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Deriving Chinese Traveler Profiles under Bourdieu's Social Space Theory
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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, reproduced in November 2018, captures a portion of the report (a shortened version here) we submitted to Airbnb in June 2015, and my 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 bourgeoisie. 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 uses 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.
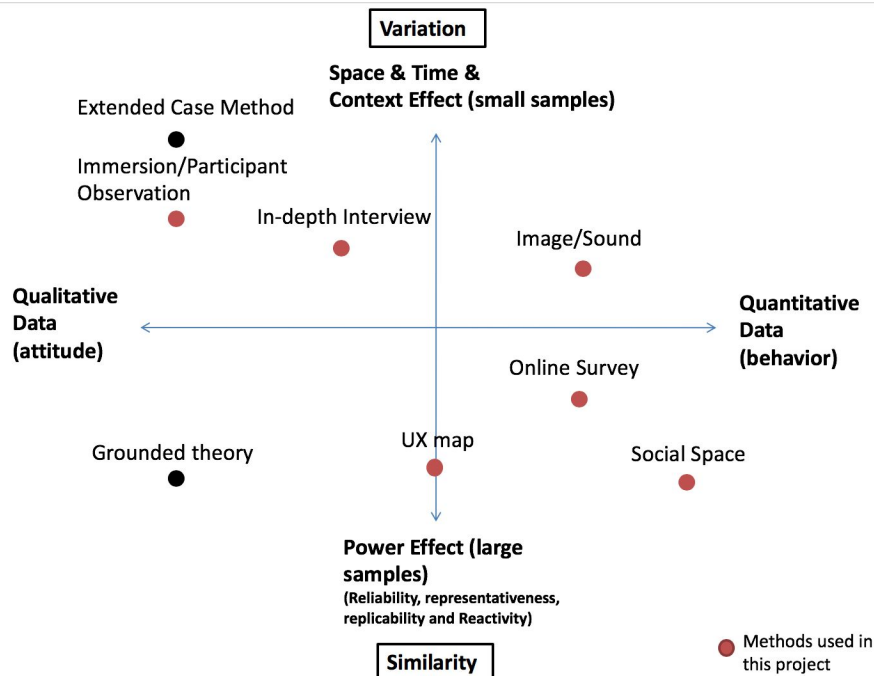
Figure 1: Visual representation of all the methods used in this project and their comparative advantages.

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
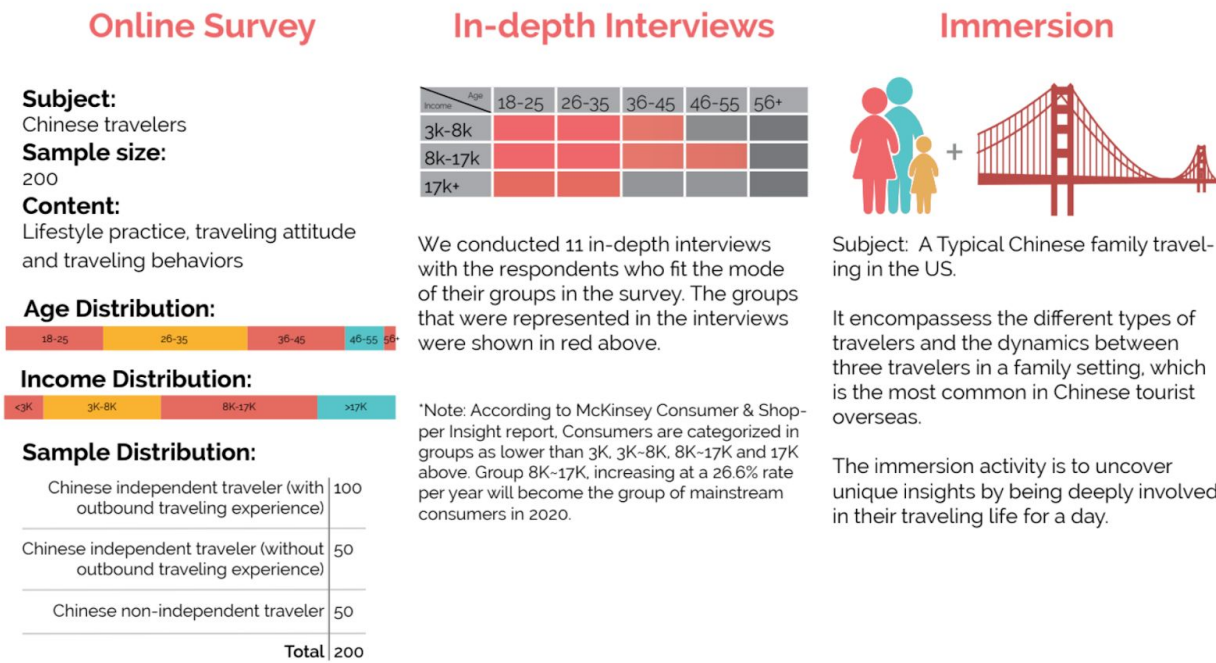
Object: Chinese outbound independent travelers

