Exploring tourists’ social identities in a similar-others destination: the case of Chinese tourists in North Korea

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to contribute to social identity theory in tourism by exploring the reflections of Chinese tourists visiting North Korea and how they negotiate their intergroup identity in this similar-others destination.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected via online platforms and in-depth interviews. A qualitative approach, i.e. thematic analysis, was used to analyse the two sets of data.

Findings – Results showed that when encountering North Koreans perceived as similar others amid the social, economic and political environments in which they were embedded, Chinese tourists often categorised themselves as ordinary tourists, preferentially treated tourists and vicarious tourists based on intergroup similarities to North Koreans. They also performed intergroup comparison to boost their self-esteem at group and collective levels and developed corresponding strategies to generate distinct emotional group commitments.

Practical implications – It is recommended that destinations reinforce the friendly and unique relationship with their similar-others source markets to improve their attractiveness. Destinations should also strive to enhance the experience of tourists from their similar-others markets by arousing their positive collective-level affection, emotional resonance and nostalgic memories and avoiding negative emotions.

Originality/value – This study offers a theoretical framework analysing the features of tourists’ social identities while visiting a similar-others destination, contributing to our understanding of the interactive and contingency nature of social identity in tourism, and responding to the call for addressing the broader social contexts in which tourists’ group identity is embedded.

Keywords Social identity, Social identity theory (SIT), Chinese tourists, North Korea, Similar others, Intergroup similarity

Paper type Research paper

探索“类似他者”目的地的游客认同：以赴朝中国游客为例

摘要

目的：本文致力于探索赴朝中国游客的反思以及他们在这个“类似他者”目的地如何协商群体身份，以及对旅游领域的身份认同理论做出贡献。

设计/方案：本文运用主题分析方法，资料来源于网络文本和深度访谈。

发现：当中国游客面对被视为“类似他者”的朝鲜人时（具有相似的社会、经济和政治环境），他们根据与朝鲜人的群体相似性，将自我分类为“普通游客”、“受优待者”和“外来人”三类。此外，他们还会通过群体比较来提高群体层面和集体层面的自信，并采取对应策略以产生不同的群体承诺。

价值：本文提出了一个分析游客访问“类似他者”目的地时的社会认同理论框架，并对理解旅游中的社会认同的互动性和偶然性做出了贡献，并响应了在考察游客群体认同时关注其所处的更广泛的社会背景的呼吁。

启示：目的地应该强化它们与“类似他者”客源市场之间友好且独特的关系，以提升自身吸引力。目的地还应该唤醒游客积极的群体情感和怀旧，产生主客情感共鸣，并避免负面情感。尽全力提升来自“类似他者”客源地的游客体验。

关键词 社会认同 社会认同理论 中国游客 朝鲜 类似他者 群体相似性

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Estudio de las identidades sociales de los turistas en un destino similar a otros: El caso de los turistas chinos en Corea del Norte

Resumen
Propósito: Este estudio pretende contribuir a la teoría de la identidad social en turismo mediante la exploración de las reflexiones de los turistas chinos que visitan Corea del Norte y cómo negocian su identidad intergrupal en este destino similar a otros.

Diseño/metodología/enfoque: Los datos se recogieron mediante plataformas en línea y entrevistas en profundidad. Se utilizó un enfoque cualitativo a través de análisis temático para analizar los dos conjuntos de datos.

Resultados: Los resultados mostraron que, al encontrarse con norcoreanos percibidos como otros similares en el entorno social, económico y político en el que estaban integrados, los turistas chinos a menudo se categorizaban a sí mismos como turistas ordinarios, turistas con trato preferente y turistas vicarios basándose en las similitudes intergrupales con los norcoreanos. También, realizaban comparaciones intergrupales para aumentar su autoestima a nivel grupal y colectivo, y desarrollaban las estrategias correspondientes para generar distintos compromisos emocionales grupales.

Originalidad/valor: Se presenta un marco teórico en el que se analizan las características de las identidades sociales de los turistas que visitan un destino similar a otro, lo que contribuye a nuestra comprensión de la naturaleza interactiva y contingente de la identidad social en turismo y responde a la necesidad de abordar los contextos sociales más amplios en los que se inserta la identidad de grupo de los turistas.

Implicaciones prácticas: Se recomienda que los destinos refuercen las relaciones amistosas y únicas con sus mercados emisores similares para mejorar su atractividad. Los destinos deberían esforzarse por mejorar la experiencia de los turistas de sus mercados emisores similares, estimulando su afecto positivo a nivel colectivo, su resonancia emocional y sus recuerdos nostalgicos, y evitando las emociones negativas.

