

Preprint, to cite:

Li, R., Lin, Y., Miller, Z., Su., C., Pan, B., Taff, D., & Graefe, A. (in press).
An exploratory study on Chinese tourists' visitation to a U.S. National Park. To
be published in Tourism Recreation Research.

**An Exploratory Study on Chinese Tourists' Visitation to a U.S.
National Park**

ABSTRACT

This study adopts semi-structured interviews in Grand Teton National Park (GRTE) in the United States and aims to understand Chinese tourists' decision-making processes and experiences. The results reveal that China's unique technical infrastructure and policies influence Chinese tourists' information sources and reasons for visiting GRTE. Their information sources are unique, and their decisions for visiting GRTE are ad-hoc in nature. Chinese tourists' expectations and experiences, such as planned places to visit and activities to participate in, are influenced by a cultural dimension of a high level of collectivism. The study also shows that Chinese tourists' sense of complacency, respect for nature, comfort with detachment from nature, and beliefs in fate and destiny affect their satisfaction with their experiences, compared to domestic American tourists. The study then provides a conceptual model of how these national differences affect Chinese tourists' information source choices, decision-making, expectations, satisfaction, and intentions to return in the future. The model may overthrow the classic linear process of consumer decision making framework in a cross-country context.

KEYWORDS: National park; Chinese tourist; semi-structured interviews; decision-making process; cultural influences

1. Introduction

Before the pandemic in 2020, global international tourist arrivals witnessed a 5% growth and reached the 1.4 billion mark in 2018, two years earlier than the UNWTO forecast (UNWTO, 2019). Meanwhile, China is a leading outbound tourism origin country, both in tourist departures and tourism expenditure (UNWTO, 2019). In 2018, Chinese outbound tourism trips were about 150 million, and tourism expenditure reached over USD 277 billion (UNWTO, 2019). China has become one of the world's largest international tourism source market (UNWTO, 2019). The United States National Park Service (US NPS) is also experiencing a surge in Chinese tourists under this global trend: in particular, 40% of Chinese tourists visit a national park during their trip to the U.S. (Thomsen & Tenney, 2019). The expansion of Chinese outbound tourism to national parks can be an opportunity to generate tourism revenue, but also can be a challenge for visitor management and for providing tourists with a satisfactory visitor experience.

Many studies investigated tourists' experiences and visitor management at different destinations (Pinkus et al., 2016; Jensen, Li, & Uysal, 2017). However, most of them only focus on domestic instead of international tourists (Rodrigues & McIntosh, 2014). Due to large natural and cultural differences among countries, domestic and international visitors exhibit different behaviors (Akama & Kieti, 2003; Ahn & McKercher, 2015; Car, 2002; Huang & Crotts, 2019; Yang, Liu, & Li, 2019). Despite some research about international tourism demand for U.S. national parks (Dikgang, Muchapodwa & Stage, 2017), little research has examined international tourists' decision-making, expectation formation, and resulting satisfaction (Lyu & Noh, 2017; Khairi, Ismail, & Jaafar, 2019; Kruger, Viljoen & Saayman, 2017). Previous research shows that international tourists may have different experiences in national parks compared to domestic ones (Miller, Freimund, & Blackford,

2018). Chinese tourists' testimonies exemplify this: they may hold distinctive beliefs and cultural values (Samovar & Porter, 1991), and so perceive wildlife, the environment, and matters of natural preservation differently than domestic tourists.

Additionally, most studies provide quantitative analyses of factors influencing tourists' experience, overall satisfaction, and the likelihood of returning (Rivera & Croes, 2010). Still, qualitative studies can provide a deeper understanding of how those constructs connect, particularly given the lack of research exploring these topics. The limited amount of work on these topics indicates the need for research on international tourists within a U.S. national park context, especially those examining Chinese tourists.

The purpose of this study is to improve the understanding of Chinese tourists' decision-making process and experience in a popular U.S. National Park that has received increased use from this demographic during recent years. For this reason, Grand Teton National Park (GRTE) was chosen as the location for this case study. GRTE is located in northwestern Wyoming, with a seven-mile John D. Rockefeller Memorial Parkway linking it with Yellowstone National Park (YELL), directly to the north. GRTE features iconic peaks, rivers, lakes, wetlands, wildlife, and recreational opportunities. Like most National Park Service (NPS) units, GRTE is witnessing a rapid increase in Chinese visitation over recent years (NPS, 2017). This paper examines how Chinese tourists collect information before trips, make decisions, form expectations, and construct evaluations. An underlying exploration examines the role cultural differences play in influencing Chinese tourists' experience in U.S. national parks. These findings can inform park managers and gateway communities regarding strategies that can improve Chinese tourists' experience and that align with management objectives for GRTE and the surrounding environs.

2. Literature Review

This research studies Chinese tourists' trips to GRTE in the following aspects, and past studies on these aspects were reviewed: (1) the usage of information sources; (2) tourists' decision-making process, (3) tourists' expectation, (4) tourists' satisfaction and revisitation. Since this study takes place in a cross-country context, past research for (5) cultural influences in the two countries -- China and the U.S.-- were also reviewed.

2.1 Tourists' information sources

Before deciding on the destinations, tourists have various information sources to utilize (Sparks & Pan, 2009). A wide variety of sources include traditional sources, such as travel agencies, brochures, and family members or friends (Fodness & Murray, 1998; Beerli & Martin, 2004; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). Information sources also evolve with time. In our digital era, consumers rely more and more on electronic Word-Of-Mouth (eWOM) or other people's online comments to make a decision.

Previous researchers also studied information sources among international tourists. Uysal, McDonald, and Reid (1990) studied several common information sources for tourists from the United Kingdom, West Germany, France, and Japan, concluding that different information sources' relative importance varies from country to country. Sparks and Pan (2009) studied Chinese tourists who travel outside their homeland to Australia. They concluded that television programs are an important source, and the Internet's importance increases over time (Sparks & Pan, 2009). Thomsen and Tenney (2019) conducted a case study with Chinese tourists in West Yellowstone, Montana (a gateway community and popular entrance into the park). They found that most Chinese tourists they interviewed (64%) utilized online websites or blogs, followed by family and friends' advice. About 1/5 of Chinese tourists used WeChat (A Chinese multi-purpose messaging, social media, and mobile payment application) as an information source (Thomsen & Tenney, 2019). Comparatively, there is still limited research

on international tourists', especially Chinese tourists' information sources for visiting U.S. National Parks.

2.2 Tourists' decision-making

McCabe et al. (2016) proposed four models of consumers' decision-making process. The first is a normative approach, in which decision-makers are viewed as economic agents and make decisions based on the benefits and costs of each alternative product. In the context of tourism, tourists calculate the values of relevant attributes of each destination and form preferences for each (McCabe et al., 2016). The second is a structural process approach, which employs a choice-set model to argue that the decision-making process is a three-stage process: first, consumers develop an initial set of destinations, the so-called 'awareness set'; then they form a smaller consideration set of choices from the awareness set, called the 'evoked set' (Bradlow & Rao 2000), from which they ultimately select a destination (McCabe et al., 2016). The choice-set model was criticized for oversimplifying consumers' decision-making processes to structured stages (McCabe et al., 2016) or a binary logic (Decrop, 2010). As a result, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) was developed, holding that attitudes towards a behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavior control can all shape actual behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein 1980; Fishbein & Aizen, 2011; McCabe et al., 2016). The fourth approach, often overlooked by tourism research, is called the 'Dual-System Theory' (Chaiken & Ledgerwood 2012; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The theory claims that two modes of cognitive processing are behind consumers' decision-making. One is an intuitive, rapid, and effortless process of accepting and understanding given information. The other is a rational, slow, and effortful process that concentrates on more elaborate information searching and processing (Chaiken & Ledgerwood 2012; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). the last approach stresses both the intuitive and emotional components of decision-making beyond rationality.

