

Tourist Psychology and Sociology: A Case Study of Hoi An, Vietnam

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Abstract

Hoi An, Vietnam is one of the rising UNESCO World Heritage sites which is getting more popular with the rise of an interest in Asian cities as well as more receptive and positive attitudes of Vietnamese government. Although Hoi An proves to be attractive for tourists due to its ancient center, beaches, village life as well as the mountains and other heritage sites nearby, academic works on Hoi An's touristic transformation and potential future possibilities are rare. This article aims to fill this gap by analyzing Hoi An as a dynamic touristic site from the psychological and sociological points of view. Among the themes to be explored through such a conceptualization, tourist motivation, personality differences, tourist perceptions, tourist attitudes, the influence of reference groups and word of mouth over Hoi An tourists' behaviors, family tourism and social group-based tourism for Hoi An, cultural, subcultural and cross-cultural differences among Hoi An tourists and print, social media and in situ advertising about Hoi An would be highly prominent and practical. This case study concludes with a set of recommendations and future directions for Hoi An's tourism authorities and touristic enterprises.

Keywords: Hoi An, Vietnam, cultural heritage, and heritage tourism.

Introduction

Hoi An, a UNESCO world heritage site (since 1999) is one of Vietnam's tourism hotspots. Located in Central Vietnam, it is 20-25 km. to Danang which is the 3rd largest city of the country. The urban core of Hoi An consists of ancient wooden buildings that are constructed for residence, trade, congregation and religious purposes. The well-preserved ancient town attracts numerous tourists every year with multiple high seasons due to its mild climate. The town used to be a busy port, but due to the river silt, its significance eclipsed centuries ago. The riverside hosts a number of souvenir shops, cafes, restaurants and museums which are the main attractions of the urban core which is a no-traffic zone in particular time periods with cycling allowed. The town also offers more than an ancient town feeling, with its two beaches (Cua Dai where the luxury resorts are located and An Bang where hotel development is limited), village activities (cycling, fishing, farming etc. at Cam Thanh village area), its mountain (Marble Mountain which is full of temples, caves and scenic views of the beaches and nearby towns), its crafts villages (such as Thanh Ha pottery village which recently inaugurated a pottery museum), nearby heritage sites (such as My Son which was the ancient capital of Cham empire which was a Hindu kingdom much in resemblance with Khmer empire that built Angkor Wat), Cham island which is visited for its reefs although recently they are under threat from excessive tourism activity, Danang which hosts a Cham Museum and Vietnam's only Buddhist museum as well as beaches, mountains, an Asian theme park and panoramic bridges on Han River, and Hue which is another nearby city attracting tourists for cultural heritage as the historical imperial capital.

Historically speaking, Hoi An was considered to be a major port during Cham period and later it consisted of a port, a Chinese quarter and a Japanese quarter (Tunprawat, 2009). The Chinese quarter is what at present mostly constitutes the ancient urban core. The 17th century-built bridge pagoda connecting the Chinese quarter to Japanese quarter is another heritage from those

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heydays, and it is considered to be the symbol of modern Hoi An. It is a structure which simultaneously functions as a bridge and pagoda. It might be considered unique in that sense. The bridge pagoda image appears on Vietnamese banknotes.

Hoi An was the busiest port of Southeast Asia in 16th-18th centuries according to historians (Lockard, 2010). By 18th century however, its significance eclipsed due to Thu Bon River's siltation, as stated above and the maritime trade move to other nearby ports, especially Danang.² Currently, Hoi An images are some of the most common pictures in Vietnam tourism brochures (Cooper & Le, 2009). The urban core attracted not only tourists but also Vietnamese entrepreneurs from other cities. Some of the souvenir shops are run by non-Hoianese, while some of the souvenirs are supplied from elsewhere (Trinh, Ryan & Cave, 2014), which is hardly surprising considering Hoi An's openness to other cultures and trade and its historical significance as a meeting place for international maritime traders and world cultures.

In this paper, a number of consumer behavior conceptualizations such as tourists' perceptions and attitudes about Hoi An, tourists' personality differences with regard to Hoi An, the influence of reference groups and word of mouth with regard to travel decisions relevant for Hoi An and the relevance of family tourism and social group-based tourism for Hoi An as well as the relevance of cultural, subcultural and cross-cultural differences in this context, and finally advertising and in-print representations of Hoi An are explored by taking Hoi An as a case study deemed worthy of academic research. Although Hoi An appears to one of the emerging destinations for cultural tourists, tourism research on Hoi An is just a few, that is why this paper was supported by other sources of information as seen in the list of references. Case study analysis is the methodology of the research considering the lack of established academic literature on Hoi An. The aim of this research, in that sense is drawing researchers' attention to Hoi An for future research and supporting political decision makers of Hoi An with analyses and suggestions.