Palabras clave Identidad social, Teoría de la identidad social, Turistas chinos, Corea del Norte

1. Introduction

The cultural homogeneity associated with globalisation has spurred people to re-establish unique identities (Cifaldi and Malizia, 2022). This motivation arises from a need to renegotiate boundaries between oneself and others (i.e. “us”/“we” and “them”/“they”), thus cultivating social identities (Cifaldi and Malizia, 2022; Hornsey, 2008). Social identity is “derive[d] from [one’s] knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance of that membership” (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). This concept is a driving force behind human behaviour (Tajfel, 1982). It is also associated with self-verification (Ellemers et al., 1999), self-esteem and self-efficacy (Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel, 1982) and emotions (Hogg, 2006).

Tourism scholars have expressed interest in the tourist experience as a process of reshaping identities (Palmer, 2005). Tourists from different cultural backgrounds naturally interact with others during travel (i.e. residents, tourism practitioners and other travellers). This process is crucial to social identity development (Chen et al., 2020; Palmer, 2005; Zhang et al., 2019). One’s travel behaviour (Lewis et al., 2021) and mental health (Zhao et al., 2022) are affected accordingly.

Social identities are important to intergroup interaction. However, the understanding of social identity construction in tourism is still developing (Chien and Ritchie, 2018). Some research has focussed on how experiences (e.g. backpacking) facilitate tourists’ group identities (Chen et al., 2020). Studies have also considered how tourism experiences influence (or are influenced) by these identities (Lewis et al., 2021). Social identity research frames identity construction as interactive and contingent, calling for more work in this area (Zhang et al., 2021).

Continuous interactions between “us” and “others” contribute to one’s identity (Hogg, 2006). It is hence necessary to understand tourists’ social identities in destinations with similar others (i.e. residents and tourism practitioners). These places are termed “similar-others destinations” in this study. Social psychology describes “similar others” as people with...
similar characteristics to focal individuals. This overlap applies to various categories: sociodemographics, organisational attributes, sociopsychological features and historical events (Chung and Choi, 2013; Frable et al., 1998).

Notable identity differences are generally thought to exist between hosts and guests in international travel (Zhang et al., 2019). The idea of similar others instead contends that tourists’ and hosts' identities can be similar in many cases. Although hosts are “others” to tourists, some parties may share identities – especially when visiting nearby nations. As Festinger (1954) argued, individual social comparisons involve becoming closer to people like oneself (i.e. similar others). Between-group social comparisons pertain to idiosyncrasies between one’s own and other groups, leading to a distinct group identity (Tajfel, 1982). Travellers presumably prefer comparing themselves to similar others to establish a unique (albeit transient) social identity. To the best of the authors’ knowledge, no research has investigated tourists’ social identities – particularly the construction process – in a destination where people encounter similar others.

North Korea (i.e. Democratic People’s Republic of Korea) typifies a similar-others destination for Chinese tourists. North Koreans share many features with their Chinese counterparts (Chung and Choi, 2013; Li and Wang, 2020). These similarities pertain to history (e.g. Japanese invasion), culture (e.g. Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist heritage) and ideology (i.e. communist/Marxist–Leninist ideology). Historical and geopolitical events have led the North Korean authority to adopt fairly loose regulations regarding Chinese tourists (Li et al., 2020; Li and Wang, 2020). China has long been North Korea’s largest tourist source market, providing more than 80% of arrivals (Nanyang Sin-Chew Lianhe Zaobao, 2018). Chinese tourists to North Korea therefore constitute an ideal population for delineating social identities when visiting a similar-others destination.

This study contextualises intergroup identity development. Exploring Chinese tourists’ reflections on visiting North Korea, and how they negotiate their intergroup identity in this similar-others destination, elucidates identity construction through travel.

2. Literature review

2.1 Tourists’ social identities and social identity theory

Interaction between people from various cultural backgrounds during travel is integral to tourists’ social identities (Palmer, 2005). Multiple tourist groups have elicited scholarly intrigue. Examples include independent travellers (e.g. backpackers; Chen et al., 2020), outbound tourists (Zhang et al., 2019) and tourists in dark/heritage settings (Lee et al., 2020). Studies have primarily contemplated the settings in which these groups are embedded.

Tourism researchers have also pondered the tourist gaze and place identity when tourists hail from a location culturally similar to their destination (Lee et al., 2020; McKechnie and Decosta, 2007; Mou and Brito, 2021). Mou and Brito (2021) targeted tourists from mainland China and Macau. Both groups’ place meanings regarding Europe overlapped, as the two groups are culturally Chinese. Yet the symbolic Portuguese settings in Macau tourists’ home environment profoundly affected their memories and self-identity prior to their trips. This infusion may have shaped their perceived place meaning of Portugal. Meanwhile, no research appears to have addressed tourists’ identities within a similar-others destination where tourists share experiences (social, historical, cultural, political, economic or psychological) with others (i.e. residents and tourism practitioners).

