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TOURISM CONFLICT AND LOCAL RESIDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: ZERO-FARE TOURS

Jui-Chang Cheng (*National Taichung University of Science and Technology, Taiwan*)

Yen-Ju Chiang (*National Cheng Kung University, Taiwan*)

Wongladda Weerapaiboon (*Silpakorn University, Thailand*)

Hsiu-Yu Teng (*National Taichung University of Science and Technology, Taiwan*)

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the number of group tourists from mainland China has substantially increased because of the country's rapid economic development. According to United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), more than 100 million people from mainland China will travel overseas in 2020. Because of the large market of Chinese tourists, zero-fare tours and one package tourist service (Tse & Tse, 2015; Xu & McGehee, 2017) have resulted in problems in neighboring countries that require urgent solutions through the policy development of local tourism industries. Zero-fare tours are the inferior quality products of group package tours in which fares are improperly allocated between outbound tour operators and inbound tour operators (Chen, Mak, & Guo, 2011). That is, inbound tour operators charge travel agencies in mainland China zero- or low-fares for special group tours. Thus, effective tourism development policies are required to solve the gradually serious problems caused by zero- or low-fare shopping tours in Taiwan and to reduce their impact on the tourism industry and tourism development. However, to date, only few qualitative studies have explored this topic.

Taiwanese residents' views about zero-fare tours for Chinese tourists include three dimensions, namely cognitive, affective, and behavioral (Barki & Hartwick, 2004). Conflict and negative emotions have occurred among both Taiwanese residents and Chinese tourists. If tourism conflict continues to affect local residents for a long period, the sustainable development of the tourism industry in Taiwan will be negatively influenced (Yen, Tsaor, Wang, & Hsu, 2016). From local residents' perspectives, tourism conflict indicates dislike of, negative emotions toward, and disturbance caused by foreign tourists (Yen et al., 2016). Tourism conflict refers to bidirectional influence and interactive relationship between the two. Because of lifestyle and moral differences between Chinese tourists and Taiwanese residents, large numbers of Chinese tourists may affect the lives of local residents and influence their use of transportation and recreational resources. These phenomena can influence whether local residents support tourism development. However, studies of zero-fare tours have mostly been conducted from the perspectives of tourists or tour guides (Tse & Tse, 2015; Xu & McGehee, 2017), but not from the perspectives of local residents. Therefore, in the present study, we explored the impact of tourism conflict due to zero-fare tours on local residents' support of tourism development by applying the conflict theory.

Numerous studies have used social exchange theory to explain tourism development (Andereck, Valentine, Knopf, & Vogt, 2005; Ap, 1992). Social exchange theory describes individual people's roles and their interactions with others in a group. Specifically, the goal of an organization is achieved through the roles of the organization members, and the members' roles are determined by their interpersonal relationships with other members, which are typically based on reciprocity (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). In the context of tourism, the support of local residents of tourist destinations for tourism development is influenced by their overall evaluation of the actual and perceived benefits/costs (Andereck et al., 2005).

Perceived benefits refer to local residents' perception of positive outcomes due to tourism development (Gursoy, Jurowski, & Uysal, 2002). Perceived costs refer to local residents' perception of negative outcomes due to tourism development (Jurowski & Gursoy, 2004). When local residents have dissimilar understandings and goals toward tourism development (including differences in personal interests and their overall perceptions of costs and benefits), their support of tourism development may be influenced by others. Therefore, the process of tourism development involves social exchange relationships for local residents (McGehee & Andereck, 2004). Each local resident has personal demands and expectations for tourism development, and the balance between their perceived benefits/costs should be achieved. According to the aforementioned studies, from the perspective of local residents, tourism conflict, perceived benefits and costs, and support of tourism development are related.

In summary, although some studies have explored zero-fare tours, most such studies have employed qualitative research and focused on the perspectives of tourists or tour guides. However, the influence of tourism conflict on local residents' perceptions of tourism development has still lacked investigation through causal studies. Therefore, by employing social exchange theory, we explored the influence of tourism conflict caused by zero-fare tours on local residents' perceived benefits/costs and their support of tourism development. We hope that the results can contribute new knowledge and serve as a reference for facilitating the long-term development of tourist destinations and the formulation of tourism development policies by government.

METHOD

The target population for this study was local residents in Taiwan; the sampling locations were tourist attractions, crowded stations, community parks, and local administrative centers. We conducted an on-site questionnaire survey among local residents in Taiwan and adopted a purposive sampling method. The questionnaires were retrieved after the respondents had completed them. In total, 350 questionnaires were distributed and 319 questionnaires were returned. Among the 319 questionnaires, 22 were invalid and 297 were valid. Therefore, the valid response rate was 85%.

FINDINGS

Among the 297 participants who returned valid questionnaires, 107 were men (36.4%) and 187 were women (63.6%). Most participants were married (53.4%), and the most common educational level was bachelor's degree (39.5%). The most common monthly income range of the participants was NT\$20,001- 30,000 (38.4%). Structural equation modeling was performed using the maximum likelihood estimation method to investigate the relationships among tourism conflict, perceived benefits, perceived costs and support of tourism development. The goodness of fit indices ($\chi^2 = 1856.72$, $df = 590$, $\chi^2/df = 3.15$, $p < 0.001$, $GFI = 0.92$, $AGFI = 0.90$, $CFI = 0.95$, $RMSEA = 0.08$) supported the appropriateness of the structural model. The coefficients were significant for the paths from tourism conflict to perceived costs ($\beta = 0.79$, $t = 8.38$, $p < 0.01$), and from perceived benefits to support of tourism development ($\beta = 0.43$, $t = 3.62$, $p < 0.01$). The empirical results of this study indicated that tourism conflict was positively related to perceived costs, and perceived benefits was positively related to support of tourism development. However, the coefficient for the paths from tourism conflict to perceived benefits and from perceived costs to support of tourism development was insignificant.

CONCLUSION

Most studies of zero-fare tours have employed qualitative research (Tse & Tse, 2015; Xu & McGehee, 2017), and few empirical studies have been conducted into the causal relationships between variables. In addition, most studies have explored zero-fare tours from the perspectives of tourists or tour guides but not from the perspectives of local residents. In this study, we adopted the social exchange theory to explore the influence of tourism conflict caused by zero-fare tours on local residents' perceived benefits/costs and their support of tourism development. The results indicated that tourism conflict positively influenced local residents' perceived costs, and perceived benefits positively influenced their level of support of tourism development. The results of this study accorded with social exchange theory. For local residents, the process of tourism development involves social exchange relationships.

The level of support of local residents in tourist destinations for tourism development was influenced by their perceived benefits. Furthermore, this study revealed that the influence of tourism conflict on perceived costs was higher than that on perceived benefits. Thus, to facilitate sustainable development of the tourism industry, tourism-related departments should pay attention to the tourism conflicts caused by tourism development, enhance local residents' perceived benefits, and reduce their perceived costs. This study explored the phenomenon of zero-fare tours in only one country; however, this phenomenon also occurs in Southeast Asian and other East Asian countries. We suggest that samples should be collected from multiple countries to examine the level of influence of zero-fare tours in various countries. The findings of such studies can serve as references for the long-term development of tourist destinations and the formulation of the governmental tourism development policies.

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