

Xiaofan Liang
Deriving Chinese Traveler Profiles under Bourdieu's Social Space Theory
Minerva Schools at KGI

Table of Contents

Main Contents

[Context](#)

[Abstract](#)

[A Critical Assessment of Bourdieu's Social Space Theory](#)

[Methods](#)

[Results](#)

[Discussion](#)

[Conclusion](#)

Context

In 2015, I collaborated with two peers to identify and describe five categories of Chinese travelers, along with the branding strategies and marketing solutions that were most relevant to each category. Airbnb used this information to enter the Chinese market in 2016. As the primary user research person in the team, my task was to understand Chinese travelers -- who they are, what they like and how they travel -- so that Airbnb can target them most effectively. This writing captures a portion of both the report (a shortened version [here](#)) we submitted to Airbnb in June 2015, and a final paper written for a qualitative research methods class (Soc 108) at UC-Berkeley in May 2015.

Abstract

Traditionally user research either focuses on ethnographic evidence from interviews and surveys or relies on big data analytics to predict trends. It thus lacks an integrated approach that connects quantitative approaches to qualitative insights. In this paper, we adopt an empirical approach by combining Bourdieu's social space theory with multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) and apply it to a Chinese traveler user research project for Airbnb. Using MCA, we generate a social space image that shows the clustering of different traveling behaviors and derive five generic user categories of Chinese travelers -- young explorer, stuck ambitionist, work-family mainstay, free generation, and life bourgeois. Other qualitative methods, such as interviews, surveys, and participant observation, complement the interpretations of these categories. We also challenge Bourdieu's assumption to use economic and cultural capital as the

organizing principles for social space as we found that age and income are the driving factors to differentiate Chinese travelers.

A Critical Assessment of Bourdieu's Social Space Theory

In his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Tastes* (1984), Bourdieu proposed the idea of social space, a spatial representation of people's tastes along the axes of cultural and economic capital (social capital is mentioned but was not chosen for visualization). It is through such a space, or in Bourdieu's words, social field, that people orient their interests, make judgments, and take actions. Applying Bourdieu's theory to mapping the "tastes" of Chinese travelers, we argue that their traveling styles reflect a system of behaviors and social characteristics that are shaped by Bourdieu's "habitus", the mindset determined both by personal history and people's objective position in the social space. We can interpret behaviors and social characteristics that are similar, and thus close to each other in the social space, as indications for people classified under the same user profile. However, Bourdieu assumed the factors that differentiate "tastes" most significantly are cultural and economic capital, which we attempt to test in our case study with Chinese travelers. Empirically, we also found it hard to create composite indices of cultural and economic capital given limited information from survey respondents. Thus, only the respondents' income and education level are used as the coarse-grained indicators.

MCA is natural to Bourdieu's social space theory as he first adopted it in his research to construct social fields (1984). Subsequent work by Anheier & Gerhards (1995), Richards & van der Ark (2013), and Ragazzi (2014) also used MCA to empirically validate Bourdieu's theory in

the contexts of social positions of writers, diaspora policies, and cultural tourism market segments. Instead of making assumptions, we ask the MCA algorithm to pick the axes that maximize the distance of all points on the graph and thus treat income and education with the same weights as other behavioral or demographic data in the social space. As we extract meanings from the relative distances of points in the generated social space, we explicate the combinatory axes from MCA with unidimensional variables (income and age) to organize our user profiles.

Methods

To understand what types of Chinese travelers exist and how they behave, we use methods spanning qualitative and quantitative data to derive insights that have both generalizing and explaining power. In particular, we position MCA-generated social space at the bottom-right corner of the map (see Figure 1) as we use it to cluster a large amount of survey data. Four main methods -- survey, interview, participant observation, and MCA-generated social space -- are explained in detail in this essay since they complement each other for the outcome.

