Tourists' social identities in a similar-others destination: The case of Chinese tourists in North Korea

Abstract

Purpose

This study aims to contribute to social identity theory in tourism by exploring the reflections of Chinese tourists visiting North Korea and how they negotiate their intergroup identity in this similar-others destination, thereby furthering our understanding of complex identity construction through travelling.

Design/methodology/approach

Data were collected via online platforms and in-depth interviews. A qualitative approach, i.e., thematic analysis, was used to analyse the two sets of data.

Findings

Results showed that when encountering North Koreans perceived as similar others amid the social, economic, and political environments in which they were embedded, Chinese tourists often categorized themselves as *ordinary tourists*, *preferentially treated tourists*, and *vicarious tourists* based on intergroup similarities to North Koreans. They also performed intergroup comparison to boost their self-esteem at group and collective levels, and developed corresponding strategies to generate distinct emotional group commitments.

Originality/value

We offer a theoretical framework analysing the features of tourists' social identities while visiting a similar-others destination. In addition, our study underlines the importance of perceived intergroup similarity in the formation and presentation of tourists' social identities, which supplements the related social identity literature.

Practical implications

It is highly recommended that destinations reinforce the unique relationship with their source markets to improve their attractiveness. Furthermore, recognizing the unique values of the similar-others source markets, destinations should strive to create experiences that evoke collective-level affection for tourists.

Keywords: social identity; social identity theory (SIT); Chinese tourists; North Korea; similar others; intergroup similarity; intergroup comparison

1. Introduction

The increasing cultural homogeneity associated with globalization has spurred people to re-establish unique identities (e.g., Cifaldi & Malizia, 2022). At the heart of this motivation is a call to renegotiate boundaries between the self/selves and others (i.e., "us"/ "we" and "them"/ "they") and thus cultivate unique social identities (e.g., Cifaldi & Malizia, 2022; Ellemers & Haslam, 2012; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Hornsey, 2008). Social identity is considered "that part of the individuals' [*sic*] self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance of that membership" (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). Social identity has been acknowledged not only as a driving force of human behaviours (Tajfel, 1982), but also to be associated with individuals' mental health and well-being, such as self-verification (e.g., Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999), self-esteem and self-efficacy (e.g., Brown, 2000; Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel, 1982), and emotions (Hogg, 2006).

In the tourism literature, there is a growing interest to consider the tourist experience as a process of constructing, deconstructing, and reshaping identities (e.g., Kalender & Kasnakoglu, 2021; Palmer, 2005). Tourists from different cultural backgrounds and social structures naturally perceive and interact with other social groups during travel (i.e., residents, tourism practitioners, and other tourists). This process is crucial to the consolidation and development of tourists' social identities (e.g., Chen, Zhao, & Huang, 2020; Coghlan, 2015; Kalender & Kasnakoglu, 2021; Palmer, 2005; Zhang, Pearce, & Chen, 2019), which in turn influences their travel behaviours (e.g., Zhang, Tucker, Morrison, & Wu, 2017; Lewis, Prayag, & Pour, 2021) and mental health and well-being (e.g., Zhao, Chen, & Hu, 2022).

Despite the importance role social identities play in influence intergroup interactions and behaviors, understanding social identity construction in tourism is still developing (Chien & Ritchie, 2018). Previous studies have primarily focused on how different types of tourism experience (e.g., backpacking) can facilitate a sense of group identity for tourists (E.g., Chen, Zhao & Huang, 2020) and how tourism experience influence or influenced by tourists' unique group identities (E.g., Lewis, Prayag & Pour, 2021). Recent research on social identity have started to argue that identity construction is interactive and contingency and call for further research into this area (Zhang, Wang & Rickly, 2021). To response to this growing call and acknowledge that it is continuous interaction between 'us' and 'others' that formulate our identity (Hogg, 2006), the study focuses on understanding tourists' social identities while travelling in the *similar others* destination. While previous identities research assume significant identity differences between hosts and guests in international travel context (E.g., Zhang, Pearce, Chen, 2019), the idea of *similar others* breaks this assumption and argue that in many cases tourists and hosts' identities could be similar. While hosts are still others to the tourists, some may share similar identities especially for those travel close to nearby nations.

