

# A MODEL FOR CREATING MEMORABILITY IN A RURAL TOURISM DESTINATION

Tourism research is encouraging a shift in marketing towards promoting experiences, but for those experiences to translate into returning visits and word of mouth sharing, they need to be memorable. But what makes an experience memorable? To answer this, Dr. Wei Wei, from UCF Rosen College of Hospitality has, together with collaborators, created and tested a model for experiential memorability in domestic and outbound tourists with one of the world's biggest tourism markets.



Rural tourism offers a welcome relief from the stress of urban daily life.

Almost three-quarters of Chinese tourists to New Zealand visit the country's farms and orchards.

Creating memorable experiences is the purpose of the tourism and hospitality industries. It makes strong business sense: if someone has a memorable experience, they are more likely to return and tell others. As such, much research exists on the role of memory in tourist behavior and has measured experiential elements in tourism designed to elicit memories. However, within tourism research, there is little in the way of an integrated model to clarify how to create memorability, especially with the focus on encouraging returning to a destination or telling others about it. Dr. Wei Wei, from UCF Rosen College of Hospitality, and collaborators, have gone one significant step further—creating and testing such a model with one of the world's biggest tourism markets.

The link between experience and memorability is increasingly important for the tourism industry, especially one struggling to encourage people to travel after a global pandemic. Marketing research is shifting focus from quality and satisfaction towards an experiential marketing paradigm. In the face of a worldwide economic slump, people will

not invest considerable money on a holiday if, in the end, it proves merely satisfactory. The experience should be such that they continually revisit it in their memories and are eager to share it with family, friends, and colleagues, face-to-face and on social media. The question is: what makes an experience memorable?

## MAKING MEMORIES

A memorable experience is not one that's hard to forget—that's the sleepless night that follows a strange meal at a dodgy seaside restaurant. A truly memorable experience is one worth remembering because it's exceptional or unusual. But there's no simple formula for ensuring a visitor has a memorable experience, and this has challenged tourism academia and industry alike. Much depends on what visitors are searching for, and generally, this is steered by how far they are willing to travel.

Tourists traveling to short-haul, culturally similar destinations generally search for familiar experiences focusing on rest and relaxation. Those traveling further afield and to culturally exotic places do so because they want to be surprised and are looking for new and exciting experiences. As such, how tourists 'measure'

the memorability of their experiences differs. Some may find a plate of their favorite food, served in an upmarket hotel in an idyllic countryside setting, particularly memorable. Others a bungee jump into a deep mountain gorge in a distant, foreign but friendly country.

For academics shaping the decisions of the tourism industry, trying to understand the disparities of what constitutes memorability is an ongoing challenge. Consequently, little empirical evidence exists on the matter. However, there seems to be general agreement that a tourism experience is essentially a combination of familiar and unfamiliar—or 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary'—experiences. This formed the basis of Dr. Wei and her team's research and model for a memorable experience.

## A RURAL EXPERIENCE

China is one of the world's biggest tourism markets—the Chinese are increasingly enthusiastic tourists, both domestic and outbound, and destinations within China and around the world are lobbying for their attention. Given China's aggressive rate of urbanization, it is understandable that domestic

tourists searching for a welcome relief from the stress of urban daily life are attracted to the country's myriad rural destinations.

Such 'rural tourism'—the great getaway offering rural experiences, cultures, landscapes, and artifacts—is found worldwide. It may differ from country to country according to lifestyle, culture, and history, and as such, there's no universal rural tourism model. There is, however, a significant enough degree of similarity to make it a relevant focus for Dr. Wei and her collaborators. It also just so happens that rural tourism is a major offering in one of the most popular outbound destinations for Chinese tourists: New Zealand. In fact, China is New Zealand's second-largest tourism market after Australia, and almost three-quarters of Chinese tourists to New Zealand

visit the country's farms and orchards. This association of Chinese tourists looking for rural destinations both at home and abroad provided the research team with an ideal test scenario for a model for tourists from a single country seeking a memorable experience. It also allowed them to compare the experiences between domestic and outbound tourists. Their challenge was then how to channel the disparate measures of memorability into a single model.

For the researchers, part of the answer lies in the current research and the knowledge that psychologists define memorability as the feelings, judgments, and predictions people have about how memorable an event will be. As such, for an experience to be memorable, it must, to a degree, measure up to expectations.

So, Dr. Wei and her collaborators started with the point of agreement amongst tourism scholars on the value of different, but complementary, ordinary (familiar) and extraordinary (exotic) experiences. Research suggests that tourists measure an 'ordinary' experience against expectations of product or service quality and their satisfaction therewith. On the other hand, tourists evaluate an 'extraordinary' experience based on the extent of novelty and the sense of delight associated with it. Dr. Wei and the team now had their framework for the model.