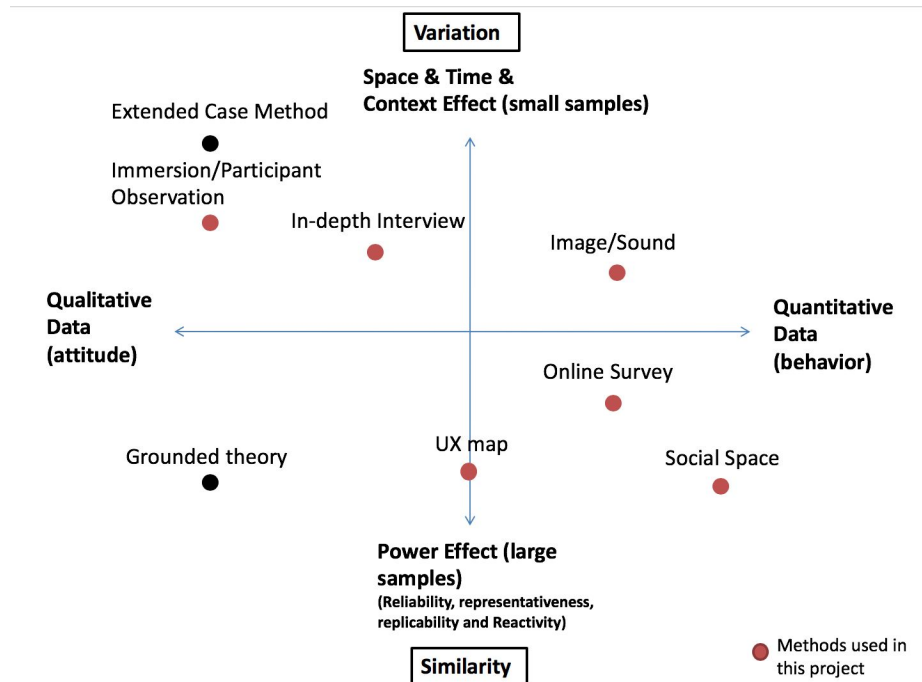


Figure 1: Visual representation of all the methods used in this project and their comparative advantages.

Survey

Through a survey company in China, we collect 200 survey responses with at least 30 people from each income and education bracket. Our multiple-choice survey has three layers of questions. The first layer collects social demographic information such as income and education level. The second layer is about people's lifestyles, which includes hobbies, favorite brands, and which news channels they prefer. The third layer concerns traveling preferences, such as how often they travel per year, favored accommodation types, and primary considerations when planning a trip. Such structure underlies Bourdieu's thinking that economic and cultural capital gives rise to lifestyle tastes which translate into specific traveling behaviors. To make sure that

answers to each question have equal weights in MCA, we keep the number of answer options roughly the same across all questions.

Interviews

In the survey, we have an optional question which asks if recipients are willing to leave contact information for the interview. From these contacts, we selected eleven interviewees from different income and education brackets (see Figure 2 for sample overview). The structure of the interviews is similar to that of the survey, but more deeply explore the subjects’ responses. We organized interview insights using Post-it notes to speed up the reorganization process when categories started to emerge.