Social psychology frames "similar others" as people who have similar characteristics to focal individuals. Such overlap can apply to a range of socially-constructed categories like university or even interest group. As Festinger (1954) argued, individual-level social comparisons involve becoming closer to and associating with people who are similar to oneself (i.e., similar others). Between-group social comparisons pertain to idiosyncrasies between one's own and other groups, leading to a distinct group identity (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). With respect to travel and tourism, individuals presumably prefer to compare themselves to similar others in a destination so as to establish a unique (albeit transient and situational) social identity. However, to the best of the authors' knowledge, no research has systematically investigated tourists' social identities—especially the construction process and characteristics—in a destination where people encounter and are greatly influenced by similar others.

In this regard, North Korea (i.e., Democratic People's Republic of Korea) typifies a similar-others destination for Chinese tourists. North Koreans share many features with their Chinese counterparts (Chung & Choi, 2013; Li & Wang, 2020; Moore, 2008), especially in terms of history (e.g., Japanese invasion, a symbiotic historical relationship, and fighting U.S. and UN forces in the Korean War), culture (e.g., Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist heritage), and ideology (i.e., communist/Marxist-Leninist ideology). Due to various historical and geopolitical reasons, the North Korean authority adopts relatively looser regulatory measures on Chinese tourists (e.g., Li & Wang, 2020; Li, Li, & Ryan, 2020) and China has long been North Korea's largest source country, providing more than 80% of North Korea's inbound tourists (e.g., Nanyang Sin-Chew Lianhe Zaobao, 2018). Therefore, Chinese tourists to North Korea constitute an ideal population for studying the establishment and attributes of tourists' social identities when visiting a similar-others destination. To contextualize intergroup identity construction within similar-others destination, this study aims to contribute to social identity theory in tourism by exploring the reflections of Chinese tourists vising North Korea and how they negotiate their intergroup identity in this similar-others destination, thereby furthering our understanding of complex identity construction through travelling.

2. Literature review

2.1. Tourists' social identities

Individuals from various cultural backgrounds and social structures perceive and interact with other groups during travel and tourism. This process is integral to the consolidation and development of tourists' social identities (Palmer, 2005). As stated, many studies on this topic have considered social identity among different tourist groups. Examples include event tourists (e.g., Davis, 2017), independent travelers (e.g., backpackers; see Chen, Zhao, & Huang, 2020), outbound tourists (Zhang, Pearce, & Chen, 2019), and tourists in dark/heritage settings (e.g., Lee, Joo, Lee, & Woosnam, 2020), among others. Yet tourism researchers have primarily contemplated the settings in which these groups are embedded. Consider backpacking as an example: these travelers prefer longer trips, lower budgets, flexible itineraries, participatory activities, and interactions with locals, hence backpackers' wish to be called "travelers" instead of "tourists" (Chen, Zhao, & Huang, 2020). They have also been found to exhibit higher self-esteem and self-efficacy than mass tourists (Chen, Shi, Zhao, & Huang, 2021).

In addition, tourism researchers have pondered the tourist gaze and place identity when tourists hail from a location that is culturally similar to their destination (e.g., Chan, 2006; Lee et al., 2020; McKercher & Decosta, 2007; Mou & Brito, 2021). For instance, Mou and Brito (2021) targeted tourists from mainland China and Macau and discovered that, despite overlap in both groups' place meanings regarding Europe (as the two groups are culturally Chinese), the symbolic Portuguese settings in Macau tourists' home environment profoundly affected their memories and self-identity prior to their trip. This infusion may have shaped their perceived place meaning of Portugal as a destination. Lee et al. (2020) considered South Korean tourists visiting the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and confirmed that the perceived similarity among these tourists influenced their shared beliefs (i.e., symbolic value, touristic value, and preservation value) about this zone, in turn coloring their place attachment (i.e., place dependence, place affection, and place identity). Meanwhile, no tourism research appears to have addressed tourists' identities within a similar-others destination where tourists share (or have shared) social, historical, cultural, political, economic, or psychological experiences with others (i.e., residents and tourism practitioners).

2.2. Social identity theory and its applications in tourist experience research

SIT has become a core theory in social psychology since being proposed by Henri Tajfel in the 1970s (e.g., Ellemers & Haslam, 2012; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Hornsey, 2008). SIT has been applied as a theoretical framework in many empirical studies, providing support for phenomena such as group processes and intergroup relations (e.g., Haslam et al., 2010; Zhang, Pearce, & Chen, 2019). An understanding of the components of SIT and their interrelations is fundamental to comprehending identity formation and contextual variation, including during travel. Scholars generally agree that social identity consists of cognitive, evaluative, and emotional elements (Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999; Tajfel, 1982).