## A MODEL FOR MEMORABILITY

Based on the relationship between quality and satisfaction, and novelty and delight, the researchers arrived at a sequence of interrelated hypotheses:

1. Experience quality positively affects memorability.
2. Satisfaction can partly mediate the relationship between experience quality and memorability.
3. Perceived novelty can positively affect memorability.
4. Tourist delight can partly mediate the effect of novelty on memorability.

THE RESULTS ALSO REVEALED AN UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTH: CHINESE TOURISTS FAVORED RURAL DESTINATIONS IN NEW ZEALAND OVER DOMESTIC RURAL DESTINATIONS.



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For outbound tourists, extraordinary experiences alone determined perceived memorability.

5. Tourist satisfaction significantly affects tourist delight.
6. Tourist delight positively affects intentions to spread positive word of mouth.
7. Tourist satisfaction positively affects intentions to spread positive word of mouth.
8. Memorability positively affects intentions to spread positive word-of-mouth.

Using current research as a foundation, Dr. Wei and her team adapted evaluative phrases to design a survey questionnaire that measured tourists' constructs of quality, satisfaction, novelty and delight, and whether or not they considered their rural destination memorable and would tell others about it. They first conducted a survey in April and May 2016 with Chinese domestic tourists in Changxing, Anji, and

### AN UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTH

Data from the tourists visiting domestic rural locations fully supported the hypothesized model, but those from outbound tourists who had visited rural destinations and attractions in New Zealand only partially supported the model. Domestic tourists derived memorability from ordinary experiences—shaped by quality and satisfaction—as well as extraordinary experiences, defined in the study as novelty and delight, but memorability only played a minor role in shaping the spread of positive word-of-mouth especially when compared with the impact that satisfaction had on shaping word-of-mouth. On the other hand, for outbound tourists, extraordinary experiences solely determined perceived memorability and played a far more important role in shaping word-of-mouth.

robustly-tested model that details the 'formation and consequences of memorability' that validates the memory-based approach in tourism marketing. Secondly, by connecting memorability as a concept with the more conventional marketing constructs of satisfaction and quality, it reconciles the emerging behavior model—focusing on memory-oriented tourist behavior—with the current satisfaction-based framework. Finally, as the team tested and compared the proposed model with data gathered from both domestic and outbound tourists, the study shows that memorability is context-dependent in terms of its formation and effect.

The research also has implications for the tourism industry, especially those in rural destinations directed at the Chinese tourism market. For domestic destinations, because satisfaction is instrumental in shaping word-of-mouth, destination management organizations and tourism operators should focus on improving the quality of their offerings to create memorable experiences and improve tourist loyalty.

For foreign rural destinations such as those in New Zealand, tourism operators should consider their offering as a stage 'devoted to presenting the local culture, customs and lifestyle that are authentic and unique to the destination' in a way that creates novel and extraordinary experiences to evoke a strong sense of delight, pleasure, sociability and happiness.

The results also revealed an uncomfortable truth: Chinese tourists favored rural destinations in New Zealand over domestic rural destinations. This suggests that Chinese rural destinations have room to 'improve their guest experiences in terms of novelty, delight, quality, and memorability.'

This research presents significant contributions to tourism research. Firstly, it provides a

## A TRULY MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE IS ONE WORTH REMEMBERING BECAUSE IT'S EXCEPTIONAL OR UNUSUAL.

Deqing—three regions in the central Yangtze River Delta that are among the top rural destinations in China. In December of the same year, they conducted the same survey with Chinese outbound tourists in three of the most popular regions of New Zealand—Auckland, Otago, and the Bay of Plenty. In total, both surveys produced 1373 valid responses. What emerged was both encouraging and surprising.

# RESEARCHERS IN FOCUS

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Dr. Wei Wei and her team created a model to show the role of memorability in experiential tourism in rural destinations

## REFERENCES

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## PERSONAL RESPONSE

### Where would you like to see your study repeated, and why?

|| In this research, we noted the room for Chinese rural destinations to improve guest experiences in terms of novelty, delight, quality, and memorability. With the COVID-induced travel restrictions as well as the enforced quarantine policies in China, it has become more challenging and effortful for many Chinese tourists to travel abroad in the short run. As such, a feasible direction for follow-up studies would be tourist experience of the Chinese domestic tourism market, which will be the main source of tourism-related activities in China for a while. In addition, as Chinese policy makers plan further shifts toward policies that explicitly encourage childbirth, family size may increase gradually in the coming years. This offers vast potential for both academia and industry to revisit and/or invest in domestic rural destinations that promote activities for family/inter-generational interactions, child development and education, as well as natural scenery appreciation. ||

## Dr. Wei Wei



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