1.5 Sample Description

Object: Chinese outbound independent travelers

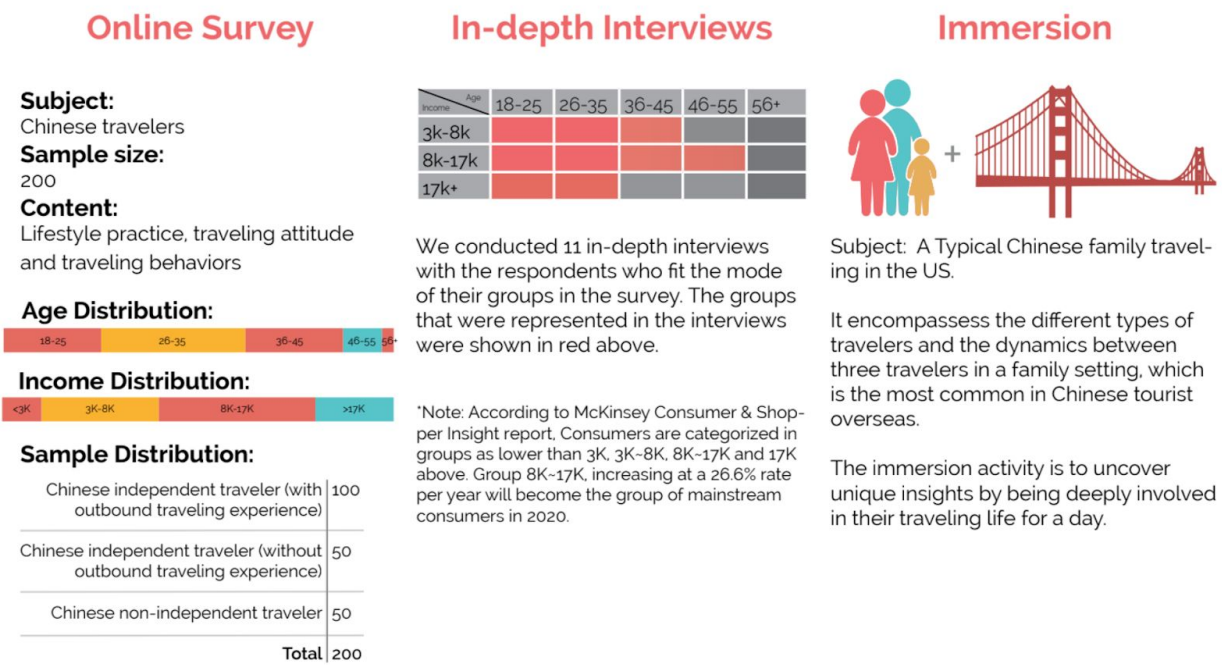


Figure 2: Survey, interviews, and participant observation overview.

Participation Observation

We accompanied a Chinese family on a tour of San Francisco to observe how they would make decisions and interact with the city. We engineered scenarios that encouraged them to engage with new experiences while we observed how they reacted. As we became more familiar with each other, we successfully documented triggers of their emotional change and body languages that are hard to detect using other methods.

MCA Generated Social Space

The results of survey responses become the inputs for our multiple correspondence analysis (MCA). We used the MCA module of the XLSTAT extension to perform our analysis. MCA is an unsupervised classification algorithm that finds linear combinations of features that best explain variance in the data. The result is a low-dimensional clustering figure that best separate the data. It takes in nominal categorical data, such as our multiple choice answers, and requires a few manually-defined parameters, such as the number of clusters. The drawback of this method is the arbitrary parametrization of the algorithm: when the clustering is not clear, the number of clusters required can largely influence the boundaries of the classification, thereby introducing the need for support from qualitative evidence.

The visual outcome is a “social space” comprised of points that each represents a single response from the survey (e.g. age range, income level, choice of a clothing brand etc.). The clustering of dots indicates that people who choose an option in the survey are also very likely to chose other options that are spatially close-by in the graph. These characteristics allow us to extract the user profiles from the clusters.

Results

Deriving Preliminary Clusters through MCA Generated Social Space

Figure 2 and Figure 3 show the MCA social space typology derived from the survey responses. All the MCA-generated figures do not have axes label because axes may be combinatory dimensions that do not have any practical meaning. The results are not clean-cut clusters, which indicates considerable overlap in the traveling styles of different groups. Different color codes refer to different groupings by the algorithm. Some clustering makes intuitive sense, such as the pairing of people who are older than 26, have an income of 17k or higher, and prefer high-end accommodations. Others are more suspicious, such as the two dots at top right corner (see Figure 2) that represent rich young people who prefer Couchsurfing. Figure 3 also reveals nonlinear borders for all categories which challenges the simple linear premise of Bourdieu's theory: if dots that are closer to each other correlate with people who are more likely to behave in the same ways, why will a few dots inside the blue dots cluster be classified as pink instead? These questions suggest that we need qualitative evidences after quantitative interpretation.

Before moving to qualitative analysis, we also experimented with different cluster numbers to test the sensitivity of the classification. We decided on having five clusters after tweaking the parameters to find the most intuitive partition. Normally, increasing the number of clusters will break up the group in which dots that are loosely correlated, while decreasing the number may merge dots that were previously in different groups. The green cluster is most sensitive to the increase of cluster numbers, shown by Figure 3 and 4, indicating the potential of

further division within it. On the contrary, the pink and blue clusters are most sensitive to merging, implying that we may overestimate the difference between the two groups when imposing five clusters to the algorithm.