2.3 Tourists' expectations

Past researchers have studied international tourists' expectations of a foreign destination. Those tourists from different countries share similarities and also possess differences. Li et al. (2011) found mainland Chinese tourists traveling to Australia seek and expect scenic beauty, safety, famous attractions, different cultures, and upscale services in hotels and restaurants. Their expectation varied among males and females, people with different educational backgrounds, and travel parties (Li et al., 2011). Maghrifani, Li, & Liu (2019) studied Chinese tourists' expectation in Bali and found that their expectation is generated in specific images of experience: low price, good food, beach, good hotel services, nice story, and time with friends (Maghrifani, Li, & Liu, 2019). Although there is some past research addressing Chinese tourists' specific expectations in foreign countries (Li et al., 2011; Choibamroong, 2017; Maghrifani, Li, & Liu, 2019), there is limited research that studies Chinese tourists' expectation in a U.S. National Park.

2.4 Tourists' satisfaction and revisitation intentions

Tourists' satisfaction is a multi-faceted concept (Reisinger & Turner, 2011). It is defined as the result of the interaction between the expectations a tourist had about that destination and the actual experience (Plzam, Neumann, & Reichel, 1978). Only when expectations are met or exceeded does satisfaction occur (Pizam, Neumann, & Reichel, 1978). Similarly, according to Hughes (1991), the likelihood of dissatisfaction increases as the disparity between expectations and experiences increases (Hughes, 1991). Hughes also identifies three levels of positive satisfaction: very satisfied, quite satisfied, and satisfied. Tourists experience higher satisfaction levels when their expectations and experiences are very similar, while not as much when they are somewhat similar (Hughes, 1991). In the third circumstance, satisfaction decreases significantly when expectations are not fulfilled (Hughes, 1991).

Previous researchers have studied the relationship between tourists' satisfaction and revisitation intentions. Kassim & Abdullah (2010) find that both Qatari and Malaysian customers' satisfaction and trust are positively related to WOM and revisit intentions (Kassim & Abdullah, 2010). Researchers also studied Chinese tourists in Korea and found that tourists' satisfaction greatly contributes to their loyalty (Chiu, Zeng, & Cheng, 2016; Chiu & Zeng, 2016).

However, some researchers argue that high satisfaction ratings do not necessarily lead to revisitation (Chi & Qu, 2008). One study shows that tourists who are slightly unsatisfied with their visits return more frequently than people with the highest satisfaction (Reisinger & Turner, 2011). A possible reason is that tourists who have disappointment about their trips want to make up for regrets from their prior visits. At the same time, highly satisfied customers feel no need to return because everything was already perfect. As a result, these researchers argue that tourist satisfaction should be replaced by customer loyalty, which is a better predictor for customers' revisitation (Chi & Qu, 2008).

While many studies examined tourists' satisfaction and revisitation intentions (Pizam, Neumann, & Reichel, 1978; Rivera & Croes, 2010), comparatively few concern international tourists' satisfaction to a foreign country, especially in a U.S. National Park context. Due to the length of the journey from China to the U.S. and the steep costs of time and money, it remains questionable whether Chinese tourists' satisfaction guarantees destination revisitation.

Based on the literature review above, a tourist's general decision-making and visitation process to a certain destination can be summarized using a conceptual linear model below (Figure 1). After tourists decide and arrive at the destination, several factors can influence their satisfaction with the trips, including tourists' expectations and actual experiences. Tourists' satisfaction further influences their future revisiting intentions.

[Figure 1 about here]

2.5 The influence of national differences

By definition, international tourism involves visitors and host communities from different countries. Two countries could differ in geography, history, political systems, technical infrastructure, culture, heritage, etc. Especially, China and the United States sit on opposite sides of the earth, and their political systems and cultures could not be more dissimilar (Samovar & Porter, 1991).

Culture is a ‘complex multidimensional phenomenon’ and has various definitions in different research areas (Reisinger & Turner, 2011). Its broad scope leads to researchers’ difficulties in sociology, psychology, anthropology, and intercultural communication to reach a consensus on its definition (Reisinger & Turner, 2011). Tylor’s (1924) classic definition for culture is ‘that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society’. Barnlund and Araki (1985) state that culture is an abstraction of commonalities among people’s behaviors. Cultures can guide an individual’s behavior and help them to interpret the behavior of others. Hofstede (1980) provides the canonical definition for culture: ‘the collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another’.

Hofstede (1980, 1991) proposes several well-known dimensions of cultures: Individualism versus Collectivism, Large versus Small Power Distance, Strong versus Weak Uncertainty Avoidance, Masculinity versus Femininity, and Long- versus Short-Term Orientation (Hofstede 1980, 1991). Trompenaars (1994) adds two more: Achievement versus Ascription and Universalism versus Particularism. These cultural dimensions differ among countries generally but especially distinguishable among Eastern and Western countries. Table 1 provides a summary of definitions for different cultural dimensions, and Table 2 summarizes how these dimensions may vary across the U.S. and China.

[Table 1 about here]

[Table 2 about here]

Table 2 shows that the U.S. and China differ across all six cultural dimensions. Samovar and Porter (1991) argue that the U.S. and China are among the countries holding the most contrasting cultural dimensions (Samovar & Porter, 1991). People in different countries have different mental programming and may find certain items in an international arena unusual or improper (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Elements that may vary among different cultural groups include ideology, history, beliefs, languages, development of a country, geographic locations, etc. (Reisinger & Turner, 2011).

Given the likelihood that cultural differences influence the tourist's behaviors and attitudes, the study of cultures has become an increasingly popular topic among tourism and hospitality researchers (Pizam, 1999; Reisinger, & Turner, 2002). Correia, Kozak, and Ferradeira (2010) argue that cultures influence tourists' decision-making process and find that cultural dimensions, including individualism, power distance, and a long-term orientation, influence tourists' decision-making (Correia, Kozak, & Ferradeira, 2010). Frías et al. (2012) find that culture, more specifically, uncertainty avoidance, moderates tourists' pre-visit image based on information sources (Frías, Rodríguez, Castañeda, Sabiote, & Buhalis, 2012). Cultures and social norms also have a strong influence on tourists' expectations and feelings of satisfaction. People from different cultures may hold different views towards the same destination or the same service. Tourists visiting new cultures typically do not have social support systems and networks from their original culture, which creates discrepancies between their expectations and actual experiences, fostering feelings of disappointment, fear, loneliness, or incomprehension toward the host culture (Weiermair, 2000). Kozak (2001) investigates differences in satisfaction among British and German tourists visiting Mallorca and Turkey and finds that British tourists are more satisfied with almost all individual

destination attributes than German tourists. Kozak (2001) argues that cross-cultural tourism satisfaction measurement is worthy of future research. Cultural variation leads to different perceived importance levels on services; the latter is related to tourists' satisfaction (Turner, Reisinger, & McQuilken, 2008). For example, Hsieh & Tsai (2009) find that Taiwanese and American travelers have different perceptions and evaluations of different hotel service aspects due to different cultural backgrounds. However, a limited number of studies focus on cultural influences on Chinese tourists' decision-making process, expectations, and satisfaction.