Online Survey

Subject:
Chinese travelers
Sample size:
200
Content:
Lifestyle practice, traveling attitude and traveling behaviors

Age Distribution:

| 18-25 | 26-35 | 36-45 | 46-55 56+ |

Income Distribution:

| <3K | 3K-8K | 8K-17K | >17K |

Sample Distribution:

Chinese independent traveler (with outbound traveling experience)	100
Chinese independent traveler (without outbound traveling experience)	50
Chinese non-independent traveler	50
Total	**200**

In-depth Interviews

Income＼Age	18-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56+
3k-8k					
8k-17k					
17k+					

We conducted 11 in-depth interviews with the respondents who fit the mode of their groups in the survey. The groups that were represented in the interviews were shown in red above.

*Note: According to McKinsey Consumer & Shopper Insight report, Consumers are categorized in groups as lower than 3K, 3K~8K, 8K~17K and 17K above. Group 8K~17K, increasing at a 26.6% rate per year will become the group of mainstream consumers in 2020.

Immersion

Subject: A Typical Chinese family traveling in the US.

It encompasses the different types of travelers and the dynamics between three travelers in a family setting, which is the most common in Chinese tourist overseas.

The immersion activity is to uncover unique insights by being deeply involved in their traveling life for a day.

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
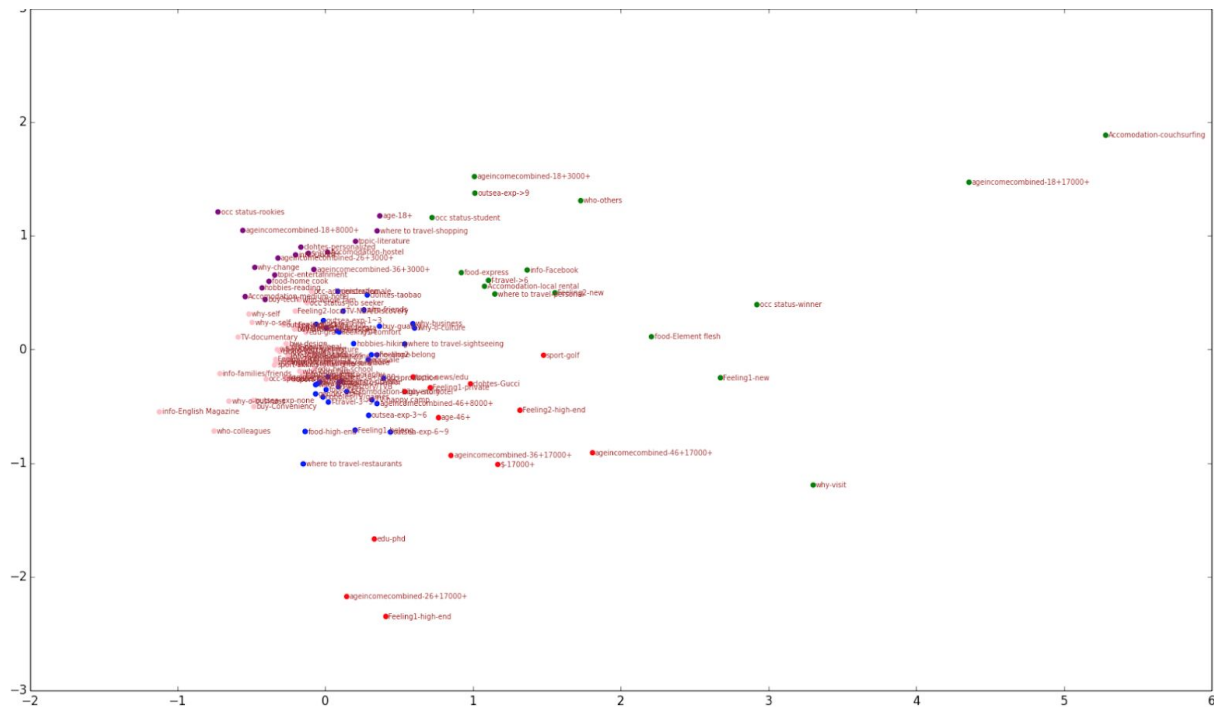
imposing five clusters to the algorithm.