The cognitive component entails one's perceptions of membership and salient/core group characteristics within a social group (Tajfel, 1982). Core attributes classify people, differentiating them into in-groups ("us") and out-groups ("others"). This psychological process is known as social categorization (Tajfel, 1978, 1982); it concerns similarities among group members while emphasizing discrepancies between groups or categories (Tajfel, 1978). Referring to the earlier example of backpackers, these individuals generally label themselves "backpackers" or "travelers" instead of "tourists" to highlight their group features (e.g., Chen et al., 2021).

With respect to ascertaining core group characteristics, the evaluative component of social identity involves assessing intra- and intergroup differences and maintaining positive in-group identities and strengths through social comparison (Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel, 1978, 1982). Members tend to stress distinguishing positive aspects or values to mitigate threats to their in-group identity from out-groups. Doing so satisfies individuals' need for self-esteem (Brown, 2000; Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel, 1982). As Festinger (1954) pointed out, individual-level social comparison serves to connect people who are similar to oneself; between-group social comparison is intended to spotlight disparities between one's group and others. This perspective links social classification with social identification (Tajfel, 1974). Research on social identity in tourism has often covered two groups (i.e., hosts and tourists), their interaction, and its consequences. Zhang, Pearce, and Chen (2019) combined SIT with literature on the concept of "face" (i.e., *lian* and *mian*). They observed that Chinese outbound tourists would, on the basis of self-differentiation, defend themselves against the image of uncivilized tourists through a sense of shame and fear of "losing collective face." Intergroup discrimination can follow when a social group prioritizes its uniqueness (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). Group members' internal consciousness is therefore important to maintaining self-esteem (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992).

The emotional component of social identity builds on the cognitive and evaluative components, referring to one's emotional commitment to a group (Tajfel, 1982). When a person is included in a particular social group, they often hold strong positive emotions towards their in-group and/or negative emotions towards out-groups. These reactions essentially defend and enhance the meaning of a group and its members, resulting in in-group favoritism (Brown, 2000; Tajfel, 1978). This process is otherwise known as social identification (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012; Tajfel, 1978). Group commitment is vital to social identity: it determines one's perceived group membership, emotional input, and behavioral intention (Ellemers et al., 1999; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). Zhang, Wang, and Rickly (2021) noticed that, by choosing meaningful positive identities, Chinese tourists experienced a shift in identity from inferiority to group emotional attachment during the COVID-19 pandemic. This change subsequently affected their social behavior.

In sum, social identity is composed of cognition, evaluation, and emotion and is achieved through social categorization–social comparison–social identification (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012). Tourists' activities influence how they view themselves and relate to groups to which they belong. Therefore, SIT is a suitable framework for investigating how Chinese tourists categorize, evaluate, and identify themselves when visiting a similar-others destination.

2.3. Intergroup identity construction: the role of similarity

Why people construct social identity? The simple answer of this question is to locate oneself within a group with similar people (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Similarity captures the degree to which individuals share certain similar attributes, which provide sense of belonging and potentially security as well. (Brown, 2000). Brocato, Voorhees, and Baker (2012) conceptualized similarity in consumers' service experiences "as the extent to which an individual customer (i.e., the rater) felt that they were similar to and could identify (i.e., the attributes) with other customers (i.e., the object) in the service environment" (p.3). Put simply, similarity reflects the degree to which people perceive sameness and a common identity between others (or related objects) and themselves (and their environment). SIT substantiates this notion (Hwang & Han, 2014). People develop their self-concept by observing overlap with others in a reference group (Hogg, 2006). They typically forge emotional connections with others who share attributes and try to provide mutual assistance (Hogg, 2006). Similarity partly explains why people tend to favor groups whose attributes and physical/social environment mirror their own.

Interpersonal similarity has been explored in relation to tourists' experiences, attitudes, and behaviors (Brocato et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2020). Brocato et al. (2012) developed the Other Customer Perception Scale through successive studies respectively performed at a theme park, sit-down restaurant, and clothing retailer. The scale covers a trio of domains: similarity (e.g., "I could identify with the other patrons in the facility," "I am similar to the other patrons in the facility," "The other patrons come from a similar background to myself"); physical appearance (e.g., "I liked the appearance of the other patrons"); and suitable behavior (e.g., "The behavior[s] of the other customers were appropriate for the setting"). As mentioned, Lee et al. (2020) confirmed the effects of tourists' perceived similarity on their beliefs (i.e., symbolic, touristic, and preservation values) about the Korean DMZ.

