Conceptualizing the Impact of Geographic Ignorance on Online Trip Planning

Introduction

Leisure travel, by its very nature, often deals with the unknown. On many occasions, consumers purchase trips to places where they have not previously visited to seek novelty and sensation (Cohen, 1972; Lee & Crompton, 1992). In those instances, the consumer is making decisions based on a wide range of external information. While the question of how this information is processed has been addressed in the literature, very little research has been conducted on whether or not the consumer has the skills to process this information in a manner in which they will derive an accurate image of the destination (Tucker 2007). This is particularly true in relation to the consumers' ability to use geographic knowledge that will help them make a successful trip plan. The purpose of this study was to explore how the lack of geographic knowledge affected American college students' abilities to plan a seven day trip to China online.

In the context of this study, geographic knowledge was defined as one's understanding and knowledge of a foreign destination's physical, cultural and economic geographies (Poria, Atzaba-Poria & Barrett 2005). The familiarity of participants with the physical geography of China was investigated by examining the students' knowledge of landmarks (both anthropogenic places and natural features) as well as their configurational knowledge (knowledge of the spatial relationships between landmarks in terms of time, direction and distance). Cultural and economic geographic knowledge was defined as the participants understanding of the larger economic, social and political contexts that shape the cultural identity of those living at the destination (Cohen-Hattab

& Kerber 2004). The following section reviews relevant literature in the area of geographic knowledge related to tourism research.

Literature Review

The Lack of Geographic Knowledge in the United States

A large percentage of U.S. residents (especially those in the 18 to 24 year old category) have little geographic knowledge of the world outside of the United States, which could have a dramatic effect on travel plan choice. A lack of emphasis on geographic knowledge in the American school system has been an issue among educators for over three decades (Roehl 1991; National Geographic Education Foundation 2006). In a national survey of 18 to 24 year old Americans, the National Geographic Education Foundation (2006) found that a majority of young Americans were unable to pass a test analyzing basic geographic literacy. For instance, they found that six in ten could not find Iraq on a map and that over 75 percent could not find Indonesia on a map, even with the substantial post-tsunami media coverage at the time of the test. This lack of geographic knowledge may affect travel decisions in an obvious manner. How can one choose a destination that s/he does not know exists?

One of the countries the majority of students could identify on a map in the National Geographic Education Foundation (2006) study was China. While the students could identify the country on a map, few had a strong concept of what China's population was, the prevalence of Mandarin Chinese as the language, or the current state of U.S.-China trade relations (they actually over-estimated the amount of trade between the nations). So while the students in that study did know some details about the physical geography of China (e.g., location on a world map), there was limited knowledge about

the social and economic geography of the country. Given that Nelson (2005); McCannell (1999); and Young (1999) all argue that place image are central to tourism in that it shapes how a destination and therefore, indicates that a lack of geographic knowledge would affect the trip planning process. The purpose of this paper is to gain an understanding of how a lack of geography knowledge affects the travel planning process?

Geographic Knowledge and Tourism Research

Past studies which examined the components of this topic have focused on: 1) place and identity accounts (McCabe & Stokoe 2004; Human 1999; Bricker & Kerstetter 2002); and 2) cross-cultural differences in relation to destination choice (Bowden 2006; Matthews 1987; Axia, Bremmer, Deluca & Andreasen 1998).

Overall, studies which focused on place and identity typically examined concepts related to: 1) image (how visitors perceive place) and its effect on place meaning (Ateljevic & Doorne 2002; Chang 2005; Bell 1996; Crick 1989); and 2) concepts surrounding authenticity (Cohen-Hattab & Kerber 2004; Tucker 2007; Perkins & Thorns 2001; Ritzer 1998). One aspect that has not been addressed, however, is how an individual's geographic knowledge of the destination relates to these two areas. Research has shown that image of a place, rather than its actual characteristics, affects tourist decision-making (Carmichael, 1992). Ryan and Cave (2005) suggested that "the cognitive and affective skills possessed by humans impute values and feelings to images, so images are not always perceived as either neutral or devoid of evocative power" (p. 143).   Destination image helps to shape the context in which decisions are made (Bricker & Kerstetter 2002). The associations visitors make with the destination (whether

grounded in fact or not) shapes how it is evaluated and considered in the decision making process (Poria *et al.* 2005; Bricker & Kerstetter 2002).   What has not been evident in the research is whether or not the individuals' ability to gain credible information about a destination affects their overall ability to plan a successful trip or tour.

