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Inland School of Business and Social Sciences

BRAGE

THE TRAVEL BEHAVIOUR OF MAINLAND CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN NORWAY

Original research paper

ABSTRACT

Mainland Chinese International Students (MCIS) were chosen for this study due to the growing and increasing market of both MCIS and Chinese tourists in Norway. A qualitative methodology approach was employed and semi-structured interviews were conducted. Contradictions with previous findings, the choice to travel alone or in small groups is due to more freedom and reducing hassle of conflicting ideas, travelling by plane is due to convenience and price as well as choosing cheap and budget accommodation such as Airbnb because of price but also because the respondents value other additional services. It can be argued that travel behaviour and choices are depended on the study destination, its infrastructure and facilities rather than the respondents' status as international students.

Keywords: International students, Chinese students, tourist behaviour, Norway, tourism marketing

Introduction

The existing studies on consumer behaviour in tourism are largely fragmented with many under-researched segments. One of these segments is international students (Cohen, Prayag, & Moital, 2014) . While many existing studies do focus on international students of Asian nations as they represent the largest group of international students, a majority of such studies as well as consumer behaviour in general are largely quantitative in nature (Cohen et al., 2014). Hence, many studies do not provide significant insights on the reasons for why certain travel behaviour exists and why some choices are made. Furthermore, current studies also focus largely on international students in study countries such as the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US) and Australia. Nevertheless, as travel behaviour and choices vary depending on the students' nationality, ethnicity and cultural background as well as the study country (Chadee & Cutler, 1996), the result of existing studies cannot be directly applied to understand Mainland Chinese International Students (MCIS)' travel behaviour in other countries such as Norway. Although Norway does not attract as many international students as other English-speaking countries, Norway's free education system certainly attracts numerous international students. As reported, the number of international students in Norway has tripled in the recent years (Wiers-Jenssen, 2013).

Based on this discussion, the purpose of this study is to investigate the travel behaviour of Chinese international students in Norway by exploring their travel related choices. The key goal of this qualitative study is to understand why MCIS make certain travel choices, not merely what they have chosen. Subsequently, the findings can provides some implications for Norwegian tourism operators to accommodate and adapt to MCIS. More importantly, the

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findings may also serve as a gateway to further understand the mainstream market of Chinese tourists (Hughes, Wang, & Shu, 2015), which is an increasing market in Norway.

Literature review

International students

The market of international students is a relatively new phenomenon in comparison to the mainstream tourist markets (Weaver, 2004). Evidently, international students who undertake studies overseas would embark on tourism related activities during their time of study. Nevertheless, their contribution and significance to the tourism industry has traditionally been overlooked, as they do not fall under the category of tourist (Chen, Dwyer & Firth, 2015; Shu & Scott, 2014). As a result, tourism organisations and operators have not devoted substantial resources when comes to marketing to target such market. Additionally, few studies have focused on international students as a significant market as it has been relatively small in comparison to other mainstream tourist markets (Gardiner, King, & Wilkins, 2013; Shanka & Taylor, 2002; Weaver & Oppermann, 2000).

Due to their increasing contribution to the tourism industry, there has been a growing number of studies on international students in the recent years (Glover, 2011). For instance, direct contribution to the study country's tourism industry occurs when international students undertake holiday during and on completion of their study (Gardiner et al., 2013; Weaver, 2004). On the contrary to mainstream tourists, international students remain in the study country for a significant period of time. The longer they remain in the study country, the more time and opportunities they have to undertake travelling in the country. Michael, Armstrong, and King (2004) further argue that international students who were attracted to their study

countries as both a study and tourism destination would be more eager to undertake travel activities. Moreover, they can develop lasting bonds with the tourism destinations, operators and providers (Field, 1999; Son, 2003), which encourage them to return to the study country after graduation. This contributes further to the local tourism economy (Gardiner et al., 2013; Taylor, Shanka, & Pope, 2004). Additionally, family and friends would also visit international students in their study countries, leading to indirect economic contributions. Taylor et al. (2004) also argue that international students would likely provide positive word-of-mouth recommendations of the study country to other potential international students. While such body of research is emerging (Brown, 2009; Gardiner et al., 2013; Glover, 2011; Kakyom Kim, Jogaratnam, & Noh, 2006; Varasteh, Marzuki, & Rasoolimanesh, 2015; Xu, Morgan, & Song, 2009), the market is still relatively under-researched to date.