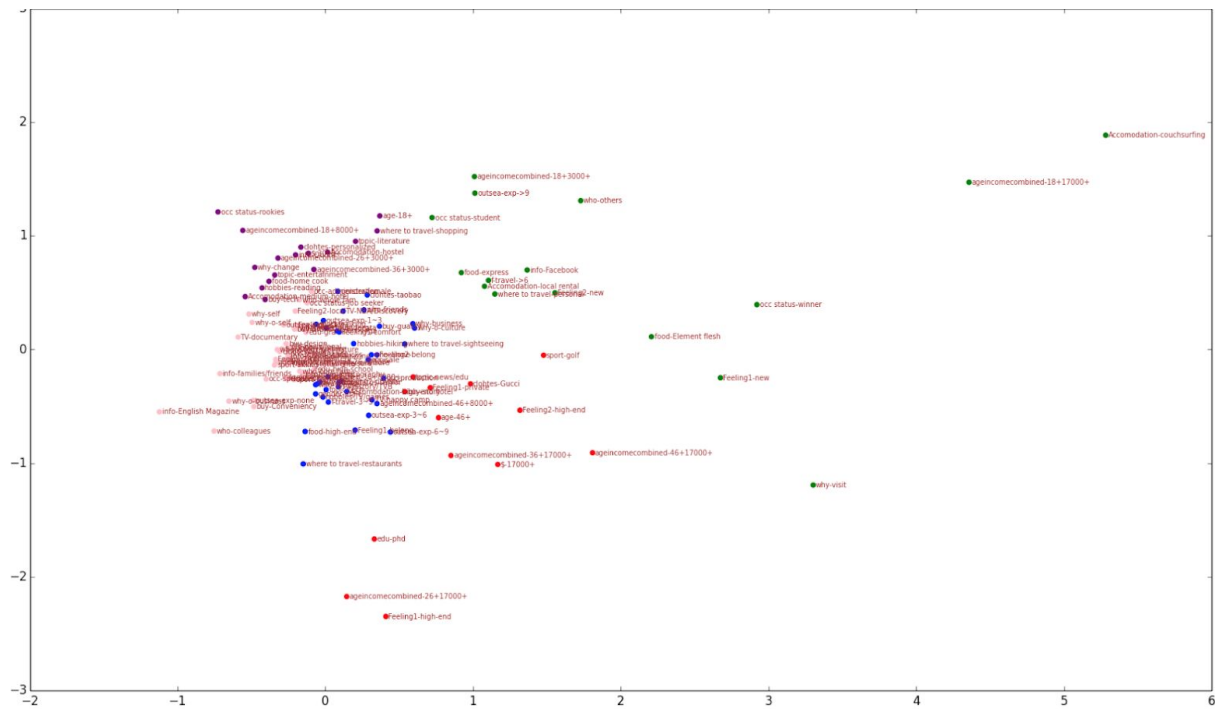


Figure 2: MCA generated social space with survey response annotation to each dot.