In research related to image authenticity, tourism marketers have often been found to struggle with visitors' false images of a destination and develop products based on these assumptions or images (Tucker 2007). Authenticity issues have been well studied in the tourism literature (Cohen-Hattab & Kerber 2004; Tucker 2007; Perkins & Thorns 2001; Ritzer 1998). Marketing strategies are often constructed to 'play upon' the consumers' presumed image of the destination in order to develop favorable responses. Tourism research has indicated that destinations with a negative image have a hard time overcoming the consumers' preconceived notions of what the destination is about (Ahmed 1991; Tasci & Gartner 2007). The image of the destination is often shaped by consumers' lack of (geographic) knowledge about the place and a desire to have stereotypes reinforced. This phenomenon was referred to by Chang and Lim (2004) as "geographic imaginations, "where individuals will lean upon previous knowledge to make judgments about place and space. Chang and Lim (2004) argued that this knowledge is often "imagineered" by tourism marketing and media rather than being based on real education. The question of whether the "geographic imagination" of a consumer affects his/her views and perceptions of another destination as a visitor are examined as part of this study. If it is found that participants' limited, pre-travel knowledge does affect their ability to plan travel, then we need to gain a greater

understanding of what mechanisms the consumers used to bridge the gap between imagination and reality.

Cross-cultural studies in tourism are becoming more commonplace (Bowden 2006). As the world becomes more globalized in nature and new large markets such as China and India continue to open to travel and tourism, accurate cross-cultural marketing and communication are going to become increasingly important. Previous studies have focused on how cultural distances between nations, and/or ethnicities, affect decision-making (Bowden 2006; Matthews 1987; Axia *et al.* 1998). Cultural distance is defined in this study as the degree of diversity, in relation to the behaviors and activities, between groups of people who perceive the world differently (Potter 1989). Specifically, in this study, it is assumed that the knowledge gap between the realities of the destination and the participants' preconceived images reflects the cultural distance between the participants' country of origin and the actualities of the final destination.

Overall, there needs to be a better understanding of how the lack of geographic knowledge affects the online trip planning process in relation to tourism. In order to facilitate this understanding, 28 participants who had only limited knowledge about China were asked to develop an itinerary for a one-week vacation to China. The process in which the participants developed and decided on their itinerary was recorded and evaluated using a qualitative approach.

Research Design

Studies on online trip planning behavior are scarce, even given that over 50 percent of tourists' travel decisions can be attributed to web-based advertising and

promotion (Petrick, Sirakaya, & Park, 2004; Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006). Further, trip planning in an online environment across different cultures from the consumer perspective hasn't been explored in previous studies. Given the lack of previous research in this specific area, the need to generate theoretical frameworks for future study was necessary. It was decided therefore, to address this issue using a mixed-methods approach

This mixed-method study followed a 'systems theory' approach. Systems theory was developed by Patton (1990) to explain the thought processes youth went through while choosing during leisure experiences. Systems theory, according to Patton (1990), is concerned with how a series of decisions interact to form behavior. He states that a systems approach requires 'synthetic' thinking in the design, implementation and analysis of the research questions. Synthetic thinking was defined by Gharajedaghi and Ackhoff (1985) as the process of revealing why a system works as it does but not necessarily how it does. Synthetic thinking takes a system and disaggregates it in an attempt to reveal each elements role or function in the system as a whole (Gharajedaghi & Ackhoff, 1985). By using this approach, analysis and synthesis are complimentary.

Systems theory has several requirements according to Patton (1990). The first is that it is interdisciplinary in nature. In the attempt to understand how a system works, there is a need to examine its components from a variety of perspectives. In the case of this study, consumer behavior, psychology and information processing models have been reviewed. This merging of literature and examination for consistencies and incongruities within them addresses this requirement.

The second requirement is that the process begins as inductive and exploratory in an attempt to be exhaustive. In this study the interviews began by questioning the participants about their knowledge and image of China, as well as about the processes they would 'normally' apply to choosing a destination. They then were allowed to freely plan a one week trip to China using the Internet. The ways and methods they employed in planning their trip was up to the participant, therefore allowing a lot of latitude.