Social identity theory (SIT) has been a core social psychology theory since Henri Tajfel proposed it in the 1970s (Hornsey, 2008). This theory has provided empirical support for phenomena such as group processes and intergroup relations (Haslam et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2019). An understanding of the components of SIT and their interrelations is
fundamental to comprehending identity formation and contextual variation, including during travel. Scholars generally agree that social identity consists of cognitive, evaluative and emotional elements (Ellemers et al., 1999; Tajfel, 1982).

The cognitive component entails one’s perceptions of membership and salient/core group characteristics within a social group (Tajfel, 1982). Core attributes classify people, differentiating them into in-groups (“us”) and out-groups (“others”). This psychological process is known as social categorisation (Tajfel, 1978, 1982); it concerns similarities among group members while stressing discrepancies between groups or categories (Tajfel, 1978). Referring to the earlier example of backpackers, these individuals label themselves “backpackers” or “travellers” instead of “tourists” to highlight their group features (Chen et al., 2020).

In ascertaining core group characteristics, the evaluative component of social identity requires assessing intra- and intergroup differences. This component also involves maintaining positive in-group identities and strengths through social comparison (Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel, 1978, 1982). Members mainly attend to distinguishing positive aspects to mitigate threats to their in-group identity. Doing so satisfies individuals’ need for self-esteem (Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel, 1982). As Festinger (1954) pointed out, individual social comparison connects people who are similar to oneself; between-group social comparison spotlights disparities between one’s group and others. This perspective links social classification with social identification (Tajfel, 1974). Research on social identity in tourism has often covered two groups (i.e. hosts and tourists), their interaction and its consequences. Zhang et al. (2019) combined SIT with the concept of “face” (i.e. 脸 and 面). They observed that Chinese outbound tourists deployed self-differentiation to defend themselves against the image of uncivilised tourists through a sense of shame and fear of “losing collective face.” Intergroup discrimination can occur when a social group prioritises its uniqueness. Group members’ internal consciousness is therefore important to preserving self-esteem (Luhtanen and Crocker, 1992).

The emotional component of social identity builds on cognitive and evaluative components, referring to one’s emotional commitment to a group (Tajfel, 1982). When a person is included in a social group, they often hold strong positive emotions towards their in-group and/or negative emotions towards out-groups. These reactions enhance the meaning of a group and its members, resulting in in-group favouritism (Tajfel, 1978). This process is also known as social identification (Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel, 1978). Group commitment is vital to social identity: it determines one’s perceived group membership, emotional input and behavioural intention (Ellemers et al., 1999; Ellemers et al., 2002). Zhang et al. (2021) noticed that, by choosing meaningful positive identities, Chinese tourists experienced a shift in identity from inferiority to group emotional attachment during the COVID-19 pandemic. This change affected their social behaviour.

In sum, social identity is composed of cognition, evaluation and emotion. The construct is achieved through social categorisation–social comparison–social identification (Hornsey, 2008). Tourists’ activities influence how they view themselves and relate to groups to which they belong. As such, SIT is a suitable framework for investigating how Chinese tourists categorise, evaluate and identify themselves in a similar-others destination.

2.2 Intergroup identity construction: the role of similarity

Individuals build social identities to assimilate into groups with similar others (Tajfel and Turner, 1985). Similarity captures the degree to which people share attributes. This overlap provides a sense of belonging and possible security. Brocato et al. (2012) conceptualised similarity in consumers’ service experiences “as the extent to which an individual customer (i.e., the rater) felt that they were similar to and could identify (i.e., the attributes) with other customers (i.e., the object) in the service environment” (p. 3). Put simply, similarity reflects
the degree to which people perceive sameness between others (or related objects) and themselves (and their environment). SIT substantiates this notion: people develop their self-concept by observing overlap with others in a reference group (Hogg, 2006). They typically forge emotional connections with individuals who share attributes and try to provide mutual assistance (Hogg, 2006). Similarity partly explains why people tend to favour groups whose features and physical/social environment mirror their own.

Interpersonal similarity has been explored in relation to tourists’ experiences, attitudes and behaviours (Brocato et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2020). Brocato et al. (2012) created the Other Customer Perception Scale through successive studies at a theme park, restaurant and clothing retailer. The scale covers a trio of domains: similarity, physical appearance and suitable behaviour. Lee et al. (2020) confirmed the effects of perceived similarity on tourists’ beliefs (i.e. symbolic, touristic and preservation values) about the Korean demilitarised zone. Scholars have also examined how commonalities between groups or people’s physical/social environment inform tourism development along with individuals’ visit intentions and experiences. McKercher and Decosta (2007) determined that European and American residents preferred to travel to places with strong historical or political ties and tended to avoid destinations without such ties.

