural destinations was financially acceptable. However, group members perceived the trip to long-distance destinations, such as New York, to be expensive and unrealistic. Inconvenient *transportation* or unwillingness to use some transportation modes could preclude consideration of some proposed destinations. For example, a distant destination without an airport could be rejected because some group members were not fancy a train journey. *Climate* had the ability to reject a proposed destination option. Groups generally preferred warm destinations for winter, such as South China, Southeast Asia, or locations near the equator. The preference for warm destinations especially held when some influential or insistent group members strongly argued against cold climates. Mounting an argument against cold weather destinations quickly resulted in the group’s rejection of such destinations.

*Safety* could be a reason to reject destination options if members expressed concerns about political instability, natural disaster, and personal health status. For instance, destinations such as Indonesia, the Middle East, and China’s Xinjiang region were perceived as unsafe owing to political instability, reflected in anti-Chinese violence in the past (Indonesia), the civil war in Syria (the Middle East), and the conflicts between the Uyghur minority and Han Chinese (South Xinjiang, China). Other considerations, such as natural disasters (e.g., tsunamis at the beach destinations) could also exclude a potential destination from consideration. *Distance* refers to the geographic distance from the destination to travellers’ area of origin. There was no exact distance that could rule out the proposal destination, and the geographic distance was based on group members’ perception. When selecting a domestic destination, some group members in three groups (G2, G4, and G6) perceived the destinations outside the Yangtze River Delta region far away, thus preferred to travel within the region. Proposed destinations (e.g., New York) with long distance from destination to group members’ area of origin could be easily rejected by other group members without considering the detailed information of the destination.

**Partially important topics** are only vital for international destination selection. *Travel style*, in terms of travelling independently or on a package tour, was an important determinant for international destination selection. The preference for independent travel resulted in the rejection of “package tour only” destinations. Some members’ ineligibility for an independent travel visa from certain overseas destinations made joining a package tour the only option for travel to these destinations, particularly as only permanent residents from selected cities in China are eligible for independent travel to overseas destinations, such as Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. *Visa application* refers to the difficulty of acquiring a visa, and the groups discussed this issue only when choosing an international destination. As noted earlier, some people may not be eligible for an independent travel document (visa) because they come from a regional area that they are not allowed to travel independently in some overseas destinations.

*Language* was a concern for two groups (G3 and G9) when choosing an international destination. Some participants were worried about the language issue in France, Italy and Germany. In order to diminish the concern about language barriers, group members decided to abandon independent travel, and join a package tour that was organised by a Chinese travel agency and led by a Chinese tour guide. Participants also used the personal travel experience of their friends to demonstrate that language is not an issue when travelling abroad, and readily available online travelogues in Chinese could also relieve travellers’ concerns about language. **Less important topics,** including*accommodation* and *dining,* was rarely discussed and did not influence destination choice.

## The role of interaction in decision making

Both verbal and non-verbal messages are important components in face-to-face group communication. The verbal messages delivered by group members were analysed based on Bales’ Interaction Process Analysis (IPA). The non-verbal behaviours which were associated with the verbal discussions were examined based on seven displays: *gesturing by speaker, touching others, smiling, frowning, nodding, headshaking,* and *laughter*.

### Verbal behaviours

This section utilises Bale’s IPA to guide the reporting of verbal behaviours. The *task* perspective includes two opposing categories: *asking questions* and *giving answers*. In the *asking questions* category, questions were asked to gain information about orientation, opinion, and suggestions, whereas in the *giving answers* category, answers were provided in terms of orientation, opinion, and suggestion. Table 3 summarises the example, role, as well as function for the *task*-related perspective. Sub-categories in the *task* perspective have three types of function in group travel decision-making, namely information, evaluation, and direction. **Information**, as the foundation of making travel decisions, was shown in two sub-categories: asking orientation and giving orientation. Specifically, factual information about sub-decision topics and the previous travel experience of group members were exchanged and clarified in the group discussion. **Judgement** includes personal opinions, and analytical assessment. In terms of progressing group travel decision-making, judgement was the advanced stage after **Information.** **Judgement** was reflected by two sub-categories: asking opinion and giving opinion. In this level, group members shared personal feelings and evaluation about topics such as destinations, travel timing, cost, transportation, tourism activity, and so on. **Direction** is the most straightforward function to guide the discussion to the next stage, and may speed up the completion of sub-decisions. This category was reflected by two sub-categories: asking suggestion and giving suggestion. Suggestions were requested and shared in terms of resolution for completing the decision-making.