In order to discover the systemic manner in which students planned trips to China, it was decided that a methodological approach which allowed for a flow of consciousness while displaying a cognitive structure was needed. With this, it was decided that a think-aloud (TA) procedure where students plan their trip online while explaining their thought processes during it was appropriate. The TA procedure involves the participant verbalizing their cognitive processes while engaging in a specific problem-solving task (Fonteyn, Kuipers & Grobe, 1993). The TA procedure is based on the philosophical belief that:

> a) the cognitive processes that generate verbalizations are a subset of the cognitive processes; b) human cognition is information processing, a sequence of internal states successively transformed by a series of information processes; and c) information recently acquired and currently being concentrated on is directly accessible as verbal data, using the TA method (Fonteyn, Kuipers & Grobe, 1993, p. 431).

In the case of this study it was assumed that participants were able to verbalize the processes of gathering information about China and express how they were processing and/or evaluating that information (either through verbalization, body language or online actions). This assumption was tested by Henry, LeBreck and Holzemer's (1989) study of 60 pediatric nurses, which revealed that there was no effect on performance related to

problem solving if the participants were asked to think aloud versus those who were not. It was assumed then, that by using this procedure that the verbalizations on ones' thoughts would not interfere with the ongoing cognitive process (Ericsson & Simon, 1980; 1984).

It was also assumed that this procedure would mimic the participants' normal trip planning behaviors as long as the researcher remained in a participant observation mode. Thus, the participant would engage in normal behavior that would only be disturbed if the researcher attempted to probe or interfered with the participant's stream of thought in any way. By observing on the side, the researchers could utilize their experience, intuition and empathic abilities to gain valuable insights into the participants thought processes (Bowden, 2002). For instance, the researcher would add into field notes instances where the participant showed signs of frustration (e.g. frowning). By doing so, insights which would have been lost by just examining transcripts and recording of the sessions would not be lost. The use of field notes has been argued extensively in the literature as one of the keys to enhancing richness of data sought by qualitative research designs (Bowden, 2002). As one of the key objectives in this research was to understand the systemic approach participants used to plan trips, having field notes was imperative to understanding instances where they encountered 'roadblocks' and gaining insights into the processes they used to navigate the web space and process online information.

Finally, in an effort to triangulate - an examination of the log was conducted. The purpose of this was to gather specific data related to which websites were visited; what search parameters participants used; and the length of time spent at each site. This information would provide further depth into how search parameters can affect systemic

approaches to problem solving (in the case of this study, planning a trip to China). Also, this log was used in conjunction with the research notes and transcriptions to evaluate how web design affected the information search process.

Overall, this methodological approach was designed to provide an initial exploration of participants thought processes when planning a trip online. Tourism research in relation to understanding travel planning and decision-making has been criticized for being too generalized and unsubstantiated empirically (Gilbert, 1991). This research attempted to contribute to the literature by examining the complex nature of the online trip planning process and developing a conceptual model of this process with particular focus on the role of geographic knowledge. Further, in this study, the researchers attempted to gain some preliminary insights into the systemic approach participants took to travel planning. The qualitative-based and quasi-experimental design of this study not only allowed for gaining insights into the processes but also into participants' problem solving strategies. In total, this design allowed the researchers to capture the complexity of the online trip planning process and also their responses.

Methods

China was selected as the destination for this study, so that all participants would share a similar level of geographic knowledge pertaining to the destination. The use of China also provided a wide array of attraction options for the participants to choose from and allowed for sufficient variation in itineraries. The participants were told to plan a week-long (Dec. 15th to 22nd) trip to China for their winter break. Each participant needed to decide which region to visit during the stay in China, as well as which cities s/he planned to visit and the attractions in each city s/he would like to go to. Due to the time

constraints of the study, the participants were asked not to worry about airline tickets and hotel rooms. Instead, the participants were asked to focus on the cities, attractions, and restaurants they were interested in visiting. A screen capturing software, Camtasia Studio, was used to capture their online activity into a movie file (TechSmith, 2006) and parental control software PC Tattletale (PC Tattletale, 2006) was used to capture the web pages the subjects accessed.