Hoi An Tourists' Perceptions

As to tourists' perceptions issues, the first point to consider could be tourists' comparisons. Competing cities and countries could be analyzed. Usually tourists compare expected value and the overall cost of a touristic visit to a particular city. Tourists' budgeting and the match or mismatch between perceived price and perceived value would be considered. In addition, overall price vs. piecemeal price could be a useful distinction. Ditto for travel costs vs. ground costs (ie costs incurred at destination). Another distinction that would be applicable is the cognitive anchors and reference prices (comparison with prices at hometown and other potential destinations).

Hoi An tourists usually visit the town for escape, relaxation motive and cultural interests. Its recognition as a UNESCO world heritage has multiplied the number of visitors in a short time which also led to increase in hospitality capacity and related services. In terms of service quality, intrinsic vs. extrinsic cues (ie features (not) attributed to the inherent qualities of Hoi An or service providers) and Hoi An's image vs. service provider's image and type image (e.g., resort, hostel, 3-star hotel, spa, restaurant etc.) could be considered. In that sense, Hoi An buzzwords to summarize the experience (e.g. memorable, relaxing, pleasing, pleasant, refreshing, satisfactory etc.) may be elaborated to tap tourists' perception. In fact, tourists' perception is strongly associated with the emotions evoked by the destination (Hosany & Prayag, 2013).

In terms of service providers, cost leaders vs. differentiators in Hoi An (e.g. cheap sidewalk restaurants and coffee shops, budget homestays, affordable shuttles etc. vs. luxury establishments, and others in the middle of the continuum) could be worth investigating. The

² It might be a surprise to see that Hoi An's maritime trade paved the way for the formation of an ancient urban core, while that was not the case for Danang which was a port of the modern times.

notion of price-sensitive consumers would be applicable in that sense. The high number of homestays which offer cheaper housing options as well as an insider experience to Vietnamese daily life, family and culture needs to be noted here.

Unlike some other heritage sites, Hoi An is predominantly a holiday destination. Although conferences, courses and team building activities do take place in Hoi An, they are the exception and not the norm.³ This is an untapped potential for Hoi An residents to consider. Likewise, Hoi An's Phan Chu Trinh University (the only university of the town) can be more active and offer international degree programs to attract international students which may also boost and diversify Hoi An's tourism targeting. Although Hoi An presents excellent venues for conferences and teambuilding activities including a conference ship (a riverside ship-shaped building on the outskirts of the city) potentially interested parties are rarely aware of the facilities that Hoi An would offer. Tourists rarely visit Hoi An for business purposes and this might change with a comprehensive city-image-building campaign.

One of the opportunities matching weaknesses relies on the fact that there are no branded products with Hoi An name. For example, Hoi An ice creams brands could be successful like New Zealand ice creams or Trang Tien ice creams (Hanoi, Vietnam) with the added benefit of promoting the city for touristic purposes. The same idea could be explored for Hoi An tailors which are famous and maybe Hoi An sprays as well. More products could be added. As an example of successful place branding in Vietnam, Dalat wine, strawberry, pea etc. could be mentioned. Somewhat similar to this, although not formally branded is Phan Rang grapes. Convergently, featured films could be shot at Hoi An as a way for potential visitors to get to know about Hoi An.

Hoi An Tourists' Attitudes

The notion of tourists' attitudes involves feeling positive vs. negative about Hoi An and about particular activities such as cooking and handicrafts (lantern making, wood making etc.) classes, swimming, cycling, diving etc. During-service and post-service attribution processes for negative and positive experiences with Hoi An could be relevant here. They can be generic (due to the city as a whole) vs. specific (due to the hotel, e.g. a noisy hotel due to construction). The specific attitude may be reflected in the following way: "I may visit Hoi An again, but I won't stay in this hotel again or in this part of the city."

A research study may be conducted to gather a list of vacation hotspot attributes that are important for the potential tourists (e.g. ease of travel, friendliness of residents, residents' positive attitudes towards tourists, nice weather and climate, attractions, activities, cleanliness, satisfactory accommodation options etc). Likewise, personal and non-personal impediments to traveling to Hoi An can be investigated. We can also focus on the difference between loyal tourists (visiting Hoi An multiple times) and distinctively loyal tourists (Visiting only Hoi An in Vietnam or Central Vietnam).