This study defines 'culture' in a broader sense as a construct encompassing social factors such as values, beliefs, social norms, economic conditions, and other different aspects of life. The cultural backgrounds of Chinese tourists may uniquely influence their cross-country trips to U.S. National Parks. This study uses qualitative data and tries to identify the role national differences play during Chinese tourists' visits to GRTE.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and data collection

Semi-structured interviews were employed, in-situ within GRTE, to investigate Chinese tourists' decision-making and visitation experiences. Before the interview, the researcher applied a screening question to separate different populations and only recruited participants born and raised in China. Following this screening question, the main interview process is divided into different sub-sections containing questions that focused on how Chinese tourists searched for information and decided to travel to GRTE and other locations during the trip, what was expected during their visit, and the resulting experience. At the end of the interview, the interviewer asked questions about interviewees' demographics information, including age, education level, and travel party details. Both individual tourists and those in tour groups are included in the interview to draw a more general conclusion.

The researcher conducted face-to-face interviews in GRTE from June 15th, 2018, to August 15th, 2018. The interception locations were Colter Bay Visitor Center and public areas in Jackson Lake Lodge, located within GRTE. These two locations are among the most popular places for Chinese tourists and were chosen in collaboration with park staff (Figure 2).

[Figure 2 about here]

The interviewer, who is fluent in English and Chinese, started the interview around 10 a.m., stopped the interview around 5 p.m., with a break between 12:30 – 1:00 p.m. From initial observations, very few tour busses approached the interview locations before or after the period. A research group developed a research guide based on discussion and consensus for the interviewer to use in the field. The interviewer approached one tourist per tour group and individual tourists, following a convenience sampling strategy. When the interviewee declined to be interviewed, the researcher moved onto the next tourist. With the interviewees' permission, the researcher audio-recorded the conversation for further transcription and data analysis. The interviewer stopped the interview process when no or few new themes were generated from the interviews, reaching a total of 58. The interviews were conducted in groups of tourists (see Figure 1 footnote).

Table 3 shows the demographics of all 58 groups of interviewees. As shown in table 3, the population of Chinese tourists to GRTE during this period tended to be younger and more educated than China's overall demographics (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2018). Traveling to a foreign country, especially one with evident cultural differences and where most residents do not speak Chinese, requires certain language skills and cross-cultural literacy, requiring a higher educational level. The time, cost, and long-distance flights also require tourists to be of rather high economic status, good physical health, and more willing to travel abroad, explaining the younger age distribution.

[Table 3 about here]

3.2 Data analysis

All 58 interviews with Chinese tourists (34 interviews with individual tourists and 24 with group tourists) were conducted, transcribed, and initially coded in Chinese. Chinese is the native language of the respondents, as well as the interviewer.

The data were analyzed using the software Dedoose, an online platform for analyzing qualitative and mixed-method research with text, photos, audio, and videos (Dedoose Version 8.1.8, 2018).

Data analysis followed a six-step process: (1) preliminary coding, (2) the development of codebook, (3) coding of interviews, (4) coding reliability testing, (5) further identification of codes, and (6) analysis of excerpts marked additional codes identified in (5). In (1), three researchers cross-coded seven randomly selected interviews. In (2), the codebook was developed based on a discussion on the preliminary coding results. In (3), researchers coded interviews with all 58 groups of tourists using the developed codebook; each researcher was responsible for approximately 20 interviews. When new themes emerged that were not originally included in the codebook, the researchers marked these and discussed them among the coders. A consensus was then formed about whether to add new codes or modify existing codes. In (4), researchers randomly cross-coded 5 of the interviews to ensure inter-coder reliability. Finally, (5) and (6) were conducted after new codes were identified. In (6), researchers read excerpts, sentences, and other relative paragraphs that fell within the study's scope and included in the report.

4. Results

4.1 Information sources

Unsurprisingly, when researching destinations during the planning stage for travel to GRTE, Chinese tourists preferred different information sources than those utilized by domestic U.S. tourists (Table 4, Braak et al., 2010; Williams, Darville, & Legg, 2012). Baidu is the most popular search engine in China since Google is blocked in China due to national interests and political reasons (Yuan, 2018). Also, many interviewees utilized WOM -- recommendations from their family or friends or online reviews and comments. Altogether 48 groups of tourists reported using at least one WOM source: 30 groups using travel blogs and 18 following others' recommendations. Thirty-one groups also used Chinese search engines.

[Table 4 about here]

Several potential factors are motivating the different preferences for information sources among Chinese tourists. First, Chinese tourists' perceived ease of use of platforms in the U.S. (e. g., Google or the official website of GRTE) was low because of accessibility issues from China. For example, interviewee no. 35 also mentioned that:

'I didn't use the official website... I can't load it. The webpage is not responding at all... I wanted to book [a reservation on the official website], because I know [you may be able to book a room] if someone happens to cancel their reservation. I wanted to try to see [if I can find a room to book], but I am too busy at work and I couldn't load the webpage...

Interviewee no. 42 also mentioned that:

I know [about the official website of GRTE], yet I didn't utilize it. When I was searching for information for this trip in China, it was not that easy for me to access foreign websites...

Second, Chinese tourists' perceived usefulness of Chinese platforms is higher than those of the U.S. platforms. Chinese tourists are just more familiar with the Chinese websites and so trusted them more. For example, interviewee no. 34 mentioned that:

'In China, we use Mafengwo and Qiongyou more often.

Interviewee no. 56 said:

'We are Chinese, and thus we prefer to utilize Chinese platforms, such as Ctrip, Mafengwo, etc.

Third, language barriers added to the difficulties of consulting untranslated English websites or non-Chinese books or travel blogs. For example, interviewee no. 8 mentioned that:

[We didn't use the official website of GRTE.] First of all, we did not know about it well. Secondly, the information [on the official websites] is all in English.

Interviewee no. 17 (interviewed on 06/21/2018) mentioned that:

I only took a glance [at the official website] because my English is not so good.

In summary, due to national differences in technical infrastructure, perceived ease of use and usefulness of certain websites, and language barriers, Chinese tourists selected different information sources. These differences are caused by both social and cultural differences and also national interests and political reasons.

4.2 Decision-making

This section aims to identify factors that influence the decision-making process of Chinese tourists. Table 5 shows the reasons the interviewees chose to visit GRTE.

[Table 5 about here]

As shown in table 5, the majority of tourists (28 groups) mainly considered YELL rather than GRTE. Many of the individual tourists mentioned accidentally learning about GRTE during their online research to YELL. When reading travel blogs or other online articles, they learned that GRTE was recommended by past tourists and is close to YELL, and so decided to add GRTE to their original travel plan. For example, interviewee no. 11 said:

A: Because I want to visit... My husband wants to visit YELL. And this park [GRTE] is close to YELL. GRTE may also have fewer visitors. Thus, I would like to pay a visit here.
[...]

Q: How did you learn about GRTE then? Is it because of YELL or...

A: Because of YELL.

Interviewee no. 18 also mentioned that:

Why we chose this park.... First of all, because of YELL, YELL is the most famous park for us, for Chinese tourists. It is the first [U.S. National Park] in history. Plus, it is located in the western U.S., and we would like to visit the western part of the U.S.
[...]