In total, 34 undergraduate students from a U.S. southeastern public university were recruited for this study with the enticement of one extra credit for a course. Most of the participants' were second, third, and fourth year undergraduate students were business majors and are within 18 to 22 year old age range. The respondents were asked to fill out an online survey first. The goal of this pre-exercise survey was to collect each subject's individual characteristics, including their travel experience, information search styles, and their baseline image about China as a tourist destination.

In order to familiarize the respondents with think-aloud protocol, prior to their search task, a training session was performed in order to coach the participants to talk about their thoughts (Ramey & Boren, 2001). In this training session, the subject was asked to exercise think-aloud protocol by finding out about the local weather.

After this, a travel planning exercise to China was conducted. As part of the think-aloud protocol, they were asked to verbalize their experience during this process. The two programs were used to capture their online behavior, including their verbalizations and links visited; at the same time, the researchers observed and made notes. Last, the subject filled out a post-exercise survey regarding their level of satisfaction toward their travel information search and trip planning process. The post-exercise survey measured

participants' process and outcome satisfaction (de Bruijin & de Vreede 1999), modified image (if any) of the intended destination, information search styles and demographic information. The total session lasted less than one hour, in which the travel planning exercise was limited to 50 minutes.

After the interviews were conducted, a transcription of the proceedings was developed which incorporated both the think-aloud protocol and the process tracing method. In the case of this research, the participants' on-screen actions, and verbalizations explaining those actions, were coded. These data were then coded through the open-coding process as described by Straus (1987). This process began by open-coding, whereby the researchers examined the field notes, transcripts and the log for each interview, looking for 'fractures' in the data where the participants engaged in a distinct, determinable activity the was part of their travel planning process. The researchers then met and discussed individual interpretations. This was an attempt to standardize reliable methods among participants.   Based on that discussion, categories were developed.

The analysis then went into a second phase where another open-coding took place. In this phase specific words, phrases and actions were identified as being part of a category. Finally, core categorizations were developed and key themes were explored. The purpose of this phase was to examine the system in a manner that reduced the volume of data to a manageable set, while retaining the depth of qualitative inquiry. Finally, this system was put through a verification process where the research team double-checked issues of variations among participants, and further analyzed and resolved these issues (Huberman & Miles, 1994). For this study, the authors also

examined what coping mechanisms the consumers employed in dealing with the foreignness of China.

Results

In total, 34 travel planning exercises were conducted. Of those 34 participants, two had traveled to China previously and four had traveled to Asia previously but not to China. It was decided to exclude these six participants given their previous experience with China or Asia. This left 28 total participants. Of those participants, none could name more than two attractions in China. Sixteen of the participants could only name the 'Great Wall' as an attraction and seven of the participants could not even name one Chinese attraction.   These results indicated that the knowledge of China's tourism attractions in the sample was limited.

When asked about what they would expect to experience in China, 26 described China as being 'crowded' and 23 described it as being 'fast-paced.' Almost all of the participants expected large differences from the United States. Generally, all of the participants described China as seeming very foreign. A typical response is shown below:

> "An atmosphere that is foreign to me, people speaking in Chinese, accents that will be difficult to understand, everything would look and sound completely different from what I know and am familiar with because of the language barrier." (Participant 28)

In order to deal with this concept of foreignness, the participants used a variety of coping strategies. Three mechanisms were generally used: 1) They subjectively made space-related assumptions or surrogated geographic knowledge for what Chang and Lim (2004) termed, "geographic imaginations;" 2) They substituted geographic learning to

dependence on recommendations from external sources for their place knowledge; and, 3) they used online geographic tools (such as maps) and information to increase their knowledge about the destination. Generally, as the participants used each coping mechanism as part of their trip planning, their geographic learning related to the destination became more sophisticated.

1) Geographic Assumptions and Geographic Imaginations

During the exercise, the participants first made several assumptions related to space and place issues. Of the 28 participants, only four used any type of mapping technology to assist them in their travel planning, although some other participants also mentioned initially that they needed a map. As a result of not using the geographic tools available, one participant (#28) planned a trip that would take her over 8,000 miles within the seven day period. During the exercise this participant did not consider the geographic size of China. When the facilitator asked her, after the exercise was completed, why she planned her trip as she did, she answered that she had no idea how big China was. She had assumed that she could get anywhere in China in a relatively short time period.