Tourism researchers have also examined how commonalities between groups or people's physical/social environment inform tourism development along with individuals' visit intentions and experiences (e.g., Holleran, 2017; McKercher & Decosta, 2007; Rogoś, 2019). For example, Holleran (2017) explored tourism development in Spain and Bulgaria—both post-authoritarian societies within the European Union—and identified its impacts on the European leisure economy. McKercher and Decosta (2007) determined that European and American residents preferred to travel to destinations with strong historical or political ties and tended to avoid visiting locations without such ties. Similarly, Rogoś (2019) noted that the inter-ethnic "brotherhood" and "unity" embodied by the Yugoslav monuments in Kosovo pervaded the collective memory of Yugoslavia and drew tourists—especially those with similar collective memories and identities between visitors and destination hosts.

Social identity theory often prioritizes ingroup similarity in contrast to outgroup differentiation (Hogg, 2006). This idea largely influences its applications in tourism research. However, the dynamic interaction between hosts and guests indicates similarity and differentiation could potentially happen in similar-others destination. To fill this gap and understand how tourists negotiate their intergroup social identity, this study aims to contribute to social identity theory in tourism by exploring the reflections of Chinese tourists vising North Korea.

2.4. Chinese tourists to North Korea

Existing studies on tourism in North Korea have two basic perspectives. From a macro perspective, tourism in North Korea and its connections to international relations and ideology have been widely discussed (e.g., Kim & Prideaux, 2006; Kim, Timothy, & Han, 2007; Lee,

Bendle, Yoon, & Kim, 2012). Focusing on the micro aspects, tourists' behaviours and experience when visiting North Korea have been examined. Specifically, topics that have been discussed regarding visiting North Korea included tourist motivations (e.g., Cho, 2007; Li & Ryan, 2015; Buda & Shim, 2015), perceived destination image (e.g., Li, Wen & Ying, 2018; Li, Li, & Ryan, 2020), satisfaction (e.g., Li & Ryan, 2015; Lee, et al., 2012), hotel experience (Li & Ryan, 2020), shopping experience (Li & Ryan, 2018), lived travel experience (Wassler & Schuckert, 2017), change of attitude (Li & Wang, 2020), and revisit intentions (Li, Wen & Ying, 2018). In addition, tourism researchers have also examined the views of border residents within North Korea and residents of Dandong (China's largest border city neighbouring North Korea) on sanctions on North Korea and tourism development (Li & Zhang, 2021). It is worth noting that most of the above studies on tourists have focused on Chinese tourists, mainly because China has long been North Korea's largest source country (Li & Wang, 2020).

Of particular importance, China has often been compared with North Korea in the international community, as the two nations have similarities in terms of political institutions (Chung & Choi, 2013), historical relations (Moore, 2008; Chung & Choi, 2013), and cultural origins (Li, Li & Ryan, 2020), among others. Specifically, regarding cultural background, the ideologies of both Chinese and North Korean people have been significantly influenced by Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism (Li, Li & Ryan, 2020). Ideologically and politically, as land neighbours with strong geopolitical ties, China and North Korea are both socialist countries that have been more or less sanctioned and devalued by the international community, as well as share multiple historical backgrounds, such as the Korean War (Moore, 2008; Li, Li & Ryan, 2020; Li & Zhang, 2021). Consequently, North Korea represents a similar-others destination for Chinese tourists.

Therefore, compared to Western tourists, Chinese tourists may have different views on and attitudes towards North Korea and may thus construct different social identities during their visits to North Korea. As such, it is important to explore Chinese tourists' social identities in North Korea.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection

3.1.1. Semi-structured interviews

Given this study's aim to evaluate the construction and characteristics of Chinese tourists' social identities regarding North Korea as a similar-others destination, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate (Denzin & Linken, 1994). Semi-structured interviews were conducted via a theoretical sampling method. Specifically, 35 tourists were interviewed using a snowball approach. Same-group tracking and post-tour recruitment were adopted for interviews. This method ensured that the interview protocol was well structured and relevant to the study while enabling the research team to explore the focal topic at length (Denzin & Linken, 1994).

