A structural model of liminal experience in tourism

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Abstract

Tourism destinations serve as liminal places where tourists can be temporarily free of their secular obligations, therefore cultivating a fertile ground for Yanyu (艳遇), a typical liminal experience, to grow. However, little is known about which factors drive tourists liminal experiences. Based on stimuli-organism-response (SOR) theory and sensation seeking theory, this study examines the impact of tourscapes and sensation-seeking on liminal experiences by using data collected in Lijiang, a city named "the capital of Yanyu", in China. The findings reveal that physical and social tourscapes have positive effects on liminal experiences, and that socially symbolic and natural tourscapes have positive effects on emotional arousal and liminal experience. Emotional arousal mediates the effects of socially symbolic and natural tourscapes on liminal experience, and tourists sensation-seeking motivations have a positive significant effect on those liminal experiences. Lastly, the theoretical and managerial implications of the study's findings are discussed.

1 Introduction

For a long time, China's society has been strongly influenced by the moral and intellectual codes of Confucianism. Chinese society is conservative in terms of gender relationships in daily life, but holidays are typically considered as a temporary escape from the daily norms of life as normal responsibilities are suspended(Weichselbaumer, 2012). This liminal transition phase has the "potential for an enriching experience in short, limited and constrained time periods that makes holidays so different from other pursuits", and in a liminal world, people can behave in a way as if they are free from constraints and obligations. Yanyu, a rising tourism phenomenon which originally meant a favorable opportunity for an encounter with a beautiful woman and which violates Chinese cultural beliefs, values and traditions, becomes acceptable and even natural in this liminal world(Zhang & Xu, 2019).

2 Literature review

The term "liminal" was first developed by French folklorist Van Gennep for use in anthropology to describe the characteristics of rites in different stages of life; he divided the rites of passage into three stages Liminality is widely used in tourism contexts. In the tourism world, destinations serve as liminal spaces where tourists experience an anonymous environment and an evasion of social control, responsibility, and obligation.

Opportunities to encounter means that a tourist may meet strangers of the opposite gender in a Yanyu destination by chance, or in other words, Yanyu is something that may come with luck, and not by deliberately searching. Sense of loss refers to the feelings of depression and anxiety when two parties in a Yanyu relationship are separated from each other after traveling; and aberration means that tourists do something

they would not do in everyday life because these things are incompatible with general social norms, but in a liminal space, these norms can be accepted. Still, not everyone dares to pursue a Yanyu experience, even when they are out of their daily lives.

3 Hypothesis development

H1. Physical tourscapes positively influence: (a) emotional arousal and (b) liminal experience.

H2. Social tourscapes positively influence: (a) emotional arousal and (b) liminal experience.

H3. Socially symbolic tourscapes positively influence: (a) emotional arousal and (b) liminal experience.

H4. Natural tourscapes positively influence: (a) emotional arousal and (b) liminal experience.

H5. Emotional arousal positively influences liminal experience.

H6. Emotional arousal mediates the positive effects of: (a) physical (b) social (c) socially symbolic and (d) natural tourscapes on liminal experience.

H7. Sensation-seeking positively influences liminal experience.

To sum up, the hypotheses model is depicted in Fig 1.