Hoi An Tourists' Personality Differences

Hoi An has a lot to offer for both introverted and extraverted tourists. For introverted tourists, more rustic and pastoral village life options as well as relatively quiet beaches and resorts are among the options. Tourists who are not willing to be part of urban noise would be satisfied in Hoi An. For extraverted tourists, Hoi An has a busy center, although peak times need to be considered. The busiest time of the day in the ancient town is by the afternoon until 21:00 or 22:00 as the shops, cafes and restaurants are mostly closed by then. Let us note that the shop owners are usually residents of their shop houses which correspond to a very typical Southeast

³ A notable exception was the convention to declare Hoi An protocols in 2000 which is the worldwide set of principles for cultural heritage management and conservation (cf. Taylor, 2004). Another exception was the Hoi An International Symposium on the Conservation of Cultural Heritage Sites and International Cooperation (2013) (ICOMOS, 2016).

Asian construction style which combines home and shop functions. By 21:00-22:00 the crowds move to the other side of the river where the enterprises provide services until late and a night market attracts a high number of tourists every night.

Variety and novelty seeking for first-timers and stability and loyalty for returning visitors would be the most relevant personality variables to analyze. Furthermore, the notion of symbolically extended self is applicable in this context. Hoi An as a relaxing tourism destination helps the visitors to feel better. It has the potential to mend fragile egos beleaguered by urban/metropolitan hecticcity. Finally, from personality theory point of view, city personification would be an option for Hoi An to consider, as it might be instrumental in reaching greater audiences that might pay a visit to Hoi An.

The Influence of Reference Groups and Word of Mouth over Hoi An Tourists' Behaviors

Reference groups such as peer groups (Currie, Wesley & Sutherland, 2008) as well as friends, relatives and other travelers (i.e. the contributors to the relevant forums, social media channels and other websites that we don't personally know) (Murphy, Mascardo & Benckendorff, 2007) are effectively shaping tourists' decision making in terms of destination, travel, hotel, activities choices and related preferences. Relevant research provides evidence for the not surprising link between travel reviews on social media and online booking rates (Ye et al., 2011).

For the notion of reference groups and word of mouth, the influence of Tripadvisor website comments and use of Tripadvisor as the proof of high quality at a number of Hoi An restaurants could be mentioned. As stated earlier, Hoi An's recognition as a UNESCO world heritage site has proven to be particularly influential over the number of visitors. A preliminary search of "Hoi An" on the most relevant top social media sites such as Youtube and Tripadvisor provides full evidence for the influence of electronic word of mouth for Hoi An visits.

Family Tourism and Social Group-based Tourism for Hoi An

Age group and gender differences in tourist behavior would be the most relevant for the case study. Nuclear family vs. extended family is a reasonable distinction to consider. Ditto for family life cycle which roughly matches bachelors, honeymooners, newlyweds, parents, married with small children, large family and post-parenthood (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2015). The so-called 'nontraditional families' (e.g. childless couples, divorced single parents, nesters, lately married couples etc.) need to be considered as well. Furthermore, the differences in family values need to be kept in mind. While some cultures value family ties more than individual, it is the other way around for some other cultures. A pair of notions from urban planning and environmental psychology literature could be applicable as well. They are: child-friendly city and elderly-friendly city conceptualizations which are how Hoi An is perceived by many of the tourists.

Cultural, Subcultural and Cross-cultural Differences among Hoi An Tourists

Distinctions such as local vs. international tourists and Asian vs. non-Asian tourists are quite relevant. Lifestyle differences should be noted as well. The key question is: What to do on vacation on home country, and related to the former, what can be done in home country, but not in Hoi An and vice versa? E.g. There is no Western type fast food culture in Hoi An, though the notion of traditional fast food culture is applicable. Sidewalk restaurants as well as brick-and-mortar ones are serving traditional food very fast. There are no McDonalds, Burger King nor KFC. But a regional fast food chicken restaurant (5 Star) just opened. It mostly serves local teenagers but tourists' interest is limited. There is no shopping mall in Hoi An nor supermarket. But Western food is accessible. Thus the cultural differences are not only at abstract levels, but also at daily material levels. The notion of Asia's emerging middle class would be applicable as well for the analysis of Asian and local tourists. Another point to consider would be linguistic barriers between local residents and Anglophone as well as non-Anglophone visitors. The notion of touristic ethnocentrism (looking for an experience similar vs. different to/from what

s/he could experience at hometown or home country) would be obviously worth discussing within this context.