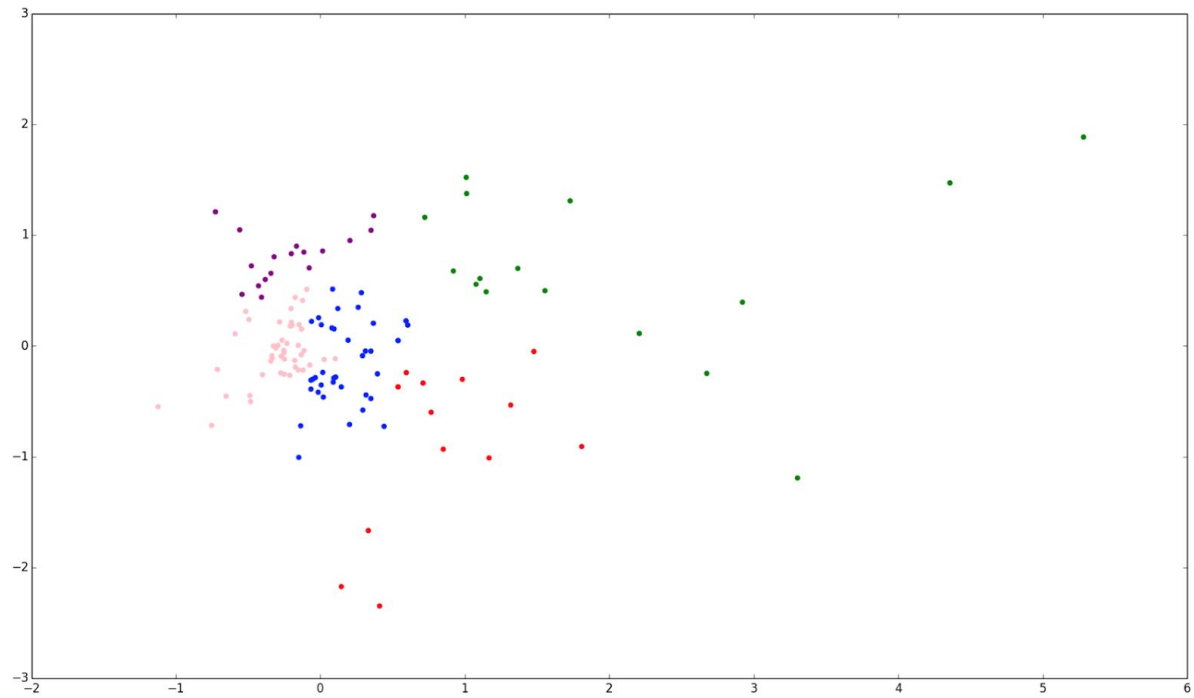Figure 2: MCA generated social space with survey response annotation to each dot.