SIT prioritises in-group similarity in contrast to out-group differentiation (Hogg, 2006). This notion influences the theory’s applications in tourism. However, dynamic host–guest interaction suggests that similarity and differentiation could emerge in similar-others destinations. It is accordingly vital to determine how tourists negotiate intergroup social identities in these places.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Data collection

3.1.1 Semi-structured interviews. Given this study’s aim to delineate Chinese tourists’ social identities regarding North Korea as a similar-others destination, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). Semi-structured interviews were held via theoretical sampling; 35 tourists were interviewed using a snowball approach. Same-group tracking and post-tour recruitment were adopted for interviews. This method ensured the interview protocol was relevant to the study while enabling the research team to explore the focal topic at length (Denzin and Lincoln 1994).

Theoretical sampling was intended to connect Chinese tourists’ experiences in North Korea with their social identities. The results therefore aligned with theory. Data coding and sampling were performed concurrently to obtain adequate heterogeneous samples. First, one author participated in a four-day tour of North Korea organised by a Chinese travel agency in the Chinese border city of Dandong in April 2019. The author followed the group’s itineraries and interviewed 18 Chinese tourists during the trip. Three interviews took place at the hotel where interviewees were staying in Pyongyang (interviewees have been anonymised as P01 and so on; P01–P03). Six participants were interviewed during the train ride back to Dandong at the end of the trip (P04–P09). Nine were interviewed on the train leaving Dandong and returning to Tianjin, China (place of departure) shortly after the trip (P10–P18). Second, the researchers recruited Chinese residents who had recently travelled to North Korea and conducted 17 interviews (P19–P35). Target respondents consisted of Chinese residents who had visited North Korea within the past two years (no earlier than 2017, as interviews were conducted in 2019).

Interview questions were designed based on the three SIT dimensions (i.e. cognition, evaluation and emotion) and spanned several themes:

- pre-trip impressions and motivations for visiting North Korea;
experiences and feelings while visiting North Korea;
attitudes or opinions about North Korea and its people; and
self-awareness and conceptualisation of Chinese tourists.

A total of 60% of interviewees were men and 40% were women. Interviewees’ average age was relatively high (49 years). Individuals over the age of 50 accounted for 48.6% of the sample; 37.1% of interviewees were retired. The oldest interviewee was 70 while the youngest was 19. Half of the participants held a bachelor’s degree or above. More than half (18 participants) were members of the Communist Party of China.

Interviews were conducted in Chinese and lasted 30–50 min. All were recorded with participants’ consent and transcribed verbatim. More than 140,000 words of text were collated. Because the last five interviews did not reveal new concepts, theoretical saturation was determined to have been reached and data collection ceased (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). The interview data were therefore comprehensive and valid.

3.1.2 Online content. Following previous studies (Mkono and Markwell, 2014), online travel content was collected and analysed independently for three reasons. First, user-generated content is more authentic than traditional online content (e.g. marketing campaigns) (Akehurst, 2009). Second, online reviews effectively capture tourist groups’ travel experiences over different time periods, enhancing sample heterogeneity. This textual content corroborated findings derived from offline interviews in 2019. Third, in early 2020, North Korea was locked down indefinitely to control COVID-19. Inbound tourism was halted and rendered field work impossible.

The types, sources and selection criteria for online content were chosen to ensure authenticity, validity and reliability. First, data were labelled as either tourists’ written travel content or online travel communities’ question-and-answer (Q&A) pages. Second, all data were extracted from well-known travel websites or online communities (e.g. Ctrip, Qyer, Qunar, Tuniu, Mafengwo and Zhihu). These sources were chosen based on visibility, authority, the number of users and the number of platform visits. The keyword “North Korea” was searched in travel blogs or community Q&A sections; text describing travel experiences in North Korea was selected after review. Guided by theoretical sampling, over 320,000 words from 39 travel pieces were obtained from 5 websites (Ctrip, Qyer, Qunar, Tuniu and Mafengwo), published between 2014 and 2020. North Korea did not fully open eight administrative regions to foreign tourists, except for Jagang-Do (George’s Image, 2022), until 2014. All text excerpts were numbered by source. For instance, XC01 denotes the first writing sample from Ctrip. QY01, QNE01, TN01 and MFW01 denote the first writing samples from Qyer, Qunar, Tuniu and Mafengwo, respectively.

3.2 Data analysis

Inductive content analysis was used to process the two sets of qualitative data independently. This approach does not require a large sample; rather, it involves coding text by themes together with contextual analysis (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). In-depth analysis and mining of textual content were completed. Results revealed how Chinese tourists perceived themselves and their social identities while visiting North Korea as a similar-others destination.