MCIS' travel behaviour and choices

Lou (2014) explains that an overseas degree is regarded as highly valuable in China as such degrees lead to higher salary and status for graduates. Hence, more students from China increasingly seek education overseas. Although the number of MCIS in Norway is relatively low in comparison to other study countries of other western democracies, MCIS are one of the highest numbers of international students in Norway. Nevertheless, while existing studies of such segment do provide knowledge and understanding of their travel behaviour and choices, it cannot be assumed that their preferences are the same across various study countries. Their motivation for choosing Norway as a country of study may be different from other countries such as the UK, the US and Australia as the study countries are varied in terms of attractions and facilities.

Existing studies also indicate that Asian international students including Chinese are more likely to travel in groups (of friends or relatives) than their European, Australian, and North American counterparts (Huang & Tian, 2013; Shanka, Ali-Knight, & Pope, 2002). This is mainly because they are often unfamiliar with the new environment (Gmelch, 1997). Unfamiliar environment generally prevent MCIS to travel or undertake certain leisure activities in the study country (Li & Stololska, 2006). Kim et al. (2006) further claim that unmarried and young international students would travel in large groups and older married international students would travel in small groups. In addition, Xu et al. (2009) state that the travel behaviour of MCIS can also be explained by their previous experiences in travelling in addition to cultural and demographic factors.

In regards to accommodation choices, existing literatures reveal more contradictory findings as some studies believe that such segment prefers youth hostels due to budget constrains whereas other studies indicate that hotel and motels were preferred (Huang & Tian, 2013; Shi, Nakatani, Sajiki, Sawauchi, & Yamamoto, 2010; Xu et al., 2009). Huang and Tian (2013) also argue that mode of transport will depend on the destination as the in UK, low-cost airlines are cheaper than trains. MCIS therefore prefer to travel by air rather than by car and train in other destinations such as Australia. While these recent studies certainly provide valuable knowledge into MCIS and their travel behaviour, they are largely quantitative in nature and based on findings from the UK, the US and Australia. Hence, the reasons for choosing certain travel choices are not explored in-depth. Additionally as discussed, existing findings cannot be directly applied to the Norwegian context.

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Methodology

Based on the nature of this study and the research aim, a qualitative research methodology was employed and primary data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. Qualitative methodology approach allows extensive data to be collected in order to further explore of the relevant topics (Veal, 1992). An interview schedules was developed for this study based on the themes and topics in the literature and it served as the main the research instrument. Kumar (1996) explains that qualitative study, which uses interviews as the main research instrument allows the researchers to ask a set of pre-determined questions in a face-to-face interaction.

Method and sampling

The sample size was determined by the information collected as new data was collected and analysed until no new data can be found (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Punch, 1998). The participants of this study were MCIS enrolled in two higher education institutions located in two regional areas in Norway. Several channels were used in order to allocate relevant respondents such as Facebook group pages and student associations. Due to the lack of responses through emails and social media, many respondents were recruited face-to-face at higher education institutions. A snowball approach was further employed to ensure that an adequate sample was attained. Although, such an approach is obviously biased, a sample may be obtained in such a way if there are difficulties in identifying the population (Henderson & Bialeschki, 2002). Participation in the research was strictly voluntarily and the respondents could terminate the interview at any given time. The researchers also guaranteed the anonymity of the respondents and only the researchers had access to the collected data. In total, 15 participants and interviews were obtained in this

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study. Each interview lasted about 45 minutes to 1 hour and they were conducted as face-to-face interviews at various campuses. A digital recorder was used to record the interviews in order to facilitate the transcribing process. Table 1 provides a profile of the respondents.