Even among those that planned, in their trip, just to visit a single city, a lack of configurational knowledge was quite obvious. For instance, three participants planned to visit the Great Wall and the Forbidden City on the same day. While this is not entirely impossible, none of these participants checked on the distance between the sites or looked for transportation linking the locations together. In seven other cases, the participants planned to visit multiple locations within Hong Kong without considering any routing or travel time ramifications. While this finding may be partially a function of the

artificiality of the research environment (they did only have one hour to plan their trip during the experiment), only two participants searched for a transit map of any type.

In general, all participants at some point during the exercise made assumptions on the macro- and micro-scale levels. In the majority of cases, scalar issues (calculating the real distance between locations) were not even considered, and as a result geographic tools such as maps generally were not employed. When the participants did try to employ geographic learning techniques, they often became frustrated with their inability to locate the information they were searching for due to cultural variations. For instance one participant (#23) could not understand why mapquest.com did not produce road maps of Beijing.

The participants also combated their concepts of foreignness by surrogating geographic knowledge for what Chang and Lim (2004) termed, "geographic imaginations." As indicated, the concept of geographic imagination is one where individuals will rely upon previous knowledge to make judgments about place and space. Examples of "geographic imagineering" occurred in all 28 cases. "Geographic Imagineering" manifested itself in two principle ways: 1) applying preconceived images to the destination based on past learning; and 2) relating a foreign location to another more familiar one.

First, the use of preconceived images of the destination seems to be based highly on past learning. One participant (#17) searched for Kung-Fu because he always associated China with martial art movies. Another (participant #8) to maintain search for the Silk Road because it was mentioned in a children's book and another wanted to see panda bears because of seeing them in a zoo in the U.S.. While these are overt examples

of this concept, others were more covert. For instance, when several participants found the 'Forbidden City' as part of their search, they often made assumptions based on its name alone and did not even try to learn more about the attraction as a whole. Interestingly, one participant (#24) who came across the 'Forbidden City' in Chinese totally ignored the site (even though it had very similar pictures) then later found it again in English and was very enamored with the locale based upon the name. Another covert example was illustrated by participant #14 when examining attractions in Hong Kong. He looked at a list of attractions and stated, "Good Stanley Market. That does not sound Chinese. Got Po Line Monastery. That sounds pretty cool." In 25 of the 28 interviews, participants were found to make judgments based on the names of the location.

Second, participants also often attempted to dilute the foreignness of the destinations by applying more familiar concepts to them. Participant #5 gave an excellent example of this concept by stating, "I went to the ancient city in Guatemala, so that was awesome. So I am sure the ancient city in China will be good." These attempts to replace foreign concepts with more familiar ones were omnipresent during the experiments.

These manifestations of "geographic imagineering" were often found used side-by-side, as illustrated in the following example. Participant #23 was seeking a restaurant as part of her trip planning process. At the 19:45 minute mark she conducted a search on www.google.com using the following query "Restaurants Beijing Travel". At the third link down on the search she came across a website called www.beijingtrips.com which had a left-side link to mid-range restaurants. That click led her to sites recommending mid-range restaurants at the 19:58 mark. As she scrolled down slightly to eliminate the

upper banner she was automatically drawn to an ad for a restaurant shown on the top left of the screen. She looked at the picture and exclaimed, 'Well…let's look here [reads the description] this looks like a diner almost." In the researcher's field notes it is stated that she said this with a smile on her face being interpreted as to meaning that the property looked attractive to her. She then clicked on that link at the 20:01 mark. Upon reaching the site she read the content quickly, moving the mouse to follow the words. After reading the opening description she looked up to notice the English translation of the restaurants name at the 20:08 mark and exclaimed, "oh…that's cute [once again smiling] Be There or Be Square." She then took a long look at the pictures and scrolled downwards once again, having the mouse follow her eye movements, and got to the bottom line of English at the 20:21 mark and stated, "oh, that is neat…it is in a little plaza…you can watch people maybe…That would be neat, I would probably go there after the Great Wall…seems kind of relaxing." She then scrolled down looking for more English and when she found none, she scrolled upwards and looked at the pictures once again and at the 20:40 mark pronounced, "I really like the name," and then proceeded to add it to her itinerary and began to move to the next activity.