Print, Social Media and In Situ Advertising about Hoi An

Hoi An ads on Hoi An-Danang road which is the main entry to Hoi An (20-25 km.) and at Danang Airport which is the international gateway to Hoi An) usually feature Hoi An tailors, but obviously more could be offered as tailors are not the metonymy that covers the pleasant experiences Hoi An would offer. In this context, comparative advertising that aims to convince the viewers that Hoi An is better than other holiday destinations may harm Hoi An's positive image and even backfire. Thus it is not recommended.

Different segments listed above can be targeted through advertisements. Visual materials matching satisfaction of different age groups, genders, countries, family life cycle, group size and touristic activities might be particularly appropriate.

Hoi An on Western Newspapers

In addition to consumer behavior considerations, we can also review the portrayal of Hoi An in Western newspapers. Britain's leading newspaper the Sun views Hoi An as a romantic destination and a food paradise. Affordability is also mentioned (Bennion-Pedley, 2016). No-traffic zone is especially preferred as well as Hoi An's tailors. Cycling around rice fields, agricultural activities and cooking classes were other attractions mentioned. The Guardian lists a beach house from Hoi An among "*top 100 holiday beach houses*" (Dunston, 2014). Another article on 'The Guardian' names Hoi An as the "*Venice of Asia*" (Kotting, 2005). However, the article also criticizes hassling by the peddlers. Considering the fact that more than a decade passed after this article, we can state that hassling problem has mostly been resolved in Hoi An, if not necessarily in other parts of Vietnam.

A reader of the Guardian presents Hoi An as a site of cultural holiday where one can be "*transported back to ancient time*" with its handicrafts and tailors (the Guardian, 2011). A few years back, the Guardian shared an excerpt from Lonely Planet Guides about "*the world's best street food*" (the Guardian, 2012). Hoi An's well known sandwich maker Banh My Phuong was among the listed. My Son was listed among "*five best hidden wonders*" (the Guardian, 2006). New York Times has an early piece about the consequences of tourism over Hoi An (Mydans, 1996). It is a significant article due to its timing. It is more about the future rather than the current situation. Hoi An was said to be lucky to survive the war undamaged. That was only partially the case for My Son, as it was bombed by American forces during the war. There were only 14 hotels in Hoi An in 1996, now in hundreds, not including homestay lodgings. La (2014) offers a portrait of the well-known French photographer Réhahn Croquevielle who lives and runs a restaurant and a guesthouse in Hoi An. In fact, he was conducive to promoting Hoi An through his Vietnamese portrait photographs. In another piece on Los Angeles Times, Danang is realistically presented as a surf city (Ives, 2011). Toronto Star, Canada's top newspaper in terms of circulation views Hoi An as a site where "*culture meets couture*" (Barnard, 2013). Another Toronto Star piece calls Hoi An a "*foodie mecca*", mentions cooking classes and tailors, and recommends "*shrimp-filled 'white rose' dumpling*" (Toronto Star, 2013), while earlier pieces are on Hoi An tailors, lanterns, boat rides and five star hotels opening in nearby areas of Hoi An such as the coast from Danang to Hoi An (Cawley, 2009; Pigg, 2007). Hoi An's 'reincarnation' from a deserted port town to a touristic hotspot is mentioned. We see similar themes offered on Australian newspapers (e.g. Clayfield, 2016; Kurosawa, 2015). However we have a higher number of pieces about Hoi An on Australian newspapers which would be explained by its relative proximity to Vietnam compared to UK, US and Canada.

Overall, these portrayals show that Hoi An has a strongly positive image in Western media which will highly support the recommendations listed in the next section. However, more direct

links with journalists and especially travel writers would be highly beneficial. Considering the popularity of Hoi An food, food and travel-themed TV stations may be invited for promotion.

Recommendations and Future Directions

Hoi An scores high on tourist retention as can be seen in Tripadvisor reviews on Hoi An. Tourists are willing to return. This is a positive point. Hoi An residents are successful in forming emotional bonds with the tourists, rather than transactional bonds which corresponds to one-time only, business-only attitude. Post-service experience, i.e. feelings and thoughts after return is highly positive.

Tourism always requires ingroups and outgroups. Tourist is a displaced person. His/her travels move him/her to locations that are not only different, but also populated with different people. The difference of these people can be at a city level (ie domestic travel) or at a country level (ie international travel). In other words, the tourist is not only exposed to a new land, but also new people. There are social psychological barriers to favor outgroups. It is cognitively less demanding to favor our ingroups, ie people who are similar to us. Thus a city that would like to draw attention of world tourists would be careful to build a social image of its residents which will broadcast the message that “yes we are different, yet we have qualities that you would find favorable.” So far, Hoi An is successful in doing this.