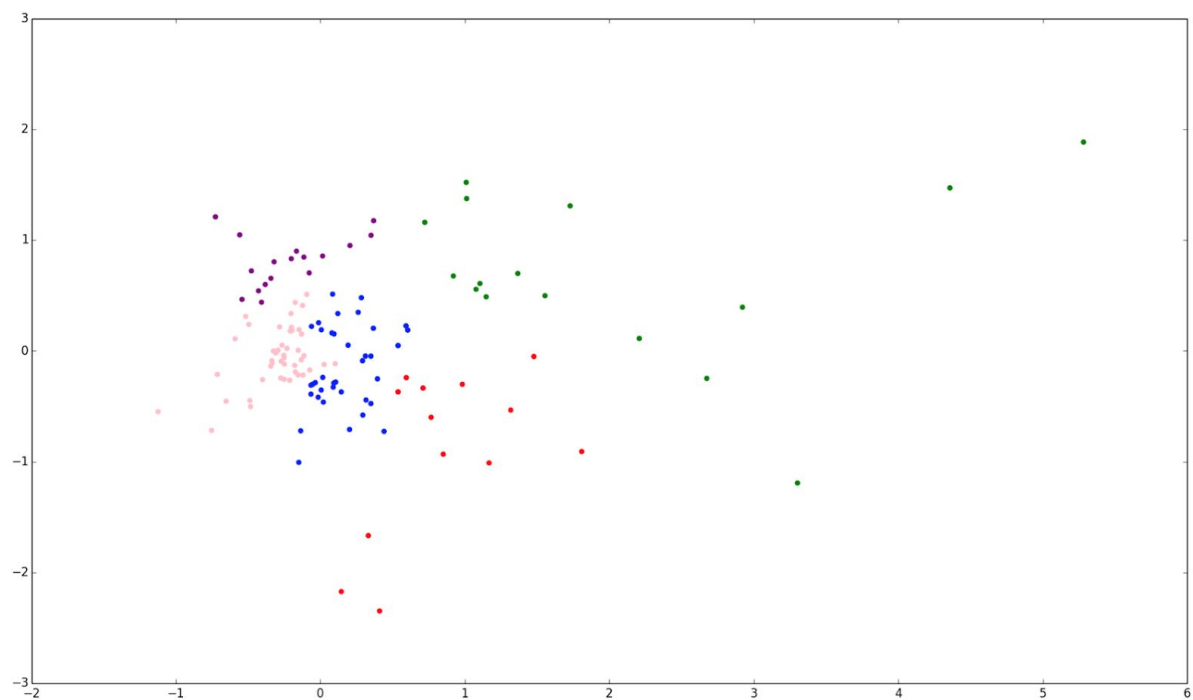


Figure 3: MCA generated social space without survey response annotation to each dot, parameterized with five clusters.

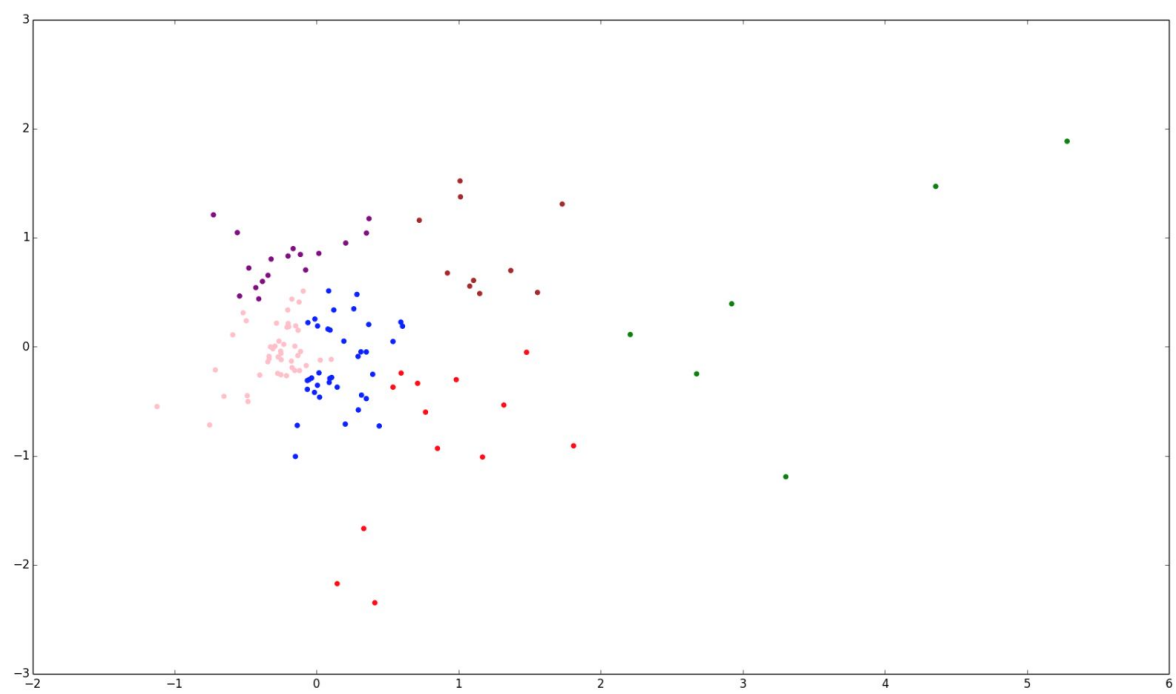


Figure 4: MCA generated social space without survey response annotation to each dot, parameterized with six clusters.