How we learned about GRTE... When we were researching our trip because YELL is usually... Because many reviews mentioned that tourists usually pay a visit to YELL and GRTE at the same time...

The short distance between GRTE and YELL also compelled Chinese tourists to add GRTE to their travel plan, while YELL was their main destination. For example, interviewee no. 35 mentioned that:

We originally decided to visit YELL. When I am actually inside YELL, I decided to visit GRTE. ... After I walked around in YELL, I still got some time. I am not in such a hurry, so I searched the route, then found that it only took one or two hours to get here [GRTE]. ... I think the views here are different from YELL, so I decided to visit here.

For those traveling in groups, many stated that their main destination was YELL, and GRTE was included in the tour but not an intentional destination. Traveling in tour groups saved them the time and energy involved in researching themselves – and they did not conduct in-depth research before this visit. Many interviewees said that they only ‘stopped by’ or ‘dropped by’ GRTE during their visit to YELL. For example, interviewee no. 6 (interviewed on 06/18/2018) said:

‘The travel plan [with the tour group] was designed like this... We don’t have any special plans on our own. Personally, I would like to visit YELL and Grand Canyon...

Interviewee no. 45 said:

A: I only know about YELL. And we joined a tour group that also organizes a visit to GRTE anyway. So...

Q: So you won’t know about GRTE if you didn’t choose to join a tour group?

A: Yes, yes.

Interestingly, some tourists even considered GRTE a part of YELL due to unfamiliarity with the parks. Interviewee no. 53 said:

Originally, I thought GRTE is part of YELL when I saw [the travel plan of] the tour group.

In summary, these Chinese tourists’ decisions to visit GRTE are *ad hoc* in nature. The popularity of YELL and the relatively unsung reputation of GRTE was a salient reason. They added GRTE as a destination when they learned of the highly-recommended aesthetics experienced in GRTE or later discovered the close distance between GRTE and YELL. Their decision-making process differed from the one mentioned in the choice-set model. Instead of gradually narrowing their final destinations from a broader awareness set, they added new

destinations to their original set of destinations. During their destination modification process, others' recommendations seem to exert a strong influence on their choices.

4.3 Expectations

Chinese visitor's expectations toward GRTE before the visit are shown in Table 6. Sixteen groups of tourists told the interviewer specific places they had visited or were going to stop at in GRTE. The places included Jackson Lake, Jenny Lake, and Signal Mountain, among others. The 31 groups of interviewees (the majority) who had no specific expectations about GRTE also bear mentioning. These groups include Chinese tourists who did not have a specific idea of where they would visit in GRTE, who only chose to stop at random places within the park, or who followed the tour group passively without specifically knowing what they would like to see. For instance, many Chinese tourists used similar statements, such as:

'We will just stop at random places that we find beautiful.' (Interviewee no. 7);

'I don't have much expectation... I think I will just see whatever I see. (Interviewee no. 52)

'I just followed the tour group [instead of researching by myself] (Interviewee no. 53).

[Table 6 about here]

Most characteristics for expectation formation among individual tourists and tourists on tour busses are similar except the following ratios: (1) Expecting to participate in different kinds of activities: individual tourists (29 out of 34) versus tourists on tour busses (13 of 24); (2) Expecting to see certain places in GRTE or were traveling with specific sights/destinations in mind: individual (15 out of 34) versus group (1 of 24).

In summary, most respondents were unfamiliar with GRTE and thus lacked specific expectations for their visit to the park. In addition, many Chinese tourists prefer to participate in activities that are more collectivistic in nature, such as wildlife viewing or photography

together with others. Individual Chinese tourists are more likely to have certain expected activities and places to visit than the group tourists.

4.4 Satisfaction and future revisiting intentions

4.4.1 Satisfaction and reasons

Several questions were used to examine satisfaction and intentions to visit GRTE in the future. Despite this study's qualitative nature, interviewees were asked to rate their satisfaction level for their GRTE trip from 1 to 10, with 1 indicating the lowest and 10 the highest satisfaction level. Among 58 groups of interviewees, 45 groups of interviewees gave a score for their satisfaction level, as some others stated that they could not give a score because they stayed in the park for too short of time, or they still had much to visit in the coming days, etc. The mean score for the 46 interviewees was about 8.3 out of 10.

After asking questions regarding satisfaction level, the interviewer asked the tourists whether they were potentially disappointed with their experience, and if so, why. Twenty-one groups of Chinese tourists mentioned that they were not disappointed about their experience even if they failed to observe things they were expecting to see. Reasons include the following six categories: (1) Tourists attributed their seeing or not seeing wildlife to 'Yuan,' or 'Yuanfen,' or 'Suiyuan,' (Goodwin & Findlay, 1997) that is, to pure luck or fate (3 groups of interviewees). For example, interviewees no. 15 said:

I won't be disappointed. I am only hoping to see...We believe in *Yuan*.

Interviewee no. 39 mentioned that:

'[Not being able to see wildlife] has nothing to do with the park. It depends on your own luck.

(2) Tourists understood and accepted uncontrollable factors that contributed to certain disappointments during their trip; thus, they were generally more tolerant of contingencies. Interviewee no. 19 mentioned that:

[The weather] has nothing to do with national parks...We probably need to know more about the weather prior to our trip, to know about the weather conditions here as soon as possible. However, we planned our journey early enough that we couldn't predict the current weather.

(3) The tourists emphasized or exemplified the traditional Chinese values of satisfaction, contentedness, or acceptance of one's situation (7 groups of interviewees). These interviewees all mentioned being satisfied with what they already had. For example, interviewee no. 40 said:

I am content already [although I did not see moose as expected] ... We settled with our current situation.

(4) Tourists argued that they should be in awe of nature and accept that humans cannot get too close to certain natural or sacred things (1 interviewee). Interviewee no. 42 mentioned:

[It's ok not being able to climb up the mountains and see the snow on the mountains.] This is what nature is like. You should be in awe of nature. There's something sacred that you should not approach.

(5) Due to a lack of knowledge about GRTE, some tourists either had no or low expectations before their visit (10 groups). Besides mentioning that the views were beautiful or that they have been lucky enough to view certain wildlife already. For example, interviewee no. 30 said:

'I didn't have much expectation about GRTE previously. GRTE is just on our way and we are passing through. However, I think GRTE is beautiful indeed.

(6) If they were not completely satisfied with this trip, some tourists would 'transfer' more expectations onto future trips or future days during their visit. This behavior reduced disappointment for the current trip. Interviewee no. 10 (interviewed on 06/18/2018) said:

If I don't see [a bear right now], I will definitely be disappointed. However, if I heard that someone else has seen it, then I won't be so disappointed, as it means that I still have the chance to see a bear.

Nine groups of tourists were disappointed or somewhat disappointed because of unfulfilled expectations. Three categories of reasons were provided, including (1) five claimed to be disappointed because they did not see the kinds of wildlife they expected to see; (2) certain uncontrollable factors, such as bad weather conditions; and (3) generally not appreciating the aesthetic environment of GRTE.

In summary, Chinese tourists' satisfaction toward GRTE was rather high, despite certain disappointments for some tourists. They emphasize on *Yuan* or luck reflects major traditional Chinese teachings and values (Lu, 2001). The beliefs in fate and destiny and the sanctity of nature mediate between higher expectations and tourists' actual experience and lessen their disappointment. Besides, due to geographic and cultural distances, many tourists did not hold specific expectations about GRTE. The latter also ended up being satisfied with the chance to view sceneries they were not expecting to see initially.