Please insert Table 3 here

The *social-emotional* perspective includes two opposing categories: *positive reaction* and *negative reaction*. *Positive reaction* category includes solidarity, tension release, and agreement. *Negative reaction* includes antagonism, showing tension, and disagreement. Table 4 summarises the example, role, and function for the *social-emotional* perspective in the group communication. Categories in the *social-emotional* perspective had three levels of function, namely **decision, tension management, and integration management**. In terms of **decision**, the sub-categories were about agreement and disagreement. Specifically, agreement refers to any act that shows acceptance as demonstrated by messages of acceptance, confirmation, and comprehension, whereas disagreement refers to any acts that show rejection of information and has two roles: unacceptance of a question, and refuting information. The messages about disagreement were used to dispute claims made in previous statements by others, and may have halted the group discussion temporarily, allowing change to a new topic.

**Tension management** was reflected by tension release and showing tension. This level had a higher level of impact on group travel decision-making. Tension release is related to a reduction in anxiety that a person or group may be experiencing. Specifically, humour was a major trigger to create laughter and then to support a friendly communication climate (details see examples in Table 5). Showing tension refers to experiencing dissatisfaction and sarcasm. Messages of dissatisfaction involved expression of worry, frustration, and unhappiness, which were related to the speakers themselves. Sarcasm was used to show tensions to other group members. **Integration management** had the highest level of impact on group travel decision-making. This category was reflected by solidarity and antagonism. Solidarity was centred on the group cohesiveness and friendship by showing positive feelings towards another person. Antagonism showed negative feelings through the use of profane language and blunt expressions. Specifically, enhancing other’s status could lead to a friendly and supportive communication climate. Laughter often followed the solidarity statement. However, lowering other’s status was reflected through a strong antagonism towards others in the group discussion, which led to negative feelings, and finally inhibited group communication.

Please insert Table 4 here

### Non-verbal behaviours

Non-verbal behaviour serves as a supplement to the verbal message in communication. Table 5 presents the definitions and examples of the non-verbal behaviours. The functions of non-verbal behaviours were analysed through a link between the non-verbal behaviour and the verbal context. For example, when a person says a disagreement but shows smiles or laughs, the function of *smiling* and *laughter* is delivering negative feelings. The major function of *the gesturing by speaker* was displayed to support the spoken language. The majority of incidents of *touching others* were displayed in the data to show a close relationship. The major function of *smiling* was to show a positive and negative feeling. *Frowning* mainly showed negative feelings (e.g., anger, worry, and dissatisfaction). Vertical (up-down) movement indicates nodding, and horizontal (left to right) movement occurred with headshaking. *Nodding* mainly functioned as agreeing with others and supporting utterance. *Headshaking* was mainly to signal disagreement or disapproval. *Laughter* refers to vocalization of smiling, and movements of facial muscles. The key function of *laughter* in this study is showing positive and negative feelings to other group members.

Please insert Table 5 here

**Group interaction process by destination selection task**

Table 6 presents the frequency (the number of times coded) and percentage of the group interaction categories in international and domestic destination selection contexts. The results show that *giving answers* dominated the group discussion, showing that group members mainly provided travel-related information to others. *Positive reaction* was the second largest category, showingthat the decision was made in a generally relaxed, friendly and supportive atmosphere. *Smiling, laughter,* and *nodding* were the top three non-verbal behaviours.