Table 1 – Profile of respondents

No.	Study	Age	Gender	Duration of Stay	Level of study	Financial Support	Working
1	Erasmus	22	F	1 semester - 5 months	Postgrad	Self-funded	No
2	Erasmus	25	F	4 months	Undergrad	Scholarship	No
3	Petroleum Engineering	25	F	2 years	Postgrad	Self-funded	Part time job (Chinese restaurant)
4	Petroleum Engineering	34	M	2 years	Postgrad	Self-funded	Summer job (Chinese restaurant)
5	NHS	27	F	8 months	Postgrad	Self-funded	Part time job
6	NHS	23	F	2 year	Postgrad	Self-funded	No
7	Erasmus	25	F	1 semester	Postgrad	Self-funded	No
8	Petroleum Technology	28	F	2 years	Postgrad	Scholarship	No
9	Media	28	M	1 year	Postgrad	Self-funded	Part time job (Chinese restaurant)
10	Computer Science	27	M	2 years	Postgrad	Scholarship	in a small company (computers)
11	Business management	25	F	2 years	Postgrad	Self-funded	Planning to work
12	Business management	28	F	1 year	Postgrad	Self-funded	No
13	Literature	20	F	6 months	Undergrad	Self-funded	No
14	Media	25	F	6 months	Postgrad	Self-funded	No
15	Engineering	23	F	6 months	Undergrad	Self-funded	No

Data analysis was conducted based on a thematic analysis of transcribed interviews. Thematic analysis is a form of constant comparison used to analyse documents, records, transcribed conversations, letters or any documents in a textual form. The approach to thematic analysis involved grouping and transforming the large amount data to manageable coded themes or categories by identifying similar patterns of the themes and issues (Neuendorf, 2002). The researchers focused on coding and organising data into categories based on key theme and issues as well as developing new establishments and conceptual elements (Jennings, 2001).

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Result and Discussion

Travelling independently or in small groups

Previous studies on international students and Chinese tourists in general indicate that they prefer to travel in groups of five rather than individual due to unfamiliar environment (Gmelch, 1997). On the contrary, Ryan and Xie (2003) stress that MCIS prefer independent travel rather than in groups. Of those who did travel in groups, they generally preferred very small groups (Ryan & Xie, 2003). The findings of this study also support such claim, as several respondents explain that they either travel alone and independently or with small group of no more than three people in total. The qualitative nature of this study allowed the respondents to explain the reason for such:

> In Norway, I prefer to travel alone or in very small group because I find it easy to travel like that. But if I travel alone I don't trust myself to go out at night [2].

> I don't prefer a lot of people [travelling together] because there are many ideas and I don't want conflicts while travelling. And I only want to travel with those that I know. Basically my friends [11].

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Hence, the findings disagree with Hughes et al. (2015) and Li and Stoldolska (2006). Most of these respondents have not really had any bad experiences in travelling in large groups, it is just the general idea that it is harder to travel in larger groups of people due to conflicting ideas and preferences. Further explained by respondents:

> I would travel in a small groups, I think the larger group is more of a hassle if being honest. Like if you have more than four or five people, it's just more of a hassle than fun. But if you are just there to split costs, like you are just travelling together to split costs, that's fine. Once you start trying to do things together, it just gets hard because everyone wants to do different things. We're all on different time schedules and stuff like that. You know if you really want to have fun [5].

> If I have to travel in a group, the smaller group the better. I try to avoid a group itinerary, I don't like that particularly. I haven't really experienced anything negative about it, I just prefer a smaller group. I guess just being able to be individual. And not having the problem with a group itinerary and do the thing that the group is doing. Just want to do my own thing basically [7].

Some respondents however want travel companions due to the unfamiliar environment and safety issues as claimed by Gmelch (1997). Besides unfamiliar environment and safety issues, another reason is that they wanted to share the experience with others as indicated:

I have travelled by myself, I spent some time travelling alone about a week, that was nice and interesting but I like to be able to share my travel experiences with at least another person. Because after when the travelling is done, you've got someone to talk to about the experience [12].