4.4.2 Future revisiting intentions

Although Chinese tourists' satisfaction level was high, many tourists reported being unlikely to revisit GRTE in the future. For example, interviewee no. 17 said:

‘[We are not probably not going to revisit GRTE.] First of all, GRTE is too far away [from China]; Secondly, to make a trip like this requires a certain economic status. I was here today, and I have already gained certain impressions of GRTE. If I am going to make another trip in the future, I will probably prioritize other places [that I haven't visited before] first. For example, I've been to North America; maybe I will visit South America in the future ...

This result shows that even highly satisfied Chinese tourists were reluctant to revisit GRTE due to required physical efforts, financial resources, and time commitment. When tourists make the required efforts and spend money and time to travel abroad, they are more likely to prioritize places they have not visited before. Contrary to many previous studies that argue that a high level of satisfaction will lead to a high likelihood of revisitation, in this study,

geographic boundaries and physical distances can influence the revisiting intentions of even highly satisfied tourists.

4.5 The influences of national differences

While describing Chinese tourists' information sources, decision-making process, experience, satisfaction, and revisitation, national differences play a significant role in each step. Due to different languages, technical infrastructure, national policy, and culture, each step of the investigated visitation process possesses unique characteristics, different from that of the U.S. domestic tourists.

Information sources of Chinese tourists include Chinese search engines, China-specific eWOM, and Online Travel Agency platforms. Due to YELL's reputation and Chinese tourists' unfamiliarity with U.S. national parks, Chinese tourists usually pick GRTE as an add-on to their YELL experience. This is because international tourists typically learn about the most iconic landmarks and often choose to visit those places during their first several visits (Bao, Chu, & Peng, 1993; Lew & McKercher, 2006).

China and the U.S. stand opposite ends of the cultural dimensions of collectivism vs. individualism (Samovar & Porter, 1991). Collectivism, as a cultural dimension (Hofstede, 1980), influence the expectations of Chinese tourists. Instead of expecting to participate in solitary activities, such as hiking or kayaking alone, many tourists' anticipated activities were collectivistic in nature: wildlife viewing or photography together in groups. Moreover, many tourists expressed a preference to follow groups or peer members when visiting places. They were simply planning and expecting to see whatever their peers were going to see.

Specific traditional Chinese beliefs can also influence tourists' satisfaction levels. Chinese tourists tend to have a high satisfaction level, despite certain uncontrollable factors, such as bad weather. However, the traditional Chinese beliefs in fate and destiny, contentedness, and the sanctity of nature acted as a buffer even when tourists' original expectations went unmet.

They were also satisfied because they initially did not have specific expectations about GRTE due to cultural and physical distances. They happened to have the chance to view sceneries they were not expecting to see in the end. Geographic boundaries and physical distances also influence the revisiting intentions of even highly satisfied tourists. Given the large physical distances between the U.S. and China, many highly-satisfied Chinese tourists are reluctant to travel back to GRTE in the future.

Overall, national differences influence every step of the decision-making process, from selecting information sources, decision-making, expectations, experience, and revisitation intention. Figure 3 summarizes a model on the impact of national differences on Chinese tourists' visitation to the national park.

[Figure 3 about here]

5. Discussion and Implications

5.1 Discussion and theoretical contribution

This study investigated Chinese tourists' information sources, decision-making process, expectation, satisfaction, and future revisiting intentions to U.S. National Parks using semi-structured interviews.

First, the study found that Chinese tourists use country-specific information sources (e.g., Internet and WOM) for decision-making. It indicates the role of national differences play, as Chinese tourists prefer to utilize popular information searching tools in China under different technical infrastructure, national policy, and languages. This study adds to existing literature that studies information sources among international tourists (Uysal, McDonald, & Reid, 1990; Sparks & Pan, 2009; Thomsen & Tenney, 2019).

Second, this study finds that GRTE was not an intentional destination but an add-on to YELL. This study shows that Chinese tourists added new destinations to their original set of destinations due to GRTE's proximity to YELL and their unfamiliarity and lack of

expectations for GRTE before their visit. These results confirm the normative approach that considers each decision-maker as an economic agent (McCabe et al., 2016), as Chinese tourists add GRTE to their destination set due to its proximity to YELL, which also means less cost and time needed compared to traveling from another location. However, it contrasts with the choice-set model, where decision-makers gradually narrow destinations from a broader set (Bradlow & Rao 2000, McCabe, et al., 2016). This paper adds new understanding to existing literature regarding how physical and social distances and national differences play a role in tourists' decision-making process.

Third, this study shows that Chinese tourists display different expectations or have no specific expectations; however, unfulfilled expectations do not necessarily lead to dissatisfaction. Most Chinese tourists are affected by traditional Chinese culture (e.g., beliefs in fate and destiny, contentedness, and the sanctity of nature). Therefore, they were satisfied with the visitation experience, even if their expectations were not met. Some tourists had no or few expectations and turned out to be satisfied being able to view sceneries they were not expecting to see originally. This result is different from previous literature suggested (Pizam, Neumann, & Reichel, 1978; Hughes, 1991), that satisfaction occurs only when expectations are met or exceeded. Therefore, it is necessary to consider tourists' cultural background when investigating their satisfaction.

Fourth, this research indicates that some previous findings of tourists' revisiting intentions may not hold true in a cross-country context, including national technical infrastructure and policies, physical, social, and cultural distance, and certain Chinese cultural values, into consideration. This study finds that Chinese tourists' high satisfaction level may not necessarily lead to high revisitation intentions. This result is contrary to what is found in previous literature (Chiu, Zeng, & Cheng, 2016; Chiu & Zeng, 2016, Kassim & Abdullah, 2010), where a positive relationship exists between satisfaction level and future revisitation

intentions. These studies overlook the obstacle of turning revisitation intentions into actual actions. Due to geographical distances between the two countries, Chinese tourists are not as likely to revisit U.S. National Parks despite a high satisfaction level.

5.2 Managerial implications

Based on the results, park managers may adopt the following to improve Chinese tourists' satisfaction level and protect natural resources.

First, Chinese and domestic visitors utilize different information sources (Table 4), and many Chinese visitors choose to visit GRTE because of YELL's reputation (Table 5). GRTE park managers could choose to work with the YELL communication team and adopt appropriate platforms to reach Chinese visitors and communicate with them about travel information and proper behavior and regulations. These should include those search engines (Baidu, etc.), WOM platforms, and Online Travel Agencies popular among Chinese tourists (WeChat, Mafengwo, Ctrip, etc.). In addition, information translated into the Chinese language may lessen language barrier issues for Chinese tourists and provide them with a more satisfactory trip.

Second, since Chinese visitors expected to participate in more collectivistic activities, such as wildlife viewing or photography in a group (Table 6), park managers could better communicate about locations where these activities may be facilitated. Not many tourists on tour buses were expected to participate in different activities besides wildlife and natural sights viewing. Compared to individual tourists, tourists on tour buses could be encouraged to participate in more diverse activities to be better engaged with rich resources in GRTE. The encouragement could be done through better communication with tour companies and tour guides, or different educational signs or brochures distributed to tourists on tour busses.