Please insert Table 6 here

The results show that group members had similar verbal interaction patterns when selecting either an international or domestic destination. In terms of non-verbal behaviours, group members had a significantly higher percentage of *laughter* in international destination selection than in domestic destination selection (*p* < .05), showing that group members laughed more when choosing a domestic destination. One possible reason is that Chinese travellers have some concerns about visiting an unfamiliar overseas destination (Lo & Lam, 2004). Thus, discussion of international destination showed a comparatively lower *laughter* percentage than discussion of domestic destination.

**Discussion**

***Attributes affecting destination selection***

This study confirms with the literature on individual Chinese tourists’ destination selection (e.g., Corigliano, 2011; Kim et al., 2005; MacLaurin, 2004; Marcevova et al., 2010; Qu & Li, 1997) in that *activity, cost, travel timing, transportation, climate, safety, distance,* and *visa application* determined Chinese tourists’ destination choice. It seems that Chinese tourists focus on many similar attributes when making an individual decision or a group decision. This study also identified some different findings from the previous literature on Chinese tourists. For example, *travel style* (i.e., package tour vs. independent travel) becomes important when Chinese tourists choose an international destination. Evidence shows that independent travel accounts for approximately 40% of China’s domestic and outbound tourism market (Trivett, 2013), and there is an increasing demand for independent travel among young Chinese travellers (International Tourism Consulting Group, 2011). However, previous literature has not identified travel style as an important destination selection factor. Contrary to previous studies, this study did not reveal *language* as a major barrier for Chinese travellers visiting overseas destinations. Possible reasons could be: young Chinese travellers could easily access abundant online information on overseas destinations in Chinese, and probably have much better language skills than old Chinese generations. This study shows that both *accommodation* and *dining* are not identified as key factors influencing destination choice. A possible reason could be *accommodation* is normally discussed in the trip planning process, rather than in the destination selection stage, and *dining* is more like an en-route decision, and normally travellers consider this issue during the journey (Fesenmaier & Jeng, 2000).

Comparing with the Western literature, the current study identified that both Chinese and Westerners discussed lots of similar destination selection topics, and considered many similar destination selection attributes, such as *activity, cost, travel timing,* and *transportation* (Fesenmaier & Jeng, 2000; Woodside & King, 2001). It seems that general destination selection attributes can be applied to both Westerners and Chinese context. However, this study witnessed some different findings with the Western literature. For example, Chinese tourists discussed the important topics, such as *visa application* and *travel style*; whereas Westerners didn’t mention both topics (e.g., Decrop & Snelders, 2004). This can be explained by the Chinese outbound tourism characteristics. In China, *travel style* is somewhat highly related to the *visa* issue. Travellers need a travel document (or visa) to visit another country or region. For three of China’s outbound destinations, Taiwan, Hong Kong SAR, and Macau SAR, only residents from a list of Mainland Chinese cities are able to apply for an Independent Traveller document (visa). People who cannot apply for the Independent Traveller document (visa) are only allowed to visit Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau by joining a package tour. Due to the above mentioned reasons, Chinese tourists have lots of concerns on visa application and travel style when selecting an international destination.

***Group travel decision-making***

Findings of this study are consistent with previous studies in that task information dominated the discussion. In this study, what sets it apart from past research on group decision making is that participants were given a specific problem-solving task of selecting a holiday destination. In order to complete the task, it was necessary to exchange knowledge and information about the task among members (Gorse & Emmitt, 2007). Task-related messages reflect a high frequency of giving answers and a low frequency of asking questions. The reason could be that in this study the simulation task of selecting a destination was related to the early phase of decision-making, so decision-making required more points of clarification. As Bales and Strodtbeck (1951) conclude, information in the early stage of decision-making is more important than in the later stages of decision-making. In terms of the functions of IPA categories, information is the first step of decision-making, judgement is the advanced step, and direction is the highest step, which could strongly influence final group decision.