While Norway is not an English speaking country, English is widely spoken. Hence, the respondents felt comfortable to travel in Norway, as there are less language barriers particularly in metropolitan cities such as Bergen and Oslo. The different environments and circumstances in previous studies may have contributed to the reason why contractions are found. For instance, Gmelch (1997) based his study in Austria where language barriers could be an issue, while Kim and Jogaratnam (2003) studied international students of Asian nationalities and not exclusively on MCIS. The former studies are also of much older date. The more experienced MCIS become in travelling in general, the more they become confident to conduct independent travelling (Huang & Tian, 2013). It can therefore be assumed that the younger generation of Chinese population such as MCIS are more experienced in travelling, compared to older generations. This may be attributed by China's "open door policy" where its citizens are encouraged to absorb international knowledge and experiences through travelling and studies in the last decades (Li, Zhang, Mao & Deng, 2011). Thus, many of the respondents of this study can also be considered to have more experiences as travellers and thus prefer to travel alone or in small groups.

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Exploring information source preferences

Reflecting on information source preferences, word-of-month recommendations from family and friends were mostly used. This is consistent with the previous findings by Gmelch (1997), Shanka et al. (2002) and Lou (2014). By further exploring the reason for such preference, reliability and trustworthiness were raised by all respondents. Furthermore, many respondents used the Internet specifically to find cheap airfares and to place booking online such as Airbnb, whereas the remaining respondents used the Internet to search for general information. Numerous respondents believe that using a combination of both recommendations from family and friends as well as the Internet was most reliable. Although both the Internet and word-of-mouth were extensively used by the respondents as information sources to gain knowledge about destinations, word-of-mouth remains overall the most reliable single information source due to its trustworthiness as discussed. There are also other mixed opinions about the Internet as a reliable information source. The reasons as explained:

> Most reliable information source I have to say word-of-mouth, I mean the Internet is good too because you can find a lot of information online and it's nice to look at pictures. I can find many things on the Internet and I can also use the Internet to see how the place look like before I go, but not all websites are good I think. I don't trust the websites alone for sure! They can have fake things, like not being honest if you know what I mean [3].

Some findings are thus similar to Hughes et al. (2015) arguing that MCIS tend to rely on the Internet and word-of mouth advertising whereas Xu et al. (2009) suggest that they are less reliant on commercial advertisement and more on recommendations from friends and family.

Many respondents do not trust printed advertisements such as brochures. As explained by one respondent:

> You know there are so many brochures, materials and stuff but word-of-mouth is always the best. They have real-time experience. I don't really trust those printed materials because they are made by business people and they have to make money. If you are lucky you'll get a good one. They have to make a sale. Sometimes the attractions and destinations are not like picture in brochures [6].

Furthermore, the preferred Internet platforms are clearly Chinese based platforms such as WeChat, Weibo and Baidu. The reasons for using Chinese based platforms are explained:

> It's very convenient and easy to use [Chinese-based platforms]. We are used to these platforms. I think we can trust the information there. We understand everything [1].

Although the respondents did not state language barrier as a problem when travelling in Norway, it is clear that they still prefer to search for information in Chinese and place more trust on Chinese-based platforms. Nevertheless, the reliance on Chinese-based platforms means that the information that respondents find on these platforms about Norway, as a holiday destination is arguably very limited. For instance, the respondents are only familiar with the most popular destinations and cities such as Bergen, Trondheim, Stavanger and Oslo. This may have contributed to the lack of information and knowledge about certain novel

destinations. On another note, while many literatures state that experiencing some new and novel are important factors that encourage MCIS to travel more in the study country, good weather and climate are also crucial factors (Ryan & Mo, 2001; Schlegelmilch & Ollenburg, 2013). Thus, the choice of not visiting some destinations such as Tromsø and Northern Norway was not necessarily caused by difficulties in finding information, but rather the weather and climate conditions as explained:

> I'm not too familiar with Tromsø. I think Tromsø it's too cold for me. And I don't have the right gear to go there. I don't want to spend money on buying equipment or clothes just for that [5].

> I have heard that Northern Norway is very cold. There's less sun in winter. I don't think I can stand the weather there. I would have loved to go there, I heard it's beautiful and unique. But maybe not. What do I need to go there? [9].