Third, most Chinese visitors stay in GRTE for a very short period and do not conduct extensive research beforehand (Table 6). It would be especially helpful to provide information

about places to visit or activities that are tailored to different populations of people with different needs: for instance, families with kids, young people, older adults, or people seeking adventure. If some of the information is available already, park managers may try to make it more user-friendly to Chinese tourists.

6. Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Directions

This study used semi-structured interviews and investigated Chinese tourists' decision-making process, expectation formation, satisfaction, and future revisitation intention in GRTE. It further analyzes the role of culture in this process. The study found that GRTE is an ad-hoc add-on to the Chinese tourists' itinerary. Different information sources were utilized during the tourists' decision-making process. Chinese tourists expect to see different things than domestic tourists. Most Chinese visitors are satisfied with their experience in GRTE. Despite a high satisfaction level, the Chinese tourists in this study were reluctant to revisit GRTE.

This study also finds that national differences impact Chinese tourists' visits to this national park and are likely to all the U.S. national parks. Large physical, social, and cultural distances influence Chinese tourists' selection of destinations. Tourists' expectations and satisfaction levels were influenced by unique Chinese traditional values, including collectivism, contentedness, beliefs in fate and destiny, and the sanctity of nature. Due to these national influences, international tourists show different travel behaviors and characteristics compared to domestic tourists. These, in turn, demand different management practices from park managers.

Although this study contributed to existing literature, certain aspects require further investigation. First, the word 'culture' encompasses many other constructs that differ across countries. Future researchers need to investigate the impact of other cultural constructs on tourists' experiences rather than collectivism. Second, this study is limited in the number of

interviewees, the places of interviews, the period over which it was conducted. More data investigating at different places and times are needed to identify other influential factors of cultures under different circumstances. Third, due to the study's research design, procedure, and travel patterns of the tourists, some of their answers were not in-depth. This phenomenon was especially true for group tourists since they were on a relatively tight schedule. Future research would require interviewing tourists over a longer period, perhaps joining a tour bus for the entire trip through GRTE, in order to gain more informative answers to some of the research questions.

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Table 1. Definitions of Different Cultural Dimensions based on Hofstede (1980, 1991) and Trompenaars (1994)

Cultural Dimension	Specific Definitions	
Individualism vs. Collectivism	Individualism: Emphasis on independent accomplishments.	Collectivism: Emphasis on interdependent accomplishments.
Power Distance	Large Power Distance: Tolerance & expectation of unequal relationships among people/groups.	Small Power Distance: Rejection of unequal power distribution among different people/groups.
Uncertainty Avoidance	Strong Uncertainty Avoidance: Acceptance of uncertainty or risks.	Weak Uncertainty Avoidance: Little tolerance for uncertainty or risks.
Masculinity vs. Femininity	Masculinity: Emphasis on achievement.	Femininity: Emphasis on nurture.
Long- vs. Short-term Orientation	Long-term Orientation: Orientation on the future.	Short-term Orientation: Orientation on the past and present.
Achievement vs. Ascription	Achievement: Status assignment based on achievements.	Ascription: Status assignment based on birth.
Universalism vs Particularism	Universalism: Equal application of the same set of rules to all members of	Particularism: Certain members of society enjoy special rights.

Table 2. Cultural Dimensions in U.S. and China based on Hofstede (1980,1991) and Trompenaars (1994)

Cultural Dimension	U.S.	China
Individualism vs. Collectivism:	Individual	Collective
Power Distance:	Small Power Distance	Large Power Distance
Uncertainty Avoidance:	Weak Uncertainty Avoidance	Strong Uncertainty Avoidance
Masculinity vs. Femininity:	Masculine	Feminine
Long- vs. Short-term Orientation	Short-term Orientation	Long-term Orientation
Achievement vs. Ascription:	Achievement	Ascription
Universalism vs Particularism	Universal	Particular

Table 3. Demographic Information of Tourists

Interviewee Types*	(Groups of) tourists: 58
Gender*	Female:49
	Male: 30
Ways of traveling	(Groups of) individual tourists: 34
	(Groups of) tourists on tour buses:24
Age	18-24: 14
	25-34: 18
	35-44: 19
	45-54: 14
	55-64: 8
	>65: 3
	Unknown: 3

	High school or less: 11;
	College level: 32;
Educational level	Master's degree: 20;
	Ph.D. degree: 8
	Unknown: 8

* Although some of the interviews started with one specific tourist, their peer tourists would join in the interviews, unsolicited, when they heard their family members or friends being interviewed. The same group of tourists showed similar attitudes towards the same question. Thus, this research only counts the number of tourist groups in the coding process instead of the number of interviewees. As a result, the total number of groups is different from the number of interviewees by gender, age, or educational level.

Table 4. Information Sources for Visiting GRTE of the Interviewees

(Groups of)		
Information Sources	tourists	Details
Popular Search Engines	31	E. g. Baidu (9), Google (9)
Travel Blogs	30	Most popular: Mafengwo (14), Qiongyou (7)
Recommendation by Others	18	Others include family members or friends living currently in the U.S. or past tourists
Official Website of GRTE	17	13 knew about the website but had access issues or language barriers; 8 could not load the website in China or the website too slow to load
Tour Companies	16	15 out of 24 traveling on tour buses, and 1 individual traveler

Table 5. Reasons for Visiting GRTE of the Interviewees

Reasons for visiting GRTE	(Groups of) tourists	Details
Reputation of YELL	28	The reputation of YELL or close distance between GRTE and YELL
Business-related	7	Business trips to cities nearby, attending meetings in cities nearby, etc.
Special programs	6	Work and Travel (WAT), study abroad programs between some Chinese universities and U.S. universities, etc.
Other	14	Visiting relatives in the U.S., attending family members' performance nearby, recommendations of friends and family members who have visited the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) before, etc.

Table 6. Expectations of the Interviewees

Expectations of interviewees	(Groups of) tourists	Details
Wildlife & Natural sights	47	E. g. Mountains (28), Wildlife (25), Lakes (13), etc.
Activities	42	E. g. Boating/kayaking/taking the cruise ship (14), hiking (10), photography (9), walking around (8), camping (5), horseback riding (3), fishing (2), etc.
With specific sights/destinations in mind	16	Specifically named places tourists wished to see in GRTE when asked.
Without specific sights/destinations in mind	31	Tourists did not specifically name places they wished to see in GRTE when asked. These tourists either indicated that they did not have specific places in mind or used general wordings such as <i>‘I will just follow my group to whatever places they are going to.’</i>
Others	10	Other expectations: e. g. to improve English, make friends with people within the tour group, enjoy better environmental quality, etc. Please see below.