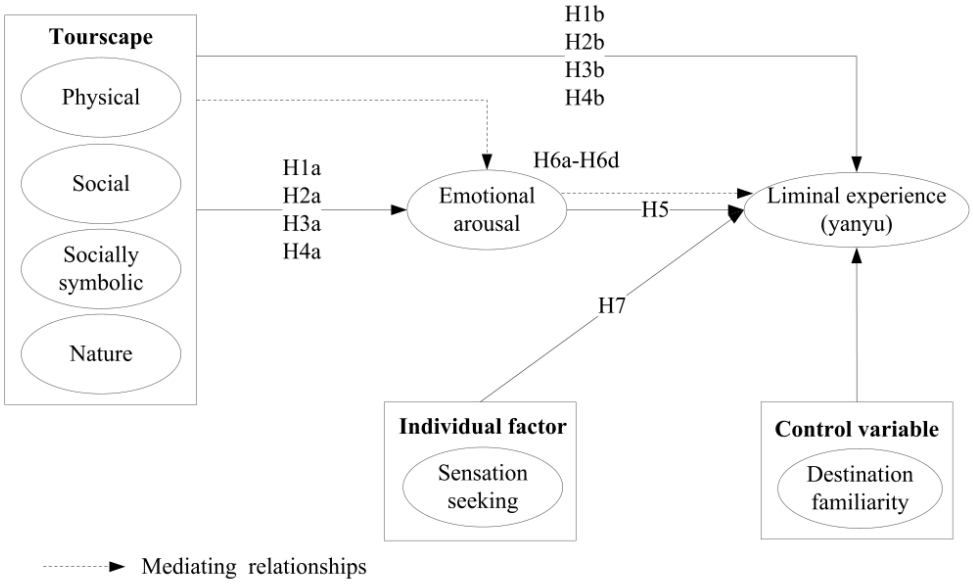

Figure 1: The hypothesis model.

4 Research methodology

Lijiang, located in northwestern Yunnan province, China, was chosen as the focus of this study for its high brand awareness and reputation as a Yanyu destination among Chinese people. Lijiang is a multi-ethnic community which includes Han, Naxi, Yi, Lisu, Pumi, Bai, Zang, and others. The Old Town of Lijiang is

located in Lijiang City, which is a UNESCO Heritage Site. The data in Table 1 indicate that among the 422 participants.

Table 1: Sample profile.

name	value	Frequency	Percent
age	under 20	8	4.37%
	21-30	136	74.32%
	31-40	21	11.48%
	above 41	18	9.84%
edu	senior high school and below	29	15.85%
	university	49	26.78%
	master and above	105	57.38%
gender	male	75	40.98%
	female	108	59.02%
income	under 1500	23	12.57%
	1500-3000	27	14.75%
	3001-5000	64	34.97%
	5001-7500	38	20.77%
	above 7501	31	16.94%
time	1	156	85.25%
	2-3	19	10.38%
	4-5	2	1.09%
	> 6	6	3.28%

5 Results

The CFA results showed that the item (SY4, concentric lock) of a socially symbolic tourscape was lower than 0.5 (0.493), so this item was removed and a new CFA was conducted. Deleting this item is appropriate in that concentric lock is not as popular as in other socially symbolic tourscapes such as doodle drawings in Lijiang. As shown in Table 2, all factor loadings were above 0.5.

Table 2: CFA results of tourscape.

items	Loading	CR
Physical_tourscape		0.748
Ambient	0.913	
Space	0.873	
Signs	0.770	
Social_tourscape		0.832
SO1. Casual behavior	0.516	
SO2. Trust	0.798	
SO3. Equal contacts	0.689	
SO4. Casual communication	0.740	
SO5. Communicate without worries	0.736	
Socially_symbolic_tourscape		0.757
SY1. Legends of love	0.785	
SY2. Modern love story	0.743	
SY3. Doodle love	0.608	
Natural_tourscape		0.779
NA1. Being away	0.678	
NA2. Fascination	0.833	
NA3. Compatibility	0.713	

Table 3: Discriminant validity test of tourscape.

	1	2	3	4
Physical_tourscape	1.000			
Social_tourscape	0.516	1.000		
Socially_symbolic_tourscape	0.497	0.466	1.000	
Natural_tourscape	0.634	0.534	0.526	1

Note:
The bold diagonal elements are square roots of AVE for each construct. Below diagonal elements are the correlations between constructs.