None of respondents planned their holiday based on brochures obtained from visitor centres and travel agents. As international students are unfamiliar with the foreign environment, they would use travel agents for bookings and other support (Field, 1999). This is, nevertheless, not consistent with the current findings. The result indicates that the respondents prefer to make their own arrangements when it comes to holiday planning by booking their own airfares activities rather than going for deal with travel agents. Such findings are consistent with Chadee and Cutler (1996) and Michael et al. (2004). The findings also disagree with the more recent studies of Hughes et al. (2015) indicating that holiday packages with travel

agents are well sought by MCIS in Australia. The reason for the contradictory findings is uncertain. It can be assumed that Michael et al. (2004), who also based their studies in Australia, focused international students in general and not specifically on MCIS. In addition, the infrastructure in Norway is quite different from Australia. Firstly, Norway as a country is much smaller with less population. Secondly, even mainstream travellers in Norway usually do not use travel agents because online booking websites are well-designed for self-service (Fonbæk, 2014). A lack of travel agents and similar services as well as the ease of use of online booking sites may have led to MCIS undertaking independent arrangements online and individual travelling in Norway.

Insights on transportation choices

Transportation choices are also one of the common travel behaviour explored in previous studies. Several respondents prefer planes when travelling in Norway, followed by train and very few indicated bus. While many of the respondents state that they have driving licences and that they are allowed to drive in Norway, they do not prefer travelling by car at all. Such findings also contradict with other studies on international students in general (Chadee & Cutler, 1996; Field, 1999; Frost & Shanka, 1999; Hsu & Sung, 1997; Shi et al., 2010; Sung & Hsu, 1996). While their choices were established, the reasons for such choices are further explored:

> I have licence, but I'm not confident enough to drive here. But I think it's
>
> too expensive too. I don't my own car and renting a car is quite expensive

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isn't it? The petrol price is not cheap either. I think the plane is much

cheaper! [3].

I have travelled by bus and train, but of course plane is much better. It's

much cheaper than train and bus! I can get really cheap plane tickets

sometimes. Much cheaper than train and bus. I save a lot of time too. So

why not [8].

Furthermore, in a recent studies by Huang and Tian (2013), they discovered that travelling by

trains is most frequently used by MCIS followed by bus and car. Evidently, mode of transport

will depend on the study country, as in countries such as the UK and Norway, plane tickets

are cheaper than trains (Huang & Tian, 2013). This is for instance not the case in Australia

(Michael et al., 2004). There seems to be many contradictions in the previous studies and the

different environment of the study country may have contributed to these inconsistencies.

Shanka et al. (2002) further explain that international students in Australia are likely to use

cars because there is a general lack of efficient public transport system. There is for example a

lack of regional trains in both the US and Australia in comparison to the UK (Huang & Tian,

2013). Hence, the findings suggest that the environment in the destination, the price, the

facilities and the availability of the various transportation modes influence the preferred mode

of transport, as there are little common or similar travel choices shared by MCIS in general.

Such findings are logical as international students including MCIS do generally have budget

constraints and therefore want value for money by choosing the mode of transport with the

best value (Huang & Tian, 2013; Hughes et al., 2015). It can thus be determined that reasons

for transportation choices are dependent on the price, convenience and facilities of the study country rather than their status as international students.

Exploring accommodation choices

A common perception about MCIS and students in general is that they prefer cheap accommodations due to budget constraints (Ryan & Xie, 2003). While the respondents in this study also highlight the importance of the accommodation being cheap, it can be argued that price is not the sole factor for choosing a budget accommodation. This is because they also value other additional services, which are included in some Airbnb accommodations for instance:

> I'm fine with hostels or Airbnb. I prefer Airbnb the most. It's easy and I can see the pictures. Sometimes the host offers meals like breakfast included in the prices. They also bring us around the city. I think Airbnb is great. It's cheap and reliable [7].

> If it's a new place and I don't know anyone there, it's really good that the host can show us around. So Airbnb is better in that sense. Better than hostels [12].

The findings thus disagree with previous studies as they argue that hotels are most preferred mode of accommodation among MCIS followed by staying with friends (Chadee & Cutler, 1996; Field, 1999; Shi et al., 2010; Sung & Hsu, 1996). Staying with friends is not an

alternative for the respondents as they do not have any relatives or close friends which they can stay with when travelling in Norway. This is also the similar case for MCIS in the UK (Huang & Tian, 2013). In regards to hotels as accommodation, Chadee and Cutler (1996) identify that international students do not necessary rely solely on backpackers and hostels as they would also use hotels. Such behaviour is similar to the mainstream Chinese tourist market where the demand for higher-quality standard is increasing in the recent years (Huang & Tian, 2013). The findings of this study however contradict with these studies, as hotels are not the preferred mode of accommodation at all, mainly due to cost issues and that they want more value for the money. Hence, the demand for higher-quality standard was not applicable.