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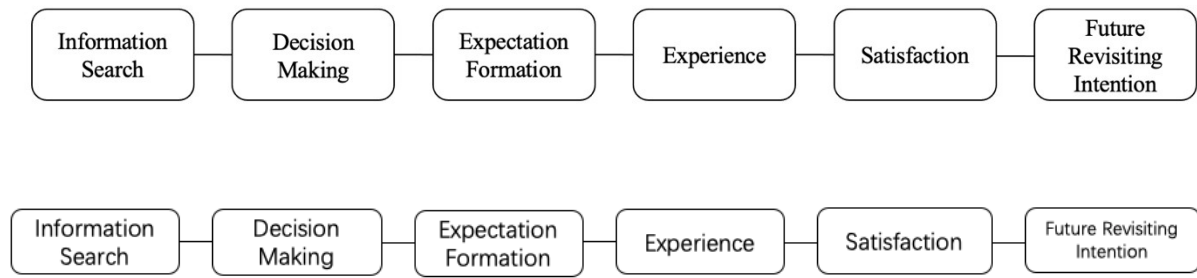
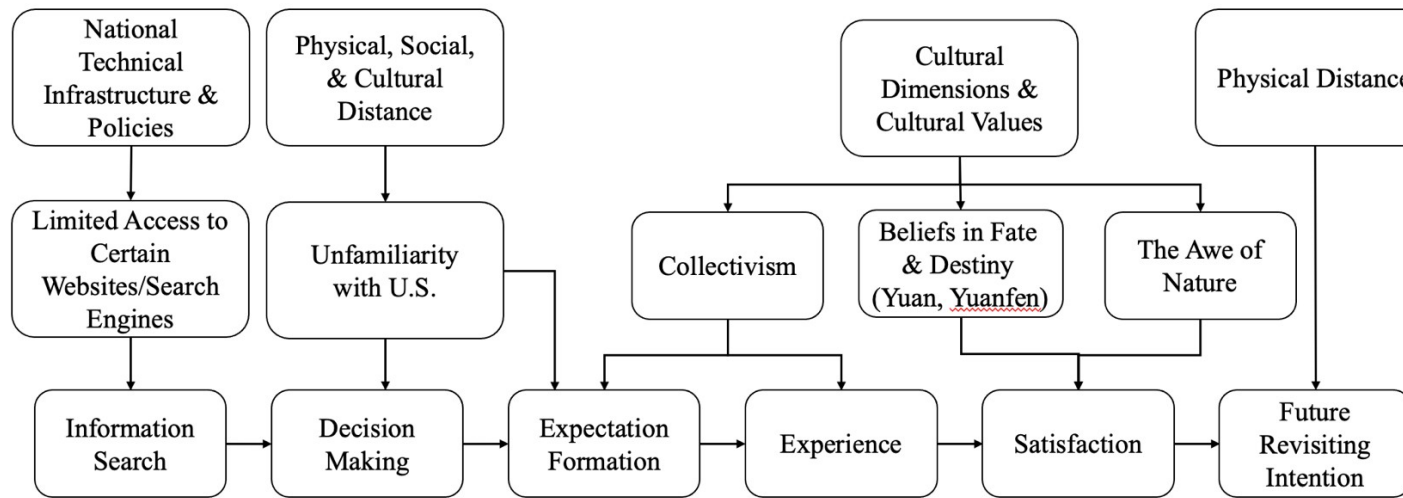


Figure 1. A Linear Model of Tourists' Travel Experience



Figure 2. Interception Locations: Colter Bay Visitor Center and Jackson Lake Lodge (National Park Service, 2016)



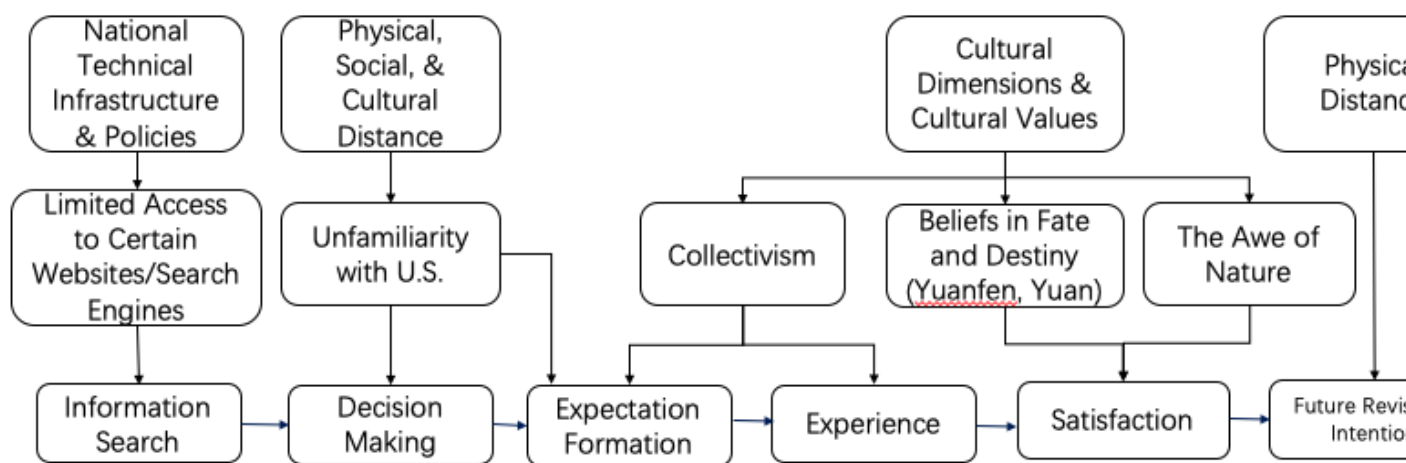


Figure 3. A Modified Model: Influential Factors of International Tourists' Cross-cultural Travel