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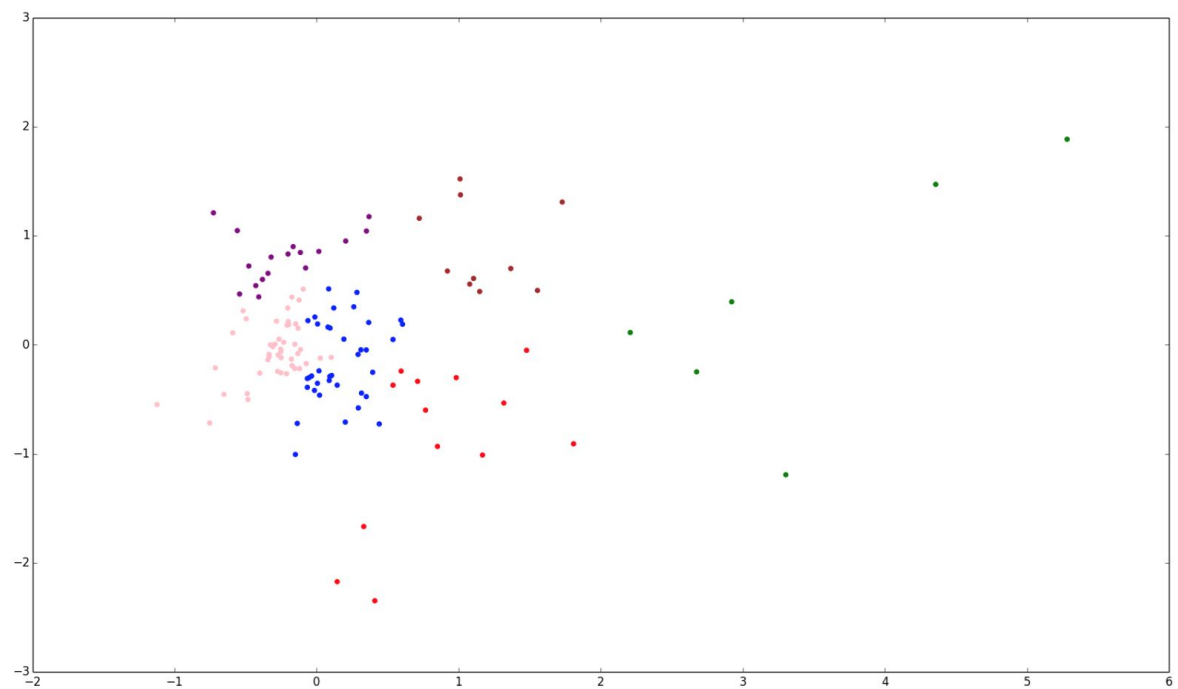
parameterized with five clusters.