Table 4: EFA and CFA results of liminal experience.

items	loadings_efa	eigenvalue	variance explained	loadings_cfa	CR	AVE
romance_and_relax		8.66	0.203		0.873	0.493
LE1. Wonderful	0.727			0.747		
LE14. Freedom	0.815			0.822		
LE11. Relaxed	0.802			0.668		
LE2. Romantic	0.550			0.703		
LE15. Unconstraint	0.608			0.699		
LE5. Unique	0.848			0.733		
LE4. Legendary	0.627			0.541		
chance_encounter		1.70	0.173		0.840	0.519
LE10. A chance acquaintance	0.603			0.770		
LE9. Meet different people	0.467			0.592		
LE8. Encounter	0.764			0.784		
LE6. Meet by chance	0.702			0.710		
LE7. Mistery	0.627			0.688		
sense_of_loss		1.51	0.149		0.884	0.709
LE16. Sense of loss	0.717			0.784		
LE17. Anxiety	0.852			0.828		
LE18. A hint of sadness	0.712			0.918		
aberration		1.14	0.125		0.678	0.411
LE3. Dubious relationship	0.494			0.592		
LE13. Exceeding the bounds	0.490			0.705		
LE12. Self-indulgence	0.497			0.602		

Table 5: Discriminant validity test of sub-dimensions of liminal experience (AVE test).

	1	2	3	4
romance_and_relax	1.000			
chance_encounter	0.729	1.000		
sense_of_loss	0.595	0.496	1.000	
aberration	0.613	0.621	0.622	1

Note:
The bold diagonal elements are square roots of AVE for each construct. Below diagonal elements are the correlations between constructs.

Table 6: Discriminant validity test of sub-dimensions of liminal experience (confidence interval test).

lhs	rhs	est	ci.lower	ci.upper
romance_and_relax	chance_encounter	0.729	0.644	0.814
romance_and_relax	sense_of_loss	0.595	0.486	0.704
romance_and_relax	aberration	0.613	0.484	0.742
chance_encounter	sense_of_loss	0.496	0.370	0.622
chance_encounter	aberration	0.621	0.490	0.752
sense_of_loss	aberration	0.622	0.492	0.752

Table 7: The overall measurement model.

items	Loading	CR
Physical_tourscape		0.747
Ambient	0.879	
Space	0.914	
Signs	0.749	
Social_tourscape		0.835
SO1. Casual behavior	0.531	
SO2. Trust	0.793	
SO3. Equal contacts	0.700	
SO4. Casual communication	0.733	
SO5. Communicate without worries	0.730	
Socially_symbolic_tourscape		0.747
SY1. Legends of love	0.739	
SY2. Modern love story	0.783	
SY3. Doodle love	0.605	
Natural_tourscape		0.781
NA1. Being away	0.681	
NA2. Fascination	0.818	
NA3. Compatibility	0.725	
Emotional_arousal		0.850
EM1. Romantic	0.647	
EM2. Love	0.806	
EM3. Lustful	0.668	
EM4. Excitement	0.755	
EM5. Desired	0.720	
Sensation_seeking		0.702
Experience_seeking	0.668	
Thrill_adventure_seeking	0.781	
Disinhibition	0.701	
Destination_familiarity		0.767
FM1. Know about Lijiang	0.815	
FM2. Know more than ordinary	0.821	
FM3. Know more than friends	0.514	
Liminal_experience		0.810
romance_and_relax	0.892	
chance_encounter	0.806	
sense_of_loss	0.693	
aberration	0.706	

Table 8: Discriminant validity test of all constructs (AVE test).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Physical_tourscape	1.000							
Social_tourscape	0.523	1.000						
Socially_symbolic_tourscape	0.503	0.467	1.000					
Natural_tourscape	0.629	0.539	0.543	1.000				
Emotional_arousal	0.225	0.374	0.475	0.490	1.000			
Sensation_seeking	0.299	0.361	0.416	0.423	0.407	1.000		
Destination_familiarity	0.158	0.191	0.221	0.138	0.239	0.344	1.000	
Liminal_experience	0.675	0.717	0.686	0.772	0.695	0.511	0.326	1

Note:

The bold diagonal elements are square roots of AVE for each construct. Below diagonal elements are the correlations between constructs.