> Hotels are too expensive for me. I have limited funds so if I wanna travel
>
> and see more, hotels are not good options [15].

All respondents prefer bed and breakfast type of accommodations including homestays, hostels and Airbnb, and where no respondents stating that they were unfamiliar with this type of accommodation.

> I have used bed and breakfast accommodation many times. It's easy to find
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> information about them and no hassle at all. I have had good experiences
>
> with them and I would choose them again. I get more from it than choosing
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> hotels [11].

Moreover, none of respondents listed camping as a preferred mode of accommodation. This provides some contradictions as cheap accommodation, budget constraints and saving money

are some of the main reasons for choosing homestays, Airbnb and hostels. However, it may not be as surprising as low price is not the sole reason for choosing an accommodation as discussed. The finding also concurs with Field (1999) who claim that international students are very unlikely to stay in camping grounds. While Field (1999) did not explore the reasons, the respondents indicate some of the reasons,

> Camping? I'm not sure. What do I need when I go camping? I might get cold. I'm not sure what equipment I need when going for camping. I don't want to spend money on buying equipment [9].

> I have never stayed in camping grounds before. It is safe? What do I need? I think it's better to choose places that I'm familiar with. Airbnb works very well for me. I can pretty much find Airbnb anywhere I want to go in Norway [12].

Hence, some of the reasons may be that they simply are not aware of the existence of such type of accommodation, similar to not being familiar with bed and breakfast type of accommodation in the UK (Huang & Tian, 2013). It seems therefore that although cheap choices are important for MCIS and international students in general, the issue of familiarity and safety as well as other additional services such as included meals and free guided tours provided by the hosts are equally important when comes to choosing type of accommodations when travelling in Norway.

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Conclusion and implications

Based on the findings, many contradictions to previous literature have been established. Several respondents prefer to either travel alone or in very small groups in order to reduce hassle and conflicting ideas. Some respondents require travel companions in order to have someone to share the travelling experiences with rather than unfamiliarity and safety issues. Hence, more tourism products should be offered to cater to small group or single travellers among MCIS. Another interesting finding is that the respondents generally prefer to search information about destinations in Norway using Chinese based websites and platforms. As it can be assumed that information about Norway is limited on these websites and platforms, Norwegian tourism industry or operators may consider collaborating with these platforms by providing information about destinations in Chinese. Tourism operators may also encourage word-of-mouth recommendations as this in combination with the Internet were considered as the most reliable and trusted sources by many respondents.

There are further contractions in regards to transportation choices as planes are chosen rather than private cars and trains due to convenience and price. However, price is not the sole determinant in regards to accommodation as although budget accommodation such as hostels, homestays and Airbnb are preferred, the respondents also value additional hospitality services provided by the hosts. It can further be argued that travel behaviour and choices such as mode of transport and accommodation are mostly depended on the study destination, its infrastructure, facilities and environment rather than the respondents' status as international students or their demographic background. There is nevertheless a need for further studies into other international students to confirm such. Additional studies should also investigate certain travel barriers, which inhibit MICS to undertake certain tourism activities. While

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MCIS in Norway are still considered as a relatively small tourist market, the findings identified in this study can be used to further understand the increasing mainstream Chinese tourist market in Norway.

In regards to general limitations, the study did not differentiate between Chinese students who study in Norway on exchange programs for one or two semesters and students who complete their entire degrees in Norway due to limited number of respondents. As the length of stay for these students vary, their travel behaviour and choices may also vary. Furthermore, other limitations exist as the sample is relatively small and homogenous. Generalisation of the findings is also limited to a study country such as Norway and may not be as applicable to other study countries with different infrastructure, facility and environment. Nevertheless, findings may be applicable to study countries of similar nature as Norway.

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