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 Bourgeoisie

Life Bourgeoisie 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 French term bourgeoisie 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.
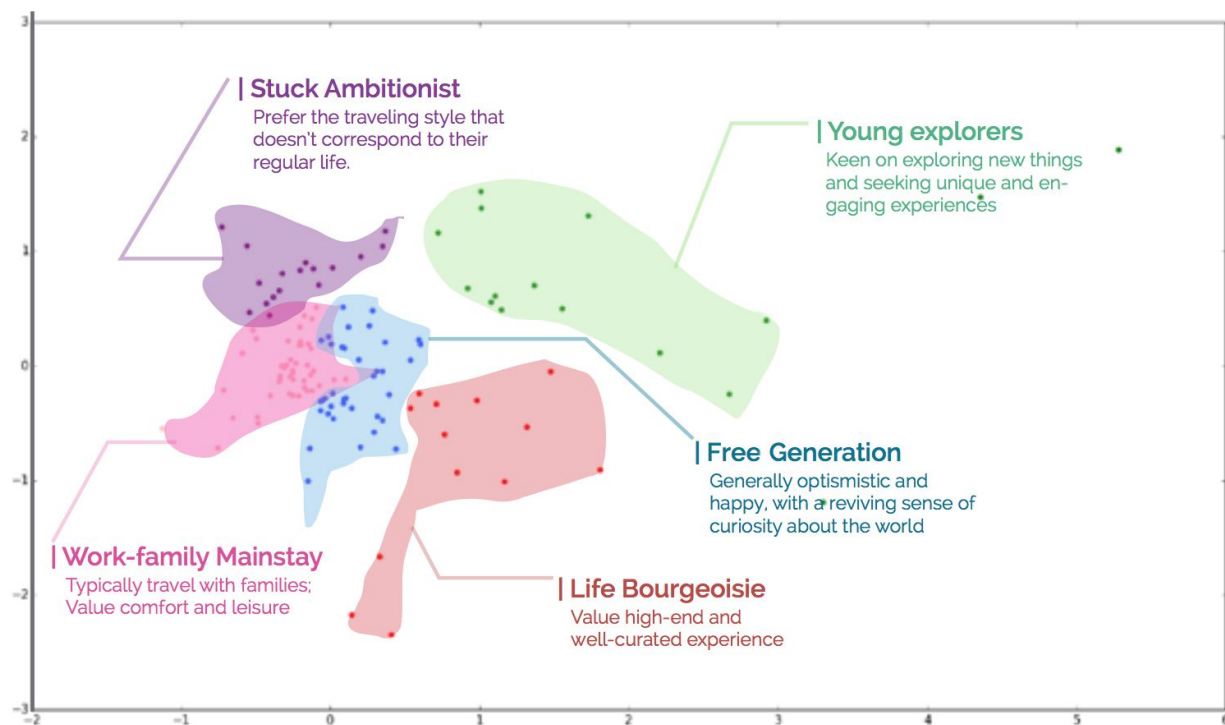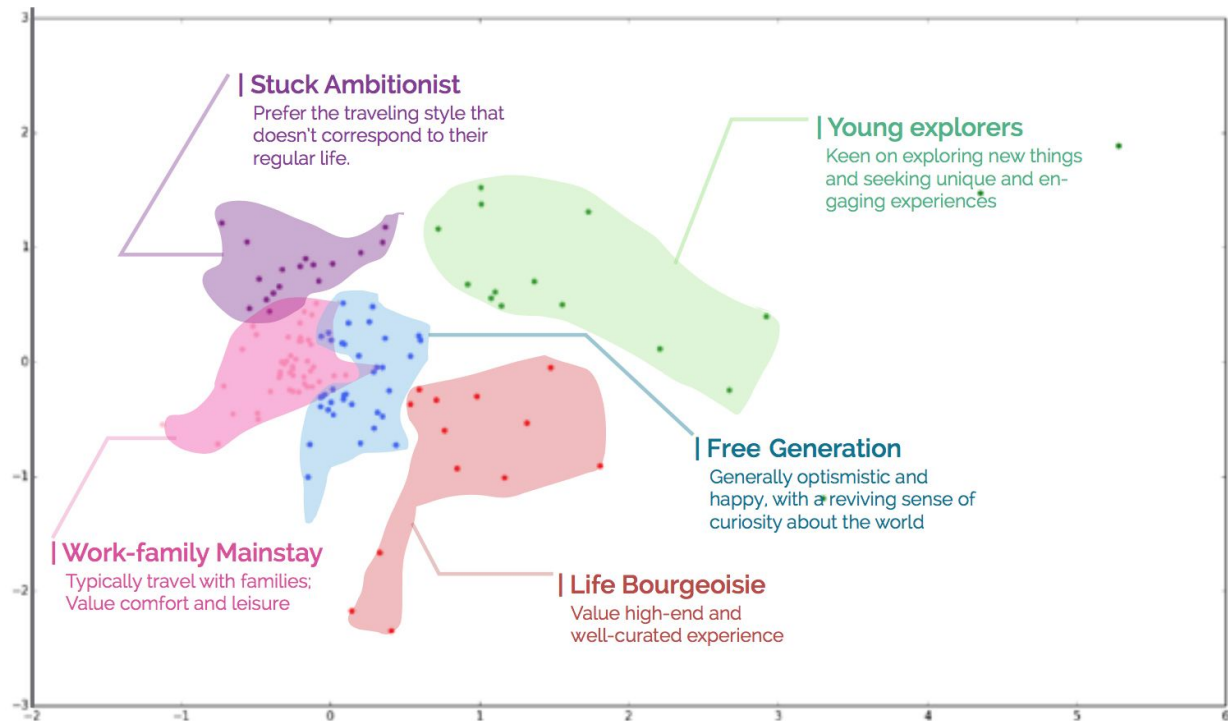