*Positive emotion* is the second largest IPA category, showing that groups maintained high levels of harmony, and the discussion was mainly a positive and friendly negotiation process. Friendship group members tend to use much social interaction to maintain their personal affective relationships with other group members (Decrop, 2005). In terms of the functions of IPA categories, decision is strongly related to decision task, tension management may influence the group friendship, and integration management could strongly influence the group friendship. It seems that social-emotional messages are not limited to group decision-making itself, but also influence the relationship among group members.

This study elaborates the functions of the non-verbal displays in the context of group travel decision-making. Different from our stereotypical perception of *smiling* and *laughter*, which is commonly associated with positive emotions, the study found that *smiling* and *laughter* could show both positive and negative feelings. This finding could be explained by two reasons. First, miserable or false smiles reflect negative feelings (Dallimore, Sparks, & Butcher, 2007). Second, Chinese cultural values dictate that Chinese people control negative emotions and only display so-called positive behaviour, such as smile, to other people (Fang & Faure, 2011). The results of this study show that group members used a lot of *smiling, laughter,* and *nodding* when making the destination choice, indicating that group travel decision-making is ‘so-called’ friendly and positive.

## Theoretical contribution

This study contributes to the current literature by offering new insights in several ways. First, even though numerous studies stated that group travel decision-making is different from individual travel decision-making (Koc, 2004; Sheth, 1974), this study identifies that in terms of destination selection attributes, young Chinese tourists considered very similar set of destination selection attributes regardless of the individual versus group-based nature of the decision. Second, this study adds to the literature to reveal that Chinese and Western tourists do not differ greatly in terms of destination selection attributes in travel decision-making. Therefore, a major theoretical contribution of this study is that no matter whether it is an individual travel decision or a group travel decision made by Chinese or Westerner, the key destination selection attributes are very similar. The difference between groups exists primarily in relation to contextual factors, such as visa policy that applies to certain countries and regions. As this study found, visa application and travel style are key destination selection factors for Chinese when choosing an international destination.

This study is one of the early studies to examine the group travel interaction process in the tourism context. Based on Song, Wang, et al. (2017) study, the study develops a systematic coding scheme to analyse the discussion content and the interaction process (both verbal and non-verbal messages). The paper contributes to the literature through examining the role of verbal and non-verbal behaviours in group decision-making, and comparing the international and domestic destination selection contexts. Incorporating a particular focus on non-verbal behaviours, this study also extends the general group interaction studies, which currently derive understanding of the interaction process primarily from verbal behaviours (S. J. Beck & Keyton, 2014; Hirokawa & Pace, 1983). The current study also expands Keyton and Beck (2010) study of examining the three types of functions (i.e., relational, procedural, and informational) of *laughter* to seven categories of non-verbal behaviours. The coding scheme developed by this study can inform future studies of non-verbal displays.

## Practical implications

This research also highlights several practical implications for the tourism industry. First, as group interaction plays a significant role in the group decision-making process, smooth interaction among group members could result in a good travel decision, and thus people may transfer the decision-making into a real travel. However, disruptive interaction may generate a poor decision, leaving people unhappy with the decision, so they may not travel together. As the group travel decision-making process was dominated by task-related information and people provided and exchanged task information to make an agreed-upon decision, reliable and influential information played a significant role in the group. Young Chinese travellers focused on seven important attributes (i.e., activity, cost, travel timing, transportation, climate, safety, and distance) when selecting a destination, and two additional attributes (i.e., travel style and visa application) for choosing an international destination. Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) need to promote the iconic attractions in the destination, emphasise budget airline travel and accommodations, feature warm weather in winter, and promote safety and independent travel style in promotional materials to young Chinese travellers as well as in product design and development of tourism to both domestic and international destinations.

Furthermore, as social-emotional messages are also important in group decision-making, DMOs should create a fantasy about the destination to arouse tourists’ interest in visiting the destination. As a result, group members may have positive feelings and excitement in the decision-making process. The more positive emotions that group members have, the stronger the friendship and cohesiveness are. From that perspective, the group travel decision-making process could also enhance the group member relationship.