Defining Five Clusters through Interviews, Surveys, and Participant Observation

Anticipating the importance of qualitative evidence, we planned interviews, surveys, and participant observation before we analyzed the MCA-generated user clusters so as to prevent confirmation bias. We derived five user categories by complementing the MCA analysis with outputs from survey, interviews and observation. The qualitative methods also help contextualize and define the clusters we found. In contrast to Bourdieu, we found that age and income are two most significant factors in differentiating the clusters because they can best distinguish each cluster. Figure 5 and Figure 6 built upon the previous MCA-generated figures from Excel and conceptualized the clusters using age and income as the axes. In the following section, we will introduce each group's socio-economic status, lifestyle and travel behaviors.

Young Explorer

The young explorer group consists of people aged 16 to 25. Most of the people in this group are students or early-career professionals with strong self-identification as the generation of the "90s" in China. In daily life, they wear international brands, attend local sports clubs, and actively absorb new ideas that they are interested in. When asked what places they want to go to, they named a few unusual locations such as Istanbul and Mumbai, indicating greater comfort to experience other cultures. Interestingly, this explorative spirit is evident only in either the low-income or high-income range. One interviewee from the former category justified her pursuit for travel optimistically by saying "as long as I put my heart to observe and listen, every day can be a travel" (Guo, 2015), while someone from the high-income bracket phrased it as

“necessary investment to expand horizons” (Jiang, 2015). The green cluster best describes their traveling behaviors, which includes renting local accommodation, frequent overseas experiences, traveling with strangers, and seeking stimuli.

Stuck Ambitionist

Aged from 26 to 55, stuck ambitionists are either middle-age adults who are facing midlife crises or young people who are at the bottleneck of life. For the middle-age adults, the combination of aging and their poor income causes anxiety and nudges them to seek recognition. During the interviews, one person became very sensitive to my reactions to their questions. If I did not respond immediately, he would question his answers and ask what I was looking for (Xu, 2015). Another interviewee complained about being an outcast in the company, and his early ambition had worn off over time (Liang, 2015). The struggle of the younger adults comes from the conflict of family, societal expectations, and their pursuit of individuality. Having followed the typical track of life for many years, they do not have the courage to break out of their bubbles, even when they want to. Compared with the young explorers, they have adequate income to travel but less freedom and spirits to take risks. To both groups, travel is “an escape from the mundane life” (Li, 2015). This group in the purple cluster features contrasting behaviors: on one hand, they prefer tourism shopping and average quality hotels, while on the other hand, they pursue individualized clothing and read books about civic life and personal success. We used the term stuck ambitionist to capture the distance of where they are and where they want to be.

Work-family Mainstay

Work-family mainstay refers to the middle-class group of people in China: they tend to be educated and wealthy enough to support families and are well-recognized in the workplace. Tech, finance, health, and kids' education are common reading topics in the group. If traveling, they will either be with colleagues on business trips or with families for leisure. They are represented by the dots in their pink cluster which points to comfortable accommodations and safety as their primary concerns when traveling. Compared with stuck ambitionists, they are more content with life, while compared with young explorers, their traveling is rarely about themselves, and more about work or family. We term this group as the work-family mainstay to reflect their core responsibilities.

Free Generation

The free generation group refers to adults who are retired but have a sense of curiosity about the world. As active senior citizens, they may be inspired by their children's study abroad experience and want to seize the day while they are still mobile. The family we spent time with and observed in San Francisco features an example of retired parents coming to attend the graduation ceremony of their daughter and then leveraging that as a chance to travel together. Though wearing simple and casual clothes, the parents were not frugal when buying food to match their Asian tastes, and relied heavily on their daughter to plan routes. When we invited them to interact with the street artists at Fisherman Wharf, they were reluctant at first, but with our encouragement, they tried the djembe in the artist's hand and later commented this as one of the best moments of the day. Less burdened by work or family, retired parents are generally optimistic and happy on vacation, and are willing to try new experiences within their comfort zones. The word "free" best depicted their mental states and the will to explore within limits.