Data were progressively analysed via open coding, axial coding and selective coding. To guarantee coding quality and topic credibility, the triangulation of data, methods and researchers is recommended in qualitative studies (Decrop, 1999). In this case, the two data sources (i.e. interviews and online materials) were complementary. On-site observation and reflection records were maintained during interviews. The research team’s lead coder independently read the compiled text several times and coded it line by line in NVivo 11. Then, two Chinese researchers, who had travelled to North Korea for fieldwork,
cross-checked results from the first phase of analysis. Their travel experiences facilitated the coding of interview transcripts in terms of fluency and trustworthiness. Following previous qualitative research on social identity (Zhang et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2021) and North Korea tourism (Chen et al., 2021), the content was next elaborated. Logical links were developed to be aggregated into higher-level concepts. After jointly reading and validating the coding results, the team reached a consensus on categories and themes. Finally, a fourth researcher, who acted as a neutral qualitative expert, joined to review transcripts and confirm the reasonableness of interpretations. Each researcher’s disciplinary background and theoretical sensitivities offered varied perspectives. The quality of data analysis was hence ensured (Decrop, 1999). The highest-level core categories and key themes were identified to illustrate Chinese tourists’ social identities when visiting North Korea.

4. Findings

A conceptual framework depicting the construction and representation of Chinese tourists’ social identities in North Korea was devised based on study findings and applicable theories (Figure 1). Chinese tourists’ social identities in the face of similar others (i.e. North Koreans) were multifaceted. Regarding intergroup similarity, Chinese tourists’ self-categorisation carried the labels of “ordinary tourists,” “preferentially treated tourists,” or “vicarious tourists.” Participants perceived North Koreans as similar others for intergroup comparison along two dimensions:

1. Chinese tourists, tourists from other countries and North Koreans; and
2. the socialist camp versus the nonsocialist camp.

These dimensions spawned dual levels of emotional commitment and behaviour (i.e. group favouritism and metaphorical commitment).

4.1 Intergroup similarity: representations of “who I am”

Chinese tourists’ perceived similarity between themselves and North Koreans generated three forms of cognitive identity (i.e. “who I am”): ordinary tourists, preferentially treated tourists and vicarious tourists. These identities informed participants’ group evaluations and emotional connections.

![Figure 1: Conceptual framework for the formation and representation of Chinese tourists’ social identities in North Korea](image-url)
SIT indicates that both hosts (i.e. North Koreans) and tourists display core group characteristics (Hogg and Williams, 2000). Chinese tourists’ views on their hosts’ characteristics were accompanied by a unique sense of familiarity, mainly in terms of shared history and similar group attributes. This finding echoes research on the overlap between China and North Korea (Chung and Choi, 2013; Li et al., 2020). As indicated by QY01 and P34, respectively:

North Korea is our comrade and brother, the place where countless Chinese volunteer martyrs shed their blood, and this is the first memory of North Korea in my mind. Many new interpretations and re-examinations of the Sino-DPRK alliance and the Korean War have been put forward. But in any case, it is undeniable that North Korea carries the common memories and emotions of that generation of Chinese people.

The same aspect is that I think Chinese culture still has a great influence on Korean culture, and we also see things that Chinese emperors have given to [Koreans] throughout history.

Chinese tourists’ varying perceptions of the similarities between themselves (and China) and North Koreans (and North Korea) led to contextually distinct social identities in terms of “who I am” as described below.

4.1.1 Ordinary tourists. This tourist group had relatively weak perceptions of the commonalities between themselves and North Koreans, leading to weak group consciousness about being Chinese. Most simply saw themselves as ordinary visitors to North Korea. P23 explained:

I am just a tourist on a package tour. Possibly I do not have a strong feeling of being Chinese […] especially back then when I was in North Korea, I thought this country was really backward. […] China is good, of course. But it did not occur to me that when I saw some scenes, I would think China is so good, or North Korea is not so good. No, I did not have such a feeling.

4.1.2 Preferentially treated tourists. Other Chinese tourists thought they had received preferential treatment from North Korea’s national authority or tourism practitioners as similar others. This perception stemmed from the belief that “China has helped North Korea a lot” (P14). P24 remarked:

The identity of being Chinese is still a good element [in North Korea], because they all think that China is a good friend to them. When we visited there, the tour guide told us so. Across the world now, it is our Chinese leaders who [have given] North Korean leaders the most gifts. [The tour guide] often mentioned this.

4.1.3 Vicarious tourists. Unlike most tourists documented in Wassler and Schuckert (2017), who felt anxiety and fear, shared socialist history and Chinese propaganda caused Chinese tourists to (un)consciously feel familiar with what they did and saw in North Korea. This group perceived fairly pronounced commonalities between themselves and North Koreans. Participants pointed out that these nations share a developmental trajectory. Tourists lived vicariously through China’s past and experienced “time travel” when encountering North Koreans (e.g. “We have been here before,” P14). The countries’ once similar political systems and social atmospheres could enhance Chinese tourists’ understanding of their hosts. XC01 stated:

We, the Chinese, are not unfamiliar with all of this, all that we have seen and heard in the past few days. Just like, when we were watching the children’s performances at the Children’s Palace in Pyongyang, I could still vaguely recall that 30 years ago, I also performed to foreign friends in the Children’s Palace in China as a young pioneer. We have been through our own 30 years just as they have.