Experience

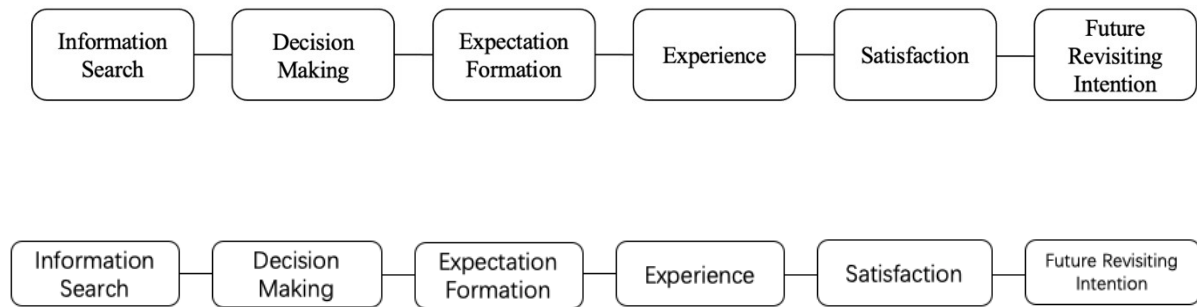


Figure 4. A Linear Model of Tourists' Travel Experience

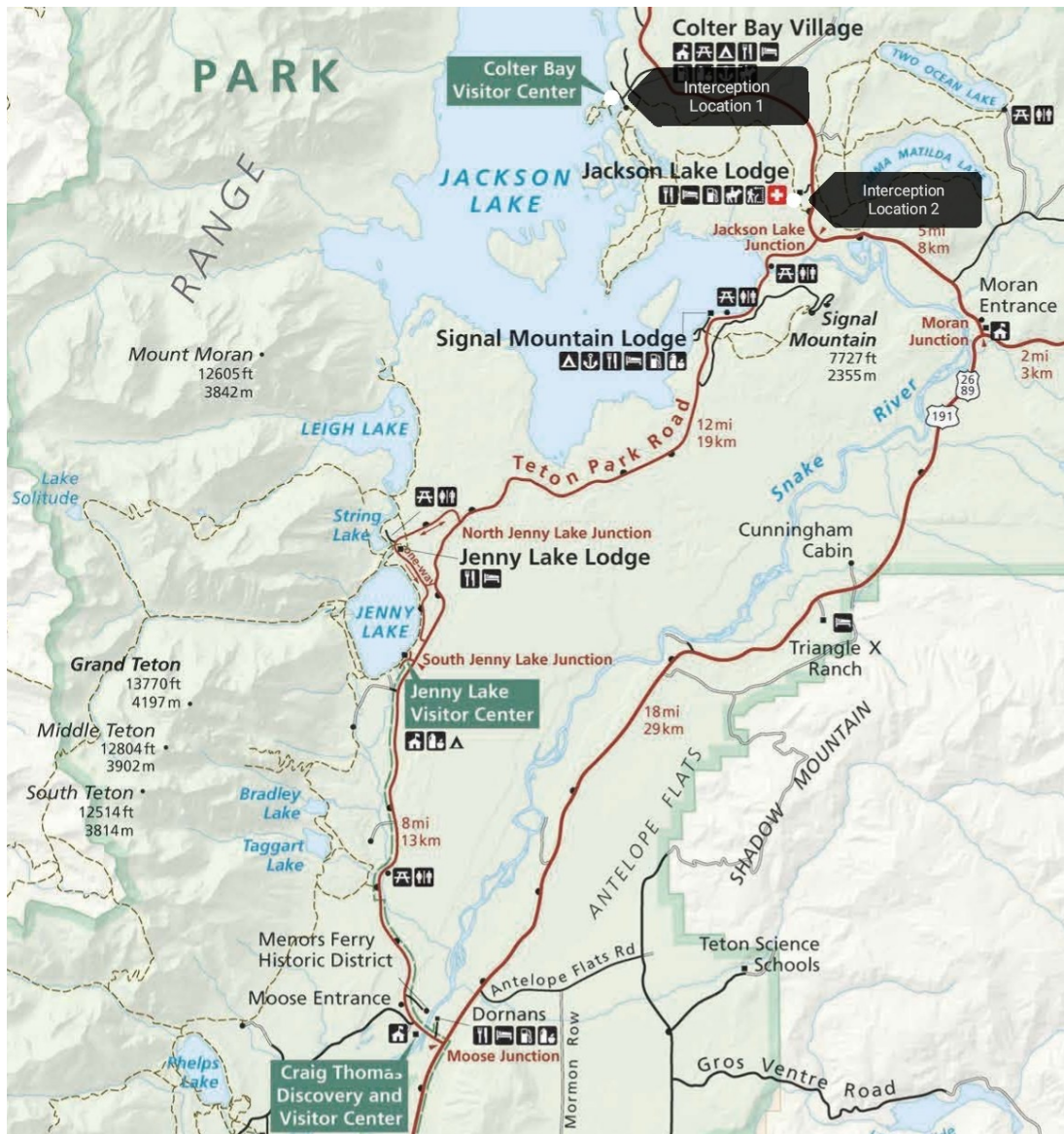
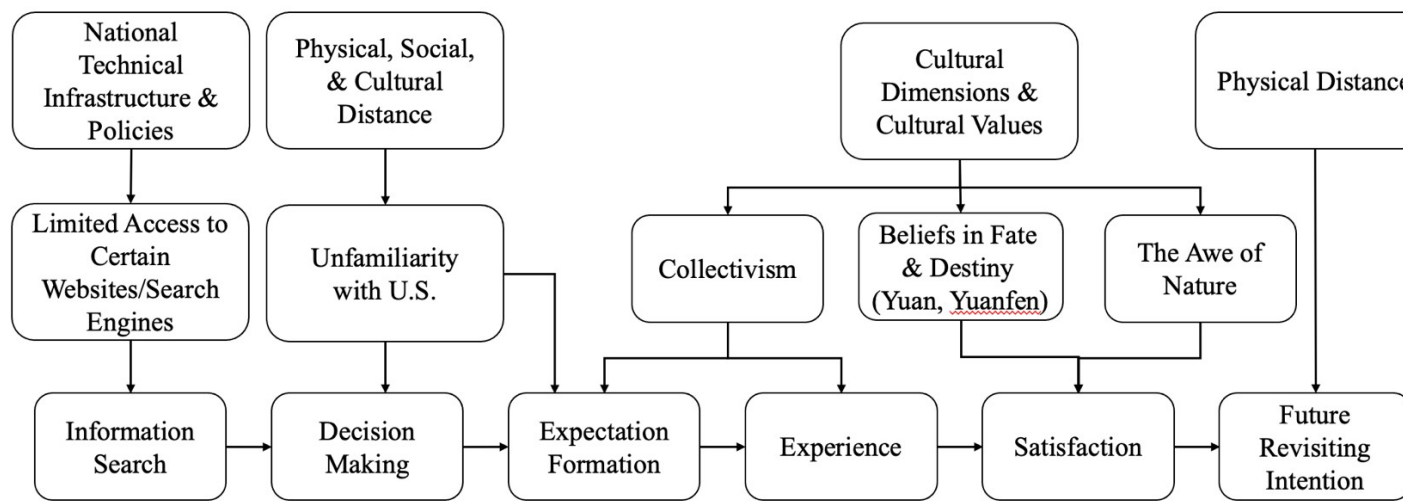


Figure 5. Interception Locations: Colter Bay Visitor Center and Jackson Lake Lodge (National Park Service, 2016)



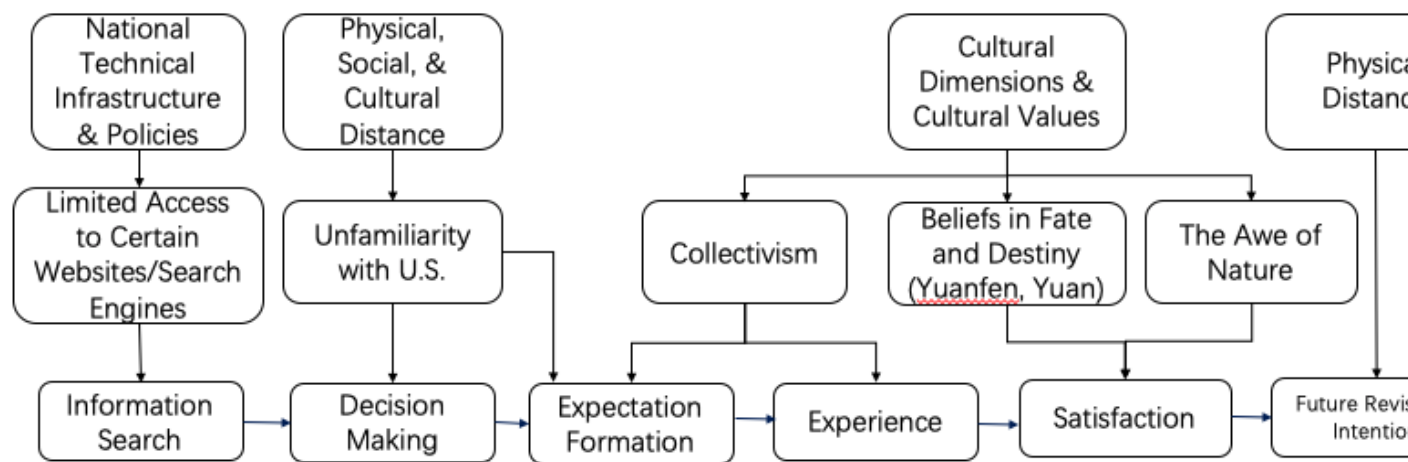


Figure 6. A Modified Model: Influential Factors of International Tourists' Cross-cultural Travel

Experience