**Limitations**

This qualitative study has several limitations. First, as with all qualitative research, the findings are limited to the specific context of this study and to the research sample, thus may not be able to be generalised to all young Chinese travellers. To further expand this research, quantitative studies can be conducted with young Chinese friendship groups to confirm the importance of the twelve destination selection factors the current study identified. Future studies can also use experimental design to investigate the effect of verbal and non-verbal categories of behaviours on the outcome of group decision-making. Second, this study uses a simulation task of selecting a destination, which lasted for approximately 30 minutes. However, the real travel decision-making process might take longer and be more extensive, as it involves multiple decisions in the pre- and during-vacation stages. To collect a comprehensive dataset, future research could involve a longer timeframe, including pre- and during-vacation stages. Comparisons between observations before and during vacation may generate differences in terms of the group interaction process. Third, this study examines the interaction process of group travel decision-making. Future studies could examine other details of the interaction, such as how group members proceed the group discussion step by step (e.g., from analysing the group task, establishing evaluation criteria, generating alternative solution, evaluating alternative solution, to selecting the final option), how the destination choices shift from beginning to the end, and how members negotiate with others and accommodate others’ need. In addition, future research could examine the role of leaders in group decision-making, for example, whether the leader initiates the trip and the conversations in the discussion.

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#### ***Table 1: Destinations discussed in group travel decision-making***

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Destination selection** | **Group number** | **Proposed destinations with little or no discussion** | **Proposed destinations with comprehensive discussion** | **Final destination choice**  |
| International Destination  | G1  | Australia, Japan, and Middle East | Mauritius and Europe (France, Italy, and Switzerland) | Europe (France, Italy, and Switzerland) |
| G3  | Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, U.S., Japan, Cambodia, and Philippines  | Europe, Maldives, Phuket, and Bali  | Maldives  |
| G5  | Maldives | Hong Kong and Taiwan  | Taiwan  |
| G7  |   | New York, Singapore-Malaysia-Thailand, Hong Kong, and Macau | Hong Kong and Macau |
|  | G9  | Poland | Germany, France, Italy, Switzerland, and Norway | Europe (Germany, France, Italy, and Switzerland)  |
| Domestic Destination  | G2  | Hangzhou, Suzhou, Qingdao, Hainan, and Yunnan  | Mount Putuo and Xiamen  | Xiamen  |
| G4  |   | Xinjiang, Tibet, Mount Sanqingshan, and Mount Lushan | Mount Sanqingshan |
| G6  | Shanghai, Hangzhou, Beijing, Suzhou, Wuhu, Qingdao, Weihai, Rizhou, Mount Tai, and Mount Heng | Mount Huangshan, Yangzhou, Changzhou, Chengdu, Yunnan, Inner Mongolia, and Tibet  | Chengdu  |
| G8  | Diaoyutai Islands, Mount Tai, Dunhuang, Tibet, and Yangzhou  | Hainan, Guilin, Mount Huangshan, Harbin, and Zhenjiang-Changzhou-Wuxi-Suzhou-Shanghai  | Mount Huangshan and Harbin  |
|  | G10 | Inner Mongolia, Jiuzhaigou | Qinghai and Yunnan | Qinghai  |

#### ****Table 2: The role of the topics in destination selection****

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Discussion topic** | International Destination | Domestic Destination | Appeared in groups | Overall evaluation |
|  | G1 | G3 | G5 | G7 | G9 | G2 | G4 | G6 | G8 | G10 |  |  |
| **Activity** | # | # |  | # | # | # | # | # | # | # | Nine | Important  |
| **Cost** | # | # | # | # |  |  | # | # | # |  | Seven  | Important |
| **Travel timing** | # | # |  | # |  | # | # | # | # | # | Eight  | Important |
| **Transportation** | # | # |  |  |  |  | # | # | # |  | Five  | Important |
| **Climate** | # | # |  |  |  |  |  | # | # | # | Five  | Important |
| **Safety** |  | # |  |  | # |  | # |  | # | # | Five  | Important |
| **Distance** |  |  |  | # |  | # | # | # | # |  | Five  | Important |
| **Travel Style** |  |  | # | # |  |  |  |  |  |  | Two  | Partially important |
| **Visa Application** | # |  | # |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | Two  | Partially important |
| **Language** |  | # |  |  | # |  |  |  |  |  | Two | Partially important |
| **Accommodation** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | Zero  | Less important |
| **Dining** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | Zero  | Less important  |

Note: # shows that group members considered such topic important in the destination selection process; the important topics were highlighted.