In the previous example, which covered around 55 seconds, the participant searched for a site, gathered the information related to the site and made a judgment about it based on her 'geographic imagineering.' She made her judgments based on a "cute name", pictures, and a short description of the restaurant. During this process, she made several judgments such as the restaurant being located in a "little plaza" when the website made no such claims. It does say it is in a plaza but there is no mention of the plaza size. Given that the instructions go on to say that a taxi to the restaurant would

leave a guest at the east entrance of the plaza and to find the restaurant you have to go down the escalator, there is a high probability the site would not match her expectations of what a "little plaza" is in a North American context. There is a distinct possibility that if she had indeed visited the location, the restaurant would not have met her 'imagineered' notion of what the establishment should be.

2) Substitution of Geographic Learning with Third Party Opinions

The second coping strategy, delegating geographic learning and therefore becoming dependent on recommendations from external sources for place knowledge, was commonly manifested in two ways by the participants: 1) A reliance on rating scales; and 2) A dependence on pre-made itineraries from well known commercial sites such as www.travelocity.com and www.frommers.com.

In 26 of the 28 cases, the participants viewed information and made judgments related to the destination using some type of third party rating system as a guide. A typical example of the use of rating systems was illustrated by participant #3, who was searching for a restaurant in Beijing. He conducted a search on www.google.com and came across www.travelchinaguide.com. Upon clicking on that page, he scanned down and found a listing of cuisine types. Upon seeing this page he stated, "I do not like this page because it really doesn't tell me the restaurants I want to try." He then back clicked to www.google.com and clicked on the www.fodors.com page. Upon reaching that page, he scanned down the page and took note of those facilities that were ranked as being "Fodor's Choice". He clicked on the first "Fodor's Choice", a restaurant called Mei Fu, and scanned the description of the restaurant. He then moved lower onto the screen to

where the rating scales were located. He spent considerably more time reading the one review that was present than he spent on reading the description of the restaurant. Upon finishing, he stated, "This looks like a fancy restaurant. Everything gets high rating (food 5, atmosphere 4, service 5, value 5, overall 4.8). So Dec 18th, would make reservations for the Mei Fu Restaurant." He then clicked back once again to search for another restaurant. He went to the next "Fodor's Choice" restaurant and clicked on it. He then engaged in the same process whereby he scanned the description quickly then moved down to the ratings. This restaurant had more ratings this time, but they were mixed so he exclaimed, "this does not look like it got very good ratings here…1, 3,1,1,1.4, so I do not like this." In this example, the participant chose to explore facilities based on the website's recommendations, but seemed to really put credence into individuals' reviews of the restaurants.

In this research, the majority of participants (18 of 28) tended to give higher credence to what they perceived as 'independent' reviews in contrast to corporate ones such as being a "Fodor's Choice." In the case described above (as with 22 others), the participant did not consider either who was doing the ranking or how many rankings were present, and, interestingly, would not necessarily even read the comments associated with the rankings but just looked for highest number of the symbol the ranking system employed.

Evidence shows online reviews constitutes delegated learning. Consumers increasingly rely on online reviews to make a variety of decisions (Dellarocas 2003). Compared to information provided by sellers, users generally feel consumer reviews to be more trustworthy, more understandable and more familiar (Park, Lee & Han 2007). By

reading other people's reviews, consumers can better construct their interpretation of the nature of the products based on the experiences of others, resulting in less perceived risk for their own transactions. Therefore, consumers may make more informed decision.

The second manifestation that of relying on pre-made itineraries from well known commercial sites such as Travelocity and Frommer's, was also commonly found among the participants. This was especially true of those who felt that their knowledge of China was weak. One example of this was found when participant #18, who was searching for Manila to add to her itinerary, realized the city was in the Philippines and not China. She became embarrassed and decided to just go to www.fodors.com. She exclaimed, "I wonder what the Fodor's guy has to say." She then clicked onto the link for "Fodor's Best in Beijing in 3 Days" and proceeded down the list. For the rest of the task, she searched for recommended tours and itineraries from trusted sites such as www.fodors.com and www.tripadvisor.com. She would only add attractions and restaurants to her itinerary that were recommended to her by these sites. Interestingly, once she got onto these sites, her agitation and frustration with the planning exercise dissipated dramatically (according to the researcher's notes, she began smiling and commented on, "how much easier this was"). These sites put the locales into a context she could understand and feel comfortable with.