Theoretical sampling was intended to connect Chinese tourists' experiences in North Korea with their social identities and thus guarantee that the results aligned with theory. Data coding and sampling were performed concurrently to obtain adequate heterogeneous samples (Coyne, 1997). First, one author participated in a 4-day tour of North Korea organized by a Chinese travel agency in the Chinese border city of Dandong in April 2019. The author followed the group's set itineraries and interviewed 18 Chinese tourists during the trip. Three interviews were held at the hotel where interviewees were staying in Pyongyang during the tour (interviewees have been anonymized as P01 and so on as listed in Table 1; P01–P03); six

participants were interviewed during the train ride back to Dandong at the end of the trip (P04–P09); and nine were interviewed on the train leaving Dandong and returning to Tianjin, China (place of departure) shortly after the trip (P10–P18). Second, the researchers recruited Chinese residents who had recently travelled to North Korea and conducted 17 interviews (P19–P35). The passage of time can influence people's travel memories and experiences. The researchers accounted for factors such as interview quality and the feasibility of recruiting qualified respondents. Target respondents consisted of Chinese residents who had visited North Korea within the past 2 years (no earlier than 2017, given that interviews were conducted in 2019).

Interview questions were designed based on the three SIT dimensions (i.e., cognition, evaluation, and emotion) and spanned several themes: 1) pre-trip impressions and motivations for visiting North Korea; 2) experiences and feelings while visiting North Korea; 3) attitudes or opinions about North Korea and its people; and 4) self-awareness and conceptualization of Chinese tourists.

Each interview was conducted in Chinese and lasted between 30 and 50 minutes. All were recorded with participants' consent and were transcribed verbatim. More than 140,000 words of interview text were collated. Because the last five interviews did not reveal new concepts or categories, theoretical saturation was determined to have been reached and data collection ceased (Denzin & Linken, 1994). The interview data were consequently comprehensive and valid.

As shown in Table 1, 60% of interviewees were men and 40% were women; the average age was relatively high (49 years). Interviewees over the age of 50 accounted for 48.6% of the sample; 37.1% of interviewees were retired. The oldest interviewee was 70 while the youngest was 19. Half of the participants held a bachelor's degree or above. More than half (18 participants) were members of the Communist Party of China.

Table 1 about here

3.1.2. Online content

Following previous studies (e.g., Mkono & Markwell, 2014), online travel content was collected and analysed independently for three reasons. First, user-generated content is more authentic and credible than traditional online content (i.e., advertiser-generated information for marketing purposes) (Akehurst, 2009). Second, online reviews effectively capture the travel experiences of various tourist groups over different time periods, thereby enhancing sample heterogeneity. This textual content therefore corroborated the findings derived from offline interviews in 2019. Third, in early 2020, North Korea was locked down indefinitely to control the spread of COVID-19. Inbound tourism was halted and rendered field work impossible.

The types, sources, and selection criteria for online content were carefully chosen to ensure authenticity, validity, and reliability. First, the data were labelled as either tourists' written travel content or online travel communities' question-and-answer (Q&A) pages. Second, all data were extracted from well-known travel websites or online communities (e.g., Ctrip, Qyer, Qunar, Tuniu, Mafengwo, and Zhihu) based on visibility, authority, the number of users, and the number of visits to the given platform. The keyword "North Korea" was searched in travel blogs or community Q&A sections; text describing travel experiences in North Korea was selected after review. Guided by theoretical sampling, over 320,000 words from 39 travel pieces were obtained from five websites (Ctrip, Qyer, Qunar, Tuniu, and Mafengwo), published between 2014 and 2020. The reason for the time span is mainly because not until 2014 had North Korea fully opened 8 administrative regions to foreign tourists, except for Jagang-Do (George's Image, 2022). All text excerpts were numbered by source. For example, XC01

denotes the first writing sample from Ctrip; QY01, QNE01, TN01, and MFW01 denote the first writing samples from Qyer, Qunar, Tuniu, and Mafengwo, respectively.

3.2. Data analysis

A qualitative content analysis with inductive approach was used to analyse the two sets of qualitative data independently, as this approach does not require a large sample size but involves coding the collected text by themes together with contextual analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). In-depth analysis and mining of textual content were completed to determine how Chinese tourists perceived themselves and their social identities while visiting North Korea as a similar-others destination.