#### Table 3: Function and example of the task perspective

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Task Perspective**  | **Example** | **Role** | **Function for group decision-making**  |
| ***Asking Questions*** | Asking Orientation | G1\_3: Are the Alps mainly in Switzerland? | Asking factual information | Category 1: Information |
|  | G2\_1: How much did we spend in the last trip? | Inquiring about travel experience |
| Asking Opinion | G1\_2: Do you have any opinions?  | Personal opinion | Category 2: Judgement |
| G8\_1: Do you like natural scenery or cultural attraction? | Evaluation and analysis |
| Asking Suggestion | G5\_1: What can we do in ten days?  | Requesting solution | Category 3: Direction |
| ***Giving Answers*** | Giving Orientation | G1\_2: Lafayette is a shopping mall in Paris. | Giving factual information | Category 1: Information |
|  | G1\_2: Before I travelled to France, I prepared lots of documents. Some documents were provided by the company. | Giving travel experience |
| Giving Opinion | G8\_3: I think riding a bicycle to Shanghai is very tiring.  | Giving personal opinion | Category 2: Judgement |
|  | G6\_2: My health is not good, and I have serious back pain, so I think areas near the equator are good.  | Providing evaluation and analysis |
| Giving Suggestion | G5\_3: Let’s do it this way. First Taipei, then go to south, and visit cities such as Taichung and Tainan. | Providing solution | Category 3: Direction |

#### Table 4: Functions and examples of the social-emotional perspective

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Social-emotional perspective** | **Example** | **Role** | **Function for group decision-making** |
| ***Positive Reaction*** | Agreement  | G1\_3: The travel budget is around RMB 17,000. G1\_2: The trip can be more luxurious. G1\_3: Yeah. We can increase it to RMB 20,000. Woo, RBM 20,000 in ten days. That’s fine, that’s fine. | Showing acceptance to continue the same topic | Category 1: Decision |
|  | G4\_3: … Mount Sanqingshan hasn’t been developed. Everyone who visited there says Mount Sanqingshan is beautiful. G4\_1: Qing went there before. G4\_3: Yeah. He said it’s beautiful.  | Showing confirmation to maintain the same topic |
|  | G2\_3: Where did you go? G2\_1: I went to Mount Lingshan at Wuxi city. G2\_2: Wuxi.G2\_3: Oh.G2\_2: Grand Buddha at Mount Lingshan. | Showing comprehension to maintain the same topic |
| Tension release  | G5\_2: When we finish the visit to casinos in Macau, you can open a casino in Mainland China. G5\_3: Haha… haha…G5\_1: Haha… | Sharing laughter to diminish tension | Category 2: Tension management |
|  | G1\_3: I think we should stay in hostels.G1\_2: No way. G1\_3: Hostels.G1\_2: No, definitely not. G1\_3: Haha. | Laughing alone to diminish tension |
| Solidarity  | G1\_2: Oh, yeah. You see, as a graduate of Tongji University, you are marvellous. | Enhancing other’s status | Category 3: Integration management |
|  | G6\_2: If you two go, I will definitely go. I can tell you that I am not your buddy if I am not going. | Showing friendship |
| ***Negative Reaction*** | Disagreement | G6\_2: We can go hunting. G6\_1: No, no. I can’t stand it.G6\_3: Only three of us travel, please don’t make us so exhausted. Let’s forget about adventurous activities, and find some cities. | Rejection of a suggestion to end a topic and change to a new topic | Category 1: Decision |
|  | G5\_2: We can travel independently in Hong Kong. G5\_3: That is Hong Kong, not Taiwan.G5\_2: We can do that in Taiwan.G5\_3: No.G5\_2: No? G5\_3: No. Um, Taiwan is not ok.  | Refuting information to reject a claim |
| Showing tension | G1\_2: Paris is dirty. G1\_3: Dirty?G1\_2: The subway is so dirty. | Dissatisfaction leading to tension | Category 2: Tension management |
|  | G7\_1: RMB 2000, are you kidding me?  | Using sarcasm to increase tension |
| Antagonism | G5\_2: It’s none of your business. | Lowering other’s status | Category 3: Integration management |