Life Bourgeois

Life Bourgeois is the group that value a high-end and well-curated traveling experience. They pursue athletics in daily life, wear expensive brands, and play sports such as tennis and golf which correspond to their social status. The red cluster in social space indicates that they are more likely to be the most educated and highest income people among all of the groups. The feeling of private and high-end is essential to their arrangement of travel. They value on enjoying and understanding life, and show deep interests in local lifestyle and culture wherever they go. Therefore, we appropriate the term bourgeois to label them as people in the upper middle class who treat their life with delicacy, and is well-off both economically and culturally. This is reflected in their traveling styles.

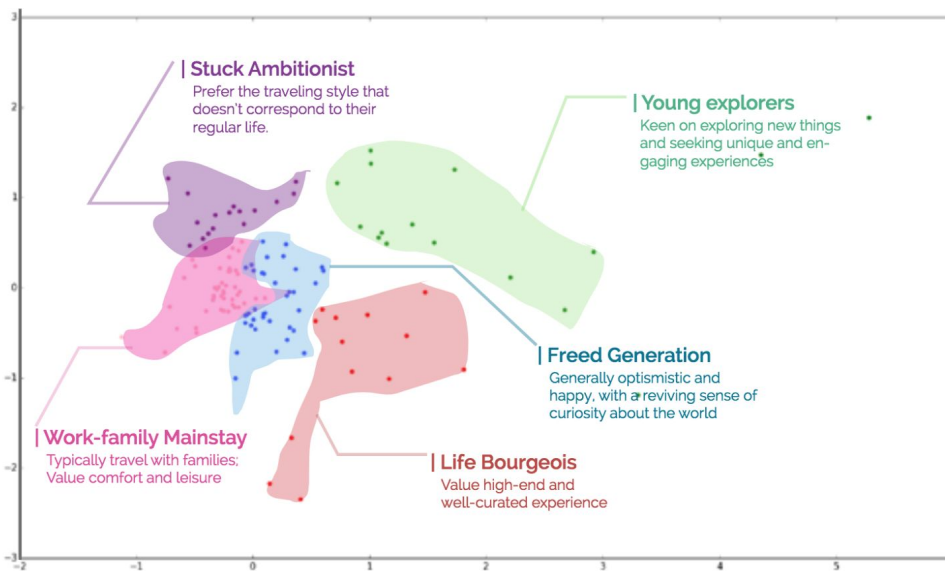


Figure 5: Interpreted social space combining information from all methods.

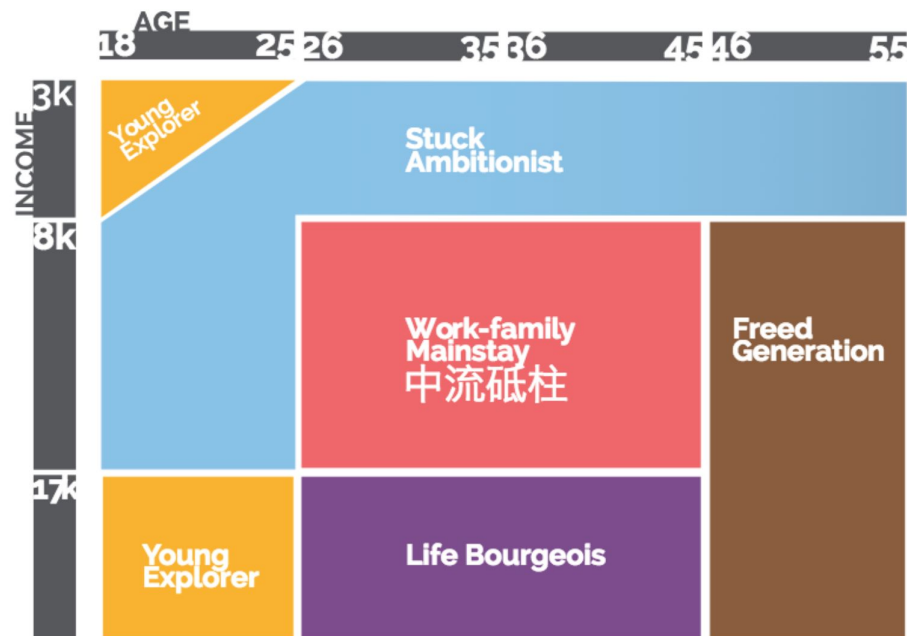


Figure 6: Interpreted social space along income and age axis.