Data were progressively analysed via open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. To guarantee coding quality and the credibility of qualitative topics, the triangulation of data, methods, and researchers is recommended in qualitative studies (Decrop, 1999). In this case, the two data sources (i.e., interviews and online materials) were complementary. On-site observation and reflection records were maintained during interviews. The research team's lead coder independently read the compiled text several times and coded it line by line in NVivo 11. Then, two Chinese researchers, who had travelled to North Korea for fieldwork, cross-checked the results of the first phase of analysis. Their travel experiences facilitated the process of coding the interview transcript in term of coding fluency and trustworthiness. The content was next elaborated and logical links were developed to be aggregated into higher-level concepts. After jointly reading, discussing, and validating the coding results together, the team reached a consensus on categories and themes. Finally, a fourth researcher, who acted as a neutral qualitative expert, jointed to review the transcript to confirm the reasonableness of the interpretation. Each researcher's different disciplinary background and theoretical sensitivities enabled us in interpreting data from different perspectives, thereby ensuring the quality of our qualitative data analysis (Decrop, 1999). The highest-level core categories and key themes were identified to demonstrate specific aspects of Chinese tourists' social identities when visiting North Korea.

4. Findings

A conceptual framework for analysing the construction and representation of Chinese tourists' social identities in North Korea was devised based on study findings and applicable theories (see Figure 1). Chinese tourists' social identities in the face of similar others (i.e., North Koreans) were multifaceted. Regarding intergroup similarity, Chinese tourists' self-categorization carried the labels of "ordinary tourists," "preferentially treated tourists," or "vicarious tourists." Participants perceived North Koreans as similar others for intergroup comparison along two dimensions: 1) Chinese tourists, tourists from other countries, and North Koreans; and 2) the socialist camp versus the nonsocialist camp. These dimensions spawned dual levels of emotional commitment and behavior, namely group favouritism and metaphorical commitment.

Figure 1 about here

4.1. Intergroup similarity: Representations of "who I am"

Chinese tourists' perceived similarity between themselves and North Koreans generated three forms of cognitive identity (i.e., "who I am"): ordinary tourists, preferentially treated tourists, and vicarious tourists. These identities informed participants' group evaluations and emotional connections.

SIT indicates that both hosts (i.e., North Koreans) and tourists display core group characteristics (Hogg & Williams, 2000). Chinese tourists' perceptions of hosts' characteristics (i.e., North Koreans) were accompanied by a unique sense of familiarity, mainly in terms of their shared history and similar group attributes. This finding echoes research on the overlap between China and North Korea (Chung & Choi, 2013; Li, Li, & Ryan, 2020). As indicated by two sources:

> *North Korea is our comrade and brother, the place where countless Chinese volunteer martyrs shed their blood, and this is the first memory of North Korea in my mind. Many new interpretations and re-examinations of the Sino-DPRK alliance and the Korean War have been put forward. But in any case, it is undeniable that North Korea carries the common memories and emotions of that generation of Chinese people.* (QY01)

> *The same aspect is that I think Chinese culture still has a great influence on Korean culture, and we also see things that Chinese emperors have given to [Koreans] throughout history.* (P34)

Chinese tourists' varying perceptions of the similarities between themselves (and the country of China) and North Koreans (and North Korea) led to contextually distinct social identities in terms of "who I am" as described below.

Ordinary tourists. This group of Chinese tourists had relatively weak perceptions of the commonalities between themselves and North Koreans, leading to a weak group consciousness about being Chinese. Most simply saw themselves as ordinary visitors to North Korea. One participant explained:

> *I am just a tourist on a package tour. Possibly I do not have a strong feeling of being Chinese…especially back then when I was in North Korea, I thought this country was really backward. Yes, I can only say this. China is good, of course. But it did not occur to me that when I saw some scenes, I would think China is so good, or North Korea is not so good. No, I did not have such a feeling.* (P23)

Preferentially treated tourists. Other Chinese tourists thought they had received preferential treatment from North Korea's national authority or tourism practitioners as similar others. This perception stemmed from the belief that "*China has helped North Korea a lot*" (P14). In essence, North Koreans are part of the Chinese people, contributing to these tourists' sense of preferential treatment. A participant remarked:

> *The identity of being Chinese is still a good element [in North Korea], because they all think that China is a good friend to them. When we visited there, the tour guide told us so. Across the world now, it is our Chinese leaders who [have given] North Korean leaders the most gifts. [The tour guide] often mentioned this.* (P24)