These findings underlined the importance of perceived intergroup similarity (Lee et al., 2020; Mou and Brito, 2021), supplementing discussions on tourists’ social identities (Zhang et al., 2019, 2021). Chinese tourists’ experiences when encountering North Koreans
activated perceived similarities. Tourists’ reactions engendered three contextualised social identities. Consistent with SIT, these self-categorisations represented prerequisites for Chinese tourists’ intergroup comparison with their hosts.

4.2 Intergroup comparison: enhancement of group self-esteem

Social comparison is the cornerstone of social identity (Hornsey, 2008). It explicates how tourism experiences can alter visitors’ identities. Visiting North Korea sparked a sense of foreignness among Chinese tourists. These tourists then viewed North Koreans as out-groups. Intergroup similarity made Chinese tourists more likely to see commonalities and differences among similar others in North Korea. This process expanded group boundaries and caused tourists to realise a group identity (Hornsey, 2008; Sarup, 1996; Tajfel, 1974). Chinese tourists engage in intergroup comparison in several respects: their gazes (Chen et al., 2021), destination image formation (Li et al., 2020) and pre-visit attitudes (Li and Wang, 2020) regarding North Korea. However, studies have not fully recognised the impacts of intergroup comparison on Chinese tourists’ social identities. The coding results demonstrated that Chinese tourists’ experiences in North Korea promoted intergroup comparison in two categories.

4.2.1 Chinese tourists vs local North Koreans vs other tourists. This category entailed group-level comparison between Chinese tourists, North Koreans and visitors from other countries. According to SIT, group members tend to create accurate self-evaluations or protect group self-esteem through out-group comparison (Suls and Wheeler, 2012). Chinese tourists dialectically learned from North Koreans. Tourists also absorbed certain strengths to self-reflect after intergroup comparison. These contemplations involved spirituality as well as moral and ethical qualities. MFW01 said:

[North Koreans] have their own system. Things are not easy for everyone. They are happy to make a little contribution to their country! They are happier than we are, more content than we are, and at least they live a true life!

As highlighted by Mlicki and Ellemers (1996), once group members deem an identity important, they acknowledge its negative characteristics. Chinese tourists recognised their own shortcomings when facing local North Koreans seen as similar others. Examples included “excessive burden of living” (P16) and “uncivilised behaviours” (XC14) in addition to the following:

[North Korean guides] also know China well and say there is no pressure to buy a house as we do in China. In North Korea, those who are single stay with their families. Those who are married are given houses by the government, and their children will be raised by the government. (P16)

North Korean citizens consciously keep the environment clean when they go out, unlike us who spit and throw cigarette butts everywhere. It is annoying because Chinese tourists are too casual to feel like at home. (XC14)

Many Chinese tourists actively differentiated themselves from North Koreans and focussed on intergroup distinction. These efforts heightened the status of the group to which they belonged and generated positive self-esteem (Tajfel, 1982). Intergroup comparison informed participants of gaps between China and North Korea. Chinese tourists also sought to dispel the stereotype that the two countries are similar. This inclination stressed Chinese people’s unique group identity and characteristics, as in the case of P3:

Although many people say that North Korea is like China in the 1970s and 1980s, it is quite different now. What remains the same may be some systems or part of the lifestyle. But there are still big differences between our political party system and their current political party, since we are socialist with Chinese characteristics. In the era I live in, I think there is very little common ground.
When visiting North Korea, participants invoked their social identity as “Chinese people” to encourage preferential treatment from North Koreans (i.e. authority staff and tourism staff). Such treatment afforded the Chinese a sense of superiority. *Ellemers et al.* (1999) observed that people can choose a more favourable social identity to gain self-esteem, as in the case of P6:

For example, I feel that North Korea still values us after seeing some places where we can buy things in RMB. And they are also very friendly to us Chinese tourists. In terms of the customs, there is no special strict requirement for us, only asking to take out the mobile phone from the bag and put it in [a] pocket. But there is no inspection, so North Korea still makes some efforts for Chinese tourists.

4.2.2 Socialist and non-socialist camps. Figure 1 illustrates that the second type of intergroup comparison, a newly identified aspect in this study, applies to disparities between the socialist and non-socialist camps. Participants’ perceived similarities between China and North Korea were largely based on both being socialist countries. The apparent overlap in their political systems has led the two sides to compose a socialist camp. Chinese tourists tended to align North Korea with China in certain situations, creating a counterbalance to the non-socialist camp. XC09 remarked:

This kind of organisational discipline can only be found in socialist countries. Look at the Western young tour members! When aren’t they loosely and thinly scattered? I guess in North Korea, [Western tourists] have finished all the queening that they have to do in their life spans.