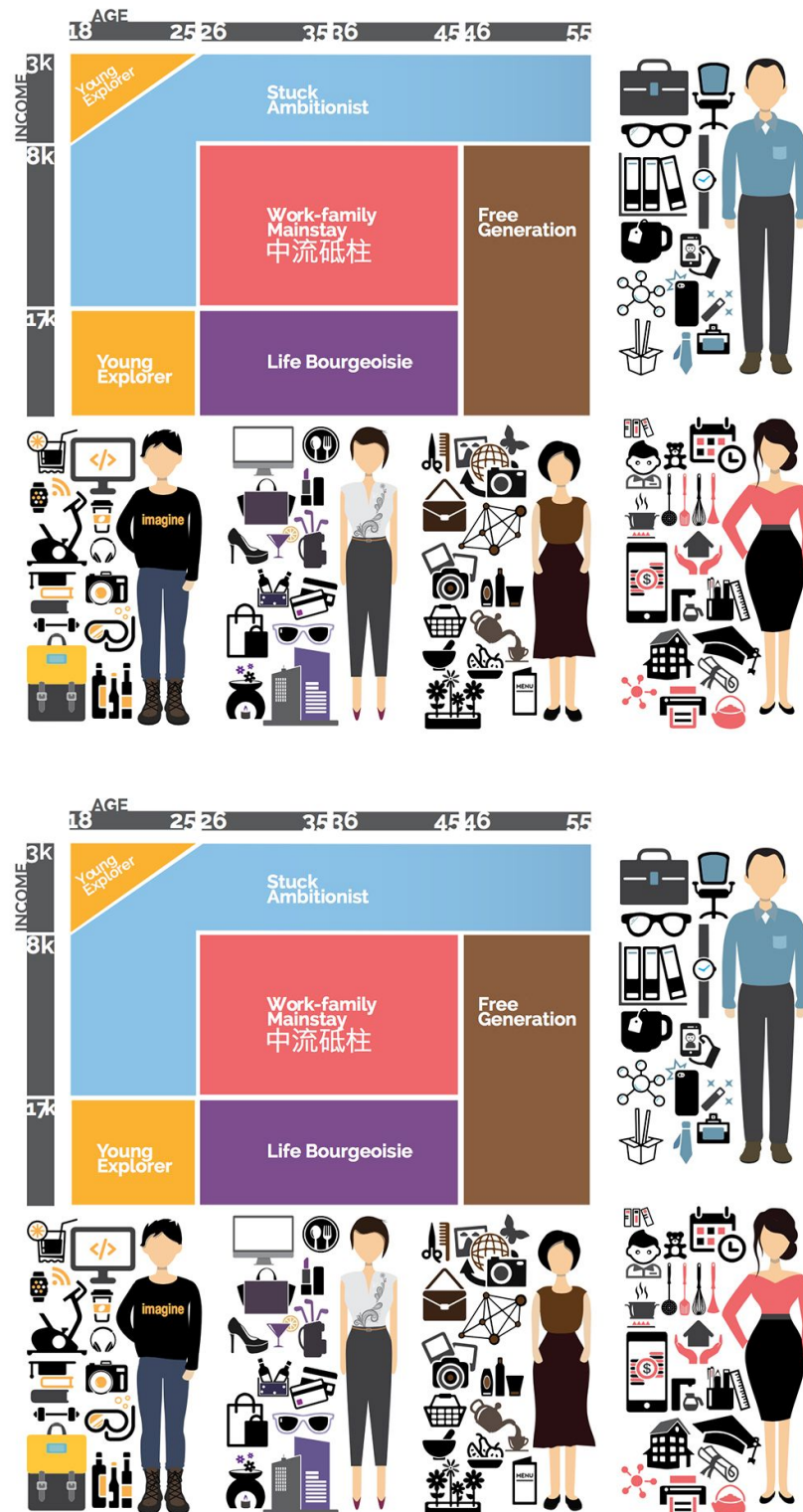Figure 5: Interpreted social space combining information from all methods.

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:

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