3) Application of Geographic Learning

The participants in 14 of the 28 cases did try to increase their geographic knowledge of the destination in some manner. Typically, the participants who did try to increase their geographic knowledge either looked for maps of the region in an attempt to

increase their configurational knowledge of the destination (eight participants), and/or sought websites that enhanced their cultural understanding of the destination (nine participants). Only in one case (#5) did the student attempt to gain economic knowledge by searching out the exchange rate between the U.S. and Chinese currencies.

Those who attempted to increase their configurational knowledge of the destination were often disappointed by the results. In four of the eight cases, the participants were searching for configurational knowledge at the micro-scale, or city level, and were unable to gain the information they were seeking online. For instance, in the case of participant #27, she sought directions around Beijing and went to www.mapquest.com see how far apart two locations she wanted to visit were from one another. When she could not get the information she wanted from the site, she became frustrated and just assumed that the distance would be okay. This result was similar in all instances where the participant became frustrated by the process. In the four cases where the participants were happy with the knowledge they gained, they typically were only searching for information on a macro- scale (for example, where Beijing was located in China). This information was easier to access online, and, therefore, lead the participants more easily able to access the information they were seeking.

In nine cases, the participants sought to increase their cultural geography knowledge by seeking out basic information on the traditions and customs of China. The participants typically sought this knowledge from travel websites such as www.travelocity.com and www.fodors.com. On two occasions, participants searched for information on www.wikipedia.com. Interestingly, when the participants did engage in specific cultural learning, it was usually by accident. In one case, participant #8 found a

site for the Forbidden Palace. Upon finding the site, she exclaimed, "ooohhhhh, this has

an exciting name." She examined the pictures on the site and became more interested.

She then read the text and stated, "Wow, this place has an amazing history. I would

definitely want to go there. I would learn so much about China by visiting it." Overall,

in all 28 cases, the experience of planning the trip lead to the participants gaining some

degree of increased knowledge about China.

Discussion & Implications

Conceptual Development

The results of this research indicate individuals' lack of geographic knowledge of

the destination could affect their strategies in online trip planning. Based on these results

it is postulated that consumers' level of geographic knowledge may influence: 1) which

information sources they are likely to use and trust as part of their trip planning process;

and 2) which restaurants, hotels and attractions they are most likely to choose. As a

result of these potential discoveries, a conceptual model of how geographic knowledge

affects travel online travel planning has been developed (Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 about here

As Figure 1 indicates, participants employed three coping strategies to bridge the

cultural gap between the origin (USA) and the destination (China). With the use of each

coping strategy, the cultural distance between the origin and the destination is narrowed

for each user. In these cases, there is a high probability that the consumer will purchase

products and/or services designed to cater to their imagineering. In this study, there were

several examples where the participants searched for and found (see the Be There or Be

Square example from earlier in the paper) tourism products that were either designed to

play into the consumer's perception of the destination or where the consumer made assumptions about the destination based on their perception of what it should be. This is also consistent with the findings of Ateljevic and Doorne (2002) who found that visitors sought destinations in New Zealand that met with their preconceived image of a destination.

For those that cope by adding the additional stage of substituting, it is believed that they do some additional learning about the destination but only to a limited degree. Those using this type of learning would tend to focus on mass tourism destinations and those attractions and/or restaurants highlighted by sources such as www.fodors.com. In this study, participants often attempted to reduce their own personal liability by relying on others to assist in the trip planning process. One could assume that if they went to the destination, and it was not to their liking, they would probably blame the source for their dissatisfaction. Even with the ability to partially blame others by trusting recommendations, the participants in most of these cases seemed to have a greater grasp of the destination, and the cultural gap might be reduced further than for those simply just using their imaginations.

Finally, those that engaged in geographic learning in this study typically displayed a much greater knowledge about the destination and seemed to bridge the cultural gap further than those who just employed the other two coping mechanisms. This concept is similar to Pearce and Lee's (2005) idea, who argued that experienced travelers typically attempted to gain greater rewards from their travel experience than more novice ones. The similarity between the Pearce and Lee's and the one presented in this paper is that, with increased knowledge about a destination (or previous experience visiting it), the

overall experience is more likely to be rewarding because: 1) the consumer will have learned more about their travel preferences and how to integrate those preferences into the destination culture; thus 2) bridging the gap as completely as possible while not physically being located at the destination.