In brief, Chinese tourists conducted two means of intergroup comparison and expressed mixed evaluations of North Korea and North Koreans. These tourists focussed on the strengths of their own group while defending (or processing) aspects unfavourable to in-groups. This propensity echoes *Yang et al.’s* (2020) finding that symbolically comparing China to other nations can amplify Chinese pride.

4.3 Group commitment: diversified emotional responses

The above discussion shows that Chinese tourists conducted intergroup comparison based on intergroup similarities while visiting North Korea. This process altered their self-esteem at the group and collective levels. Perceptions of self-cognition and self-evaluation can also produce changes in group commitment (*Tajfel, 1982*). The following subsections indicate how self-categorisation and group comparison affected Chinese tourists’ intergroup relations and behaviour.

4.3.1 Group level. According to SIT, people prefer to project positive rather than negative impressions of themselves (*Hornsey, 2008*). Favourable self-evaluation after group division and comparison prompted some Chinese tourists to engage in group favouritism to reinforce this advantage. Rationalising negative aspects of the in-group further maintained and enhanced their group identity. P31 referred to some North Korean guides’ penchant for bragging:

[North Korean guides] also say that Chinese people are stressed and tired, unlike in North Korea, where people are happy. We think it is funny to hear them brag. We have been living in China for so many years, and if we calculate their GDP, we know that North Korea cannot do many things. I am very glad that China did not take the path of North Korea, otherwise we would be finished. Like I guess I would have starved to death, huh?

Group self-esteem raised the status of individual tourists and the Chinese group to which they belonged. Tourists displayed a growing emotional attachment to their social identity as well: they leveraged in-group favouritism to maintain positive self-esteem, which minimised shame experienced in North Korea.
4.3.2 Collective level. China and North Korea are influenced by intergroup similarities and are “socialist brothers.” These countries can set aside internal differences to unite (Collins, 2012). Intergroup differentiation and bonding encouraged some Chinese tourists to view North Koreans as an in-group member more than an out-group to create emotional connections. P26 stated:

Like tourism, we are willing to send money to North Korea. Japan is certainly good, but we do not go there! We will not go there even for free, not to mention spending money. We have a grudge against it, so we do not go there. We are both socialist countries. The feelings do exist that we want to see if it is really the case in North Korea. After all, seeing is believing.

Chinese tourists’ emotional belonging, collective cohesion and self-categorisation as “Chinese people” embodied the overarching category of “socialism.” This outcome echoes the “brotherhood” between China and North Korea (Young, 2021) exemplified by Chinese tourists’ emotional commitment.

Even with a collective level of identification, Chinese tourists endured an identity crisis (Sarup, 1996) when facing a destination on par with China. Their emotional commitment did not frame North Koreans as true in-group members despite acknowledging a socialist relationship between the two countries. Instead, tourists balanced the identity threat that North Koreans posed through tactics such as “metaphorical commitment.” North Korean tour guides’ interpretation of history was inconsistent with tourists’ understanding (Li and Wang, 2020). Such divergence led Chinese tourists to believe that the North Korean authority was trying to downplay China’s assistance. The authority was perceived as projecting an image of a self-sufficient, powerful nation rather than narrating true history (Li and Wang, 2020; Wassler and Schuckert, 2017). Chinese tourists’ group commitment was therefore strengthened. At the collective level, tourists adopted metaphorical tactics such as praising North Koreans’ “friendliness,” which is not accepted. Some Chinese speculated that North Koreans may have ulterior motives. An identity crisis was particularly apparent in interviewees such as P35:

The friendship and relationship between China and North Korea are still rather special. Now the Chinese tourists are whom North Korea receives the most, and to be frank, it’s us Chinese who are supporting their construction, so they kind of want to please us. But in Panmunjom, it is obvious that the guides have been emphasising how great North Korea is. Basically [they] do not mention China’s contribution to North Korea, which kind of makes us feel upset. […] I think North Koreans value the contribution of Chinese tourists’ consumption more and are not necessarily really grateful to China.

Chinese tourists expressed anger and disappointment after the tour. These reactions were most associated with tour guides’ “ungrateful” explanations (Li and Wang, 2020). Tourists also questioned the authenticity of North Korean propaganda and “performance” (Li and Wang, 2020; Wassler and Schuckert, 2017). These tourists appeared somewhat wary of North Korea and did not regard it as an “insider of brotherhood.” Chinese tourists’ emotional commitment to their group and collective identities through group favouritism and metaphorical commitment, respectively, echoes a SIT proposition: groups with similar values display stronger intergroup discrimination than groups with different values. Pronounced intragroup favouritism can reaffirm a group’s distinctiveness (Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel, 1982).