Nearly 2 million visitors every year form a shifting but continuous minority of foreigners which leads to provision of many of the services that is the default in the high income countries. The population density of the foreigners in the urban core is quite high to claim that Hoi An has returned to the shining days of its history but of course with lots of changes and a greater audience from diverse backgrounds rather than Chinese and Japanese only. Although Hoi An residents reaped the benefits of tourism with a rise in income, job opportunities and better life standards, it is not true that traditions were preserved as they were, which is quite natural if one keeps in mind that culture and traditions are never frozen, they are dynamic and open to constant change. In that sense, we can call Hoi An as a ‘living museum’; the heritage and the traditions are alive in new ways which appears as another positive point for Hoi An’s touristic attractions. Tourism always brings change and change is not the antithesis of traditions but a companion to them. Thus the liveliness of Hoi An rather than the traditions would be a more appropriate spring board for Hoi An’s promotion activities for touristic purposes.⁴

Place attachment (i.e. sense of belonging to a particular location) is a significant variable for heritage conservation and tourism (Hoang, Brown & Kim, 2015). That is why events not only targeting the visitors but the residents would be useful to forge a stronger local identity for the residents which will also boost tourism outcomes. The local governments’ activities to revive the traditional culture such as performances and lantern-only nights every month are laudable in that sense and attractive for visitors as well as residents. More could be added to the list in that direction. In addition to reviving the traditions, it is necessary to revive the cosmopolitan pride of ancient Hoi An. Annually organized Vietnam-Japan Cultural Exchange Festival is a success in that sense.

Nearby attractions such as the Vegetable Village, a genuine authentic village where tourists can engage in agriculture and Silk Village, a traditional theme park featuring all stages of silk production process may be highlighted, and similar experiences may be capitalized on for promotion efforts. Related to this point, the new city development (Hoi An New City) at the entrance of the town (near An Bang Beach) need to be further discussed and analyzed in terms of its likely effects on Hoi An’s touristic image.

Postcard images of Hoi An could be expanded to cover more than the Japanese pagoda bridge including the beach, Marble Mountain, Hoi An-Danang resort belt, the islands, the village life

⁴ As a side note, the tourists find local market experience particularly fascinating, although the bad smell from the adjacent wet market is much complained, while that it is typical of any Vietnamese local market is noted.

etc., as it would be better if they would match the variety of touristic experiences Hoi An offers. The recent opening of the city museum and its terrace coffee shop are good news as the town needs a larger museum like the new one and a terrace to view the city. Since construction limits to vertical development of the urban core to protect the ancient fabric of the town are applicable, a terrace cafe such as the new one would fill a gap pointed out by some of the visitors.

Recently operational new bridge (Cau Cua Dai) which connects the town's beaches with the southern neighboring city which has an untapped potential with its kilometers of sand beaches needs to be analyzed carefully for future development. This new connection allows Hoi An to develop southward in addition to other directions and provides easier access for local tourists from Southern Vietnamese cities. The choice would be among Cua Dai style development (luxury resort developments that are not publicly accessible) and An Bang style development (full public access with a limited number of one- or two-floor buildings and keeping the green cover intact). The completion of the construction of Cam Kim Bridge should also be analyzed beforehand for its likely impact on tourism and economy as a result of ease of transportation.

Another future direction for Hoi An can be redevelopment as a medical tourism site, as it is a well-known destination for health-conscious tourists which are willing to spend their days for mental wellness and stress reduction. Some of the top international hospitals may be drawn to Hoi An's outer areas for health facility development. This will not only complement the wellness services that Hoi An provides, but it may also raise the quality of life for both local and international residents by allowing on-site access to high quality medical services. Currently, both groups need to visit hospitals in Danang for serious health problems. This direction may also increase the number of international people who are willing to retire in Hoi An.

Historically, it should be kept in mind that the shining port city lost its prominence due to a piecemeal natural intervention (silt formation making maritime trade impossible as stated earlier); and as contemporary natural interventions, the current erosion problem at the beach area and flooding problem at the urban core should be taken seriously. Thus, Hoi An Local Government's plans to transform Hoi An to an eco City by 2030 is valuable,⁵ but it might be too late.

As a final note, it can be stated that the future development of Hoi An needs more research on the notion of experiential economy and ecologically responsible tourism with regard to the town, as Hoi An residents can reap the benefits of not only ancient urban positioning, but also a green destination designation.

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⁵ For more details on Hoi An Eco City, see United Nations Industrial Development Organization, 2012.

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