Note: Underlined words and sentences are the examples.

#### Table 5: Examples of non-verbal behaviours

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Non-verbal behaviour** | **Definition** | **Examples in the verbal context** | **Function for group decision making**  |
| **Gesturing by speaker** | The movement of hands and arms by speakers. | G8\_1: …in the Wax Museum, a lot of professional photographers were taking pictures using professional cameras. [Animated photographer who takes pictures] | Informational (support the spoken language) |
| **Touching others** | Touching others’ hand, leg, shoulder, through movement of hands and arms. | G5\_2: He found that you are the boss.G5\_3: Let’s do it this way [touching her hand to indicate a halt], Laura, ask your boyfriend to travel with us. | Relational (show a close relationship)  |
| **Smiling** | A relaxation of the facial features, with lips parted or closed, and with the corners of the lips turned upward. | G2\_4: Hiking is really tiring, I don’t want to go. [Smiling] | Relational (both positive and negative feelings)  |
| **Frowning** | Bringing the eyebrows together, or wrinkling the forehead. | G8\_1: … actually we can visit a wax museum in Shanghai … a Madame Wax museum… I can’t remember the full name. [Frowning]  | Relational (negative feelings)  |
| **Nodding** | A continuous up and down movement of the head. | G5\_1: … then, we go to the beach.G5\_3: Yeah, go to the beach. [Nodding] | Procedural (agreeing others) and informational (supporting utterance)  |
| **Headshaking** | A horizontal movement from side to side. | G1\_3: Are two days enough for our trip? G1\_2: Perhaps not enough. [Head shaking] | Procedural (disagreement or disapproval) |
| **Laughter** | Vocalization of smiling, and movements of facial muscles. | G3\_4: Paris, in the future, I would like to travel with…G3\_3: Your wife. G3\_4: Hahahaha. [Laughter] | Relational (both positive and negative feelings) |

#### Table 6: Group interaction category for international and domestic destination

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|   | International Destination | Domestic Destination |   *x2* |
| **Verbal Category** | Number of times coded |  | Number of times coded |  |  |
| ***Asking Questions*** | 474 | 12.0% | 547 | 14.8% |   |
| ***Giving Answers*** | 2,438 | 61.6% | 2,301 | 62.4% |   |
| ***Positive Reaction*** | 857 | 21.7% | 655 | 17.8% |   |
| ***Negative Reaction*** | 188 | 4.8% | 187 | 5.1% |   |
| TOTAL | 3,957 | 100% | 3,690 | 100% |   |
| **Non-Verbal Category** |   |   |   |   |   |
| ***Touching Others*** | 44 | 3.5% | 32 | 2.6% |  |
| ***Gesturing by Speaker*** | 128 | 10.1% | 74 | 6.1% |  |
| ***Smiling***  | 329 | 26.1% | 393 | 32.3% |  |
| ***Frowning***  | 77 | 6.1% | 46 | 3.8% |  |
| ***Nodding***  | 339 | 26.9% | 226 | 18.6% |  |
| ***Head Shaking*** | 121 | 9.6% | 89 | 7.3% |  |
| ***Laughter*** | 224 | 17.7% | 357 | 29.3% |  \* |
| TOTAL | 1,262 | 100% | 1,217 | 100% |   |

Note: \**p* < .05