As displayed in Figure 1, the three aspects of self-categorisation and two levels of social comparison led to distinct manifestations of group commitment among Chinese tourists. Such commitment varied from national identity and favouritism at the group level to a farther-reaching group identity at the collective level.

5. Discussion

Guided by SIT, this study has explained how Chinese tourists constructed social identities in North Korea. A framework was crafted to analyse tourists’ social identities while visiting a
similar-others destination. This model covers the cognitive, evaluative and emotional components of SIT and comprises three constituent elements: intergroup similarity, intergroup comparison and group commitment (Figure 1).

In terms of the cognitive dimension, Chinese tourists perceived themselves and multiple self-categorisations in reference to intergroup similarity with their hosts (i.e. North Koreans). These visitors effectively treated similar others as a mirror. Chinese tourists’ identities appear both fixed and malleable: visitors maintained the umbrella label of “Chinese tourists in North Korea” but displayed separate self-categorisations (i.e. ordinary tourists, preferentially treated tourists and vicarious tourists). In the evaluative domain, tourists engaged in intergroup comparison to maintain a dominant in-group identity when faced with similar others. The Chinese thus demonstrated positive group self-esteem. Eventually, the emotional dimension included two levels of group commitment that strengthened the social identity of “being Chinese.” Group commitment involves moulding self-perceptions and self-attitudes in a similar-others destination. Social identities can then be curated accordingly (Hogg, 2006).

5.1 Theoretical implications

The framework (Figure 1) assembled in this study deepens the theoretical understanding of complex identity construction when travelling. Findings show how tourists reflect on themselves and negotiate their intergroup identity when visiting a similar-others destination.

This study responds to a call to clarify the interactive, contingent nature of social identity in tourism (Zhang et al., 2021). The idea of similar others implies that tourists’ and hosts’ identities can be alike. This overlap influences tourists’ intergroup identity and behaviour. The corresponding framework provides a lens to better understand tourists’ social identities in similar-others contexts (e.g. South Korean tourists visiting North Korea; tourists in Russia from former Soviet Union countries).

This work also addresses wider social contexts when considering tourists’ group identity (Chien and Ritchie, 2018; Ellemers et al., 2002; Hornsey, 2008). Researchers (McKercher and Decosta, 2007; Mou and Brito, 2021) have intermittently explored intergroup similarities between hosts and guests and between tourists themselves. Yet the effects of such common ground on tourists’ social identities have been largely overlooked. This study accounted for the social and historical backgrounds of Chinese tourists and North Koreans to evaluate how Chinese visitors feel about similar others and themselves (Ellemers et al., 2002).

Results shed light on how tourists develop social identities through intergroup comparison while travelling. Scholars have emphasised “shared national memories” (Park, 2010) and “common historical perceptions” (Packer et al., 2019) in the representation of such identities. Chinese tourists’ social identities appear driven by intergroup comparison that shifts when visiting a similar-others destination. These tourists’ group commitment fluctuates in kind. This pattern supports the claim under SIT that the relationship between one’s individual and collective selves is not antagonistic (Hornsey, 2008).

5.2 Practical implications

This study offers implications for the marketing and management of similar-others destinations. First, destination marketers should highlight friendly relationships with similar-others source markets. As mentioned elsewhere (Chen et al., 2021; Li and Wang, 2020), North Korea’s destination image as China’s “socialist brother” should be emphasised to reach the Chinese market. Visitation will promote North Korea’s tourism industry and economy. Second, the tourism industry in similar-others destinations should strive to enhance the tourist experience. Arousing collective affection and nostalgic memories while
preventing negative emotions are crucial. The North Korean authority should aim to improve destination attributes (e.g. accommodation, transport, souvenirs and tour guiding) to inspire Chinese tourists’ collective memories of the nations’ shared socialist history. “Ordinary tourists” can subsequently become “preferentially treated tourists” and even “vicarious tourists.” The authority should avoid evoking negative reactions among Chinese travellers as similar others (e.g. political glorification of North Korea, neglect of China’s contributions and strict controls on Chinese tourists). Third, local tour guides should be educated about source markets’ historical, cultural and societal aspects. Tourists will then connect more readily with hosts in similar-others destinations.

5.3 Limitations and future research directions

This study is not without limitations. Given challenges in accessing North Koreans for research purposes, this population was examined based on Chinese tourists’ experiences. Follow-up work should include primary data (e.g. from interviews) from North Korean locals. Second, during data collection, this study captured Chinese visitors’ recalled travel experiences to describe their identity construction. When conditions permit, scholars should seize more immediate interview opportunities to obtain in-depth information about tourists’ experiences. Third, thematic analysis was adopted to conduct an exploratory study. Investigations of other similar contexts (e.g. South Korean tourists in North Korea or Macau SAR tourists in Portugal) would verify the proposed conceptual framework.

References


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