Managerial Implications and Limitations

The results of this study indicate that the participants employed several coping mechanisms in dealing with the concept of cultural distance. As a result of this research, a conceptual model has been developed and hypothesized. Overall, the model posits that with increased geographic knowledge about a destination, a better understanding of the destination will be gained, which will in turn help create a more informed trip experience. This result indicates that tourism marketers need to examine the perceived foreignness of their products. The participants in this study did not generally employ geographic knowledge of the products or services available, but rather looked to others to fill that gap of knowledge for them or used their own imaginations to supplement a lack of knowledge. In both of these cases, customers may develop unrealistic or false expectations, which is a well-documented contributor to customer dissatisfaction (Oliver, 1980; Petrick, 2004). As such, web tools need to be designed in a manner which reduces the burden of acquiring geographic knowledge and will facilitate customers' learning processes (e.g., providing interactive maps, calendars, estimated tour time, and so on) to establish a comfort level for them. It was with that comfort level that participants in this study were more willing to add attractions and restaurants to their itineraries.

Further, findings of this study provides evidence that while technology developments have substantially empowered customers, destination marketing organizations (DMOs) nowadays are facing increasing challenges influencing customers' destination choice. Very few participants in this study (5 of the 28) visited China's own destination websites in this study. Language and loading speed issues aside, lack of trust seems to be the more fundamental challenge for DMOs targeting international travelers. For travelers, they would rather trust how other travelers arranged their tour than follow a DMO's recommendations. Thus, before trying to dilute the foreignness of the destination, DMOs first need to deal with the perceived foreignness of themselves and their websites. For instance, instead of simply posting itinerary recommendations online, destination websites may consider posting things like "other travelers visiting this attraction also visited X park, dined in X restaurant, or stayed in X hotel." Finally, this study illustrates the importance of geographic knowledge as part of the travel planning process. There needs to be further research into how specifically this knowledge affects the travel planning process.

Recommendations for Future Research

Overall, it was found that geographic knowledge could have an impact on the trip planning process. This study was conducted using a mixed-methods approach, which may have influenced the results by its artificial nature and limitations (how many people would plan an international trip in an hour?). It can be argued though, that the processes that participants engaged in would be similar if they were planning a trip for themselves

over a period of time. There does, however, need to be more research conducted in this area which follows a more 'true' trip planning process.

The results of this study indicated that the participants indeed went through a systematic planning process. As part of that process, they encountered barriers. The participants' abilities and skills in finding the required geographic knowledge were evidenced by how they employed the three coping strategies. Those with increased geographic knowledge (as well as computer skills) gained greater knowledge about the destination. Notably, while the participants may have had excellent geographic knowledge of the destination, an inability to apply that knowledge through use of the computer while planning a trip could have negated those benefits. This result also needs to be further researched. How are learning styles and computer knowledge related to the use of these coping mechanisms?

Finally, there needs to be further study as to whether or not this model is applicable to a broader audience. A more comprehensive study may find additional coping mechanisms being employed, as well as establishing a criterion in which each mechanism is used. The results of this study do indicate that the importance of geographic knowledge is vital. There needs to be further study on how geographical knowledge affects the travel planning process and, conversely, what tools marketers should employ to assist the consumer.

Conclusions

Overall, this study illustrates the need to gain a greater understanding of how geographic knowledge affects the travel planning process. This is particularly true in relation to travelers becoming more independent in their planning processes through the use of the web. While the web provides a wealth of information, it requires knowledge to search out that information in a timely and fruitful manner. As was shown in this study, if the consumer lacks the knowledge to search out needed information, the planning process can become impeded. Where once a consumer would use a travel professional for such advice; it is now imperative that destination marketing organizations fill this gap. As a result, it is critical for destination marketing organizations to understand how the consumer is likely to search for travel products related to then destination and then use that market intelligence to educate the consumer about the product (including geographic knowledge) so that the planning process can be more enjoyable.

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**Figure 1 - Conceptual Model of Coping Strategies in
Dealing with Physical and Cultural Distance during Travel Choice**

Origin:
United States

Imagination

Substituting

Geographical
Learning

Destination:
China

Physical and Cultural Distance