Discussion

The direct implication of having these five user profiles is to provide a foundation for Airbnb to use to design marketing and branding strategies. Because of the confidential agreement with Airbnb, I can only share limited information about how we channel the understanding to design solutions. For example, as we examine which user groups have the income, mindset, and experience to accept Airbnb, retired people in the free generation category and young explorers stand out. We suggested a video campaign to feature a story in which a retired couple feel left behind by the widening communication gap with their child studying abroad and decide to travel so that they could catch up and relate to them. The video will document the gradual transition of the parents from spending overt attention on their child to finally living for themselves. This

plays to the underlying motivations for retired people to be young and close to young people again.

However, the mixed methods in this project also have limitations in avoiding confirmation bias, validating our findings, and negotiating the interests between business and sociological inquiry. As we imposed the categories of socio-economic background, lifestyle choices, and traveling behaviors to the interviews, we may have swayed interviewees' answers unconsciously. Such imposition also contradicts with the open-ended nature in interviews, but we have to adopt it so that we can get structural information (e.g. identifier, accommodation preferences, and perception of shared home concepts) that are helpful to the business. As qualitative evidence continues to stretch the quantitative boundaries imposed in MCA-generated social space, we were unsure about how reliable the clusters would be, and the final decisions have largely fallen upon intuition. We admit that the user profiles were crafted to maximize the distinctness between different groups, though in real life there exist many overlaps. The actual social space is also less continuous than we expected: low-income and high-income young adults can share more similar traveling preferences than middle-income young people. Nonetheless, we experimented with a new way to approach user profiling that gives insights to categories that were challenging to establish through traditional methods.

Conclusion

As we empirically apply Bourdieu's social space theory to map the traveling behaviors by MCA algorithm, we reveal the controversial nuances in the statistical outcomes and how to complement them with qualitative evidence to improve interpretations. In the end, five user

categories emerged to capture the diverse mindsets and lifestyles that are reflected in the traveling behaviors of Chinese individuals. On the one hand, this research project provides a basic understanding for my team to design marketing and branding solutions for Airbnb. On the other hand, the experimentation of the mixed approaches contextualize Bourdieu's theory with the behaviors of Chinese travelers, discusses the applicability of Bourdieu's theory in practice, and challenges his assumption by using income and age as the organizing axes for social space.

Acknowledgement:

I want to thank Heyu Huang and Qiqi Xu, the business strategist and the designer in our team, to help me brainstorm research ideas, provide visualizations (e.g. Figure 2, 5, 6), and connect my interpretations to business interests.

Reference:

- Anheier, H. K., Gerhards, J., & Romo, F. P. (1995). Forms of Capital and Social Structure in Cultural Fields: Examining Bourdieu's Social Topography. *American Journal of Sociology*, 100(4), 859–903. doi:10.1086/230603
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction* (pp. 169-225). Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1985). The social space and the genesis of groups. *Social Science Information*, 24(2), 195-220. doi: 10.1177/053901885024002001
- Bourdieu, P. (1992). *The Logic of Practice* (pp. 52-65). Stanford University Press.
- Coulangeon, P., & Lemel, Y. (2007). Is 'distinction' really outdated? Questioning the meaning of the omnivorization of musical taste in contemporary France. *Poetics*, 35(2-3), 93-111. doi: 10.1016/j.poetic.2007.03.006
- Guo, F. (2015, April 3rd). Phone Interview.
- Liang, M. (2015, April 3rd). Phone Interview.
- Li, Q. (2015, April 4th). Phone Interview

Jiang, P. (2015, April 3rd). Phone Interview.

Ragazzi, F. (2014). A comparative analysis of diaspora policies. *Political Geography*, 41, 74-89.
doi: 10.1016/j.polgeo.2013.12.004

Richards, G., & van der Ark, L. (2013). Dimensions of cultural consumption among tourists:
Multiple correspondence analysis. *Tourism Management*, 37, 71-76. doi:
10.1016/j.tourman.2013.01.007

Xu, X. (2015, April 3rd). Phone Interview.