Table 9: Discriminant validity test of all constructs (confidence interval test).

lhs	rhs	est	ci.lower	ci.upper
Social_tourscape	Socially_symbolic_tourscape	0.467	0.322	0.611
Social_tourscape	Natural_tourscape	0.539	0.408	0.671
Social_tourscape	Emotional_arousal	0.374	0.228	0.520
Social_tourscape	Destination_familiarity	0.191	0.027	0.355
Social_tourscape	Physical_tourscape	0.523	0.387	0.660
Social_tourscape	Sensation_seeking	0.361	0.199	0.523
Social_tourscape	Liminal_experience	0.717	0.619	0.815
Socially_symbolic_tourscape	Natural_tourscape	0.543	0.403	0.683
Socially_symbolic_tourscape	Emotional_arousal	0.475	0.332	0.617
Socially_symbolic_tourscape	Destination_familiarity	0.221	0.051	0.391
Socially_symbolic_tourscape	Physical_tourscape	0.503	0.356	0.651
Socially_symbolic_tourscape	Sensation_seeking	0.416	0.251	0.581
Socially_symbolic_tourscape	Liminal_experience	0.686	0.573	0.799
Natural_tourscape	Emotional_arousal	0.490	0.353	0.627
Natural_tourscape	Destination_familiarity	0.138	-0.033	0.309
Natural_tourscape	Physical_tourscape	0.629	0.503	0.755
Natural_tourscape	Sensation_seeking	0.423	0.263	0.584
Natural_tourscape	Liminal_experience	0.772	0.679	0.865
Emotional_arousal	Destination_familiarity	0.239	0.079	0.400
Emotional_arousal	Physical_tourscape	0.225	0.060	0.390
Emotional_arousal	Sensation_seeking	0.407	0.251	0.563
Emotional_arousal	Liminal_experience	0.695	0.594	0.795
Destination_familiarity	Physical_tourscape	0.158	-0.014	0.330
Destination_familiarity	Sensation_seeking	0.344	0.177	0.511
Destination_familiarity	Liminal_experience	0.326	0.170	0.481
Physical_tourscape	Sensation_seeking	0.299	0.124	0.474
Physical_tourscape	Liminal_experience	0.675	0.561	0.788
Sensation_seeking	Liminal_experience	0.511	0.365	0.656

Table 10: Estimated standardized coefficients.

label	path	est	z	pvalue
H1a	Physical–>Emotional_arousal	-0.419	-2.215	0.027
H1b	Physical–>Liminal_experience	0.325	2.585	0.010
H2a	Social–>Emotional_arousal	0.188	1.403	0.161
H2b	Social–>Liminal_experience	0.318	3.431	0.001
H3a	Symbolic–>Emotional_arousal	0.312	2.972	0.003
H3b	Symbolic–>Liminal_experience	0.119	1.720	0.085
H4a	Natural–>Emotional_arousal	0.324	3.101	0.002
H4b	Natural–>Liminal_experience	0.164	2.347	0.019
H5	Emotional_arousal–>Liminal_experience	0.322	4.485	0.000
H7	Sensation_seeking–>Liminal_experience	0.047	0.496	0.620
-	Destination_familiarity–>Liminal_experience	0.078	1.680	0.093

Table 11: Mediating effect (bootstrap =2000).

label	Independent variable	Mediator	Dependent variable	ci.lower	ci.upper
H6a	Physical tourscape	Emotional arousal	Liminal experience	-0.267	-0.003
H6b	Social tourscape			-0.027	0.148
H6c	Socially symbolic tourscape			0.025	0.176
H6d	Natural tourscape			0.029	0.180

6 Conclusions, contributions and implications

This study takes two theoretical approaches to empirically in vestigate the factors influencing tourists' liminal experience at a Yanyu destination–Lijiang. The SOR theory is applied to examine the influences of a tourscape on tourists' emotional arousal and liminal experience, and then sensation seeking theory is used to investigate the effects of sensation-seeking on liminal experience.

The model should be further investigated and implemented with other more generic perspectives. First, in order to generalize the findings to a wider population, it would be worthwhile to expand this re-search to other Yanyu destinations such as Yangshuo and Fenghuang. Second, this study uses a quantitative method to empirically test the hypothesis model based on cross-sectional data, and future research could use qualitative methods to explore how the image of Yanyu has developed in the Chinese domestic market. Further, as liminal experience is a unique and complex phenomenon, future studies are needed to investigate other antecedents of liminal experience, such as tourist motivation, as well as consequences of liminal experience such as destination loyalty.

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