Vicarious tourists. Unlike most tourists documented in Wassler and Schuckert (2017), who felt anxiety and fear, the shared socialist history and existing propaganda in China have caused Chinese tourists to consciously and/or unconsciously generate a sense of familiarity with what they did and saw in North Korea. This tourist group perceived fairly strong commonalities between themselves and North Koreans. Participants pointed out that these nations share a similar developmental trajectory. These tourists lived vicariously through China's past and thus experienced "time travel" when encountering North Koreans (e.g., "*We have been here before*," P14). Intuitively, the countries' once similar political systems and social atmospheres could enhance Chinese tourists' understanding of their hosts. XC01 stated:

> *We, the Chinese, are not unfamiliar with all of this, all that we have seen and heard in the past few days. Just like, when we were watching the children's performances at the Children's Palace in Pyongyang, I could still vaguely recall that 30 years ago, I also*

performed to foreign friends in the Children's Palace in China as a young pioneer. We have been through our own 30 years just as they have.

Our study underlined the importance of perceived intergroup similarity (Lee et al., 2020; Mou & Brito, 2021), which supplements discussions on tourists' social identities (Zhang, Pearce, & Chen, 2019; Chen, Zhao, & Huang, 2020; Zhang, Wang & Rickly, 2021). Chinese tourists' travel experiences when encountering North Koreans stimulated perceived similarities between themselves and North Koreans. Tourists' reactions engendered three contextualized social identities. Consistent with SIT, these self-categorizations represented prerequisites for Chinese tourists' intergroup comparison with their hosts (i.e., North Koreans).

4.2. Intergroup comparison: Enhancement of group self-esteem

Social comparison is the cornerstone of social identity formation (Brown, 2000; Hornsey, 2008) and explicates how tourism experiences can alter visitors' identities (Zhang et al., 2017). Visiting North Korea sparked a sense of foreignness among Chinese tourists, which led them to view North Koreans as out-groups. Intergroup similarity made Chinese tourists more likely to discern commonalities and differences among similar others in North Korea. This process expanded group boundaries and led tourists to realize their own group identity (Hornsey, 2008; Sarup, 1996; Tajfel, 1974). In fact, extant literature has sporadically documented intergroup comparisons by Chinese tourists in their gazes (Chen et al., 2021), destination image formation (Li, Li, & Ryan, 2020), and pre-visit attitude (Li & Wang, 2020) regarding North Korea. However, these studies have not fully recognized the impacts of intergroup comparisons on the construction of Chinese tourists' social identities. The coding results demonstrated that Chinese tourists' experiences in North Korea promoted intergroup comparison, which fell into two categories.

Chinese tourists vs. local North Koreans vs. other tourists. The first type of intergroup comparison refers to group-level comparison between Chinese tourists, North Koreans, and tourists from other countries. According to SIT, group members tend to create accurate self-evaluations or enhance/protect group self-esteem through out-group comparison (Suls & Wheeler, 2012). Chinese tourists dialectically learned from North Koreans and absorbed certain strengths to self-reflect after intergroup comparison. These contemplations involved spirituality as well as moral and ethical qualities. MFW01 said:

[North Koreans] have their own system. Things are not easy for everyone. They are happy to make a little contribution to their country! They are happier than we are, more content than we are, and at least they live a true life! (MFW01)

As highlighted by Mlicki and Ellemers (1996), once group members deem an identity important, they also acknowledge its negative characteristics. Chinese tourists recognized their own shortcomings when facing local North Koreans seen as similar others. Examples included "*excessive burden of living*" (P16) and "*uncivilized behaviors*" (XC14) in addition to the following:

[North Korean guides] also know China well and say there is no pressure to buy a house as we do in China. In North Korea, those who are single stay with their families. Those who are married are given houses by the government, and their children will be raised by the government. (P16)

North Korean citizens consciously keep the environment clean when they go out, unlike us who spit and throw cigarette butts everywhere. It is annoying because Chinese tourists are too casual to feel like at home. (XC14)

Many Chinese tourists actively delineated themselves from North Koreans and focused on intergroup distinction. These efforts heightened the status of the group to which they belonged and generated positive self-esteem (Brown, 2000; Chan, 2006; Tajfel, 1982). Intergroup comparison informed participants of gaps between China and North Korea. Chinese tourists also sought to dispel the stereotype that the two countries are similar to emphasize Chinese people's unique group identity and characteristics:

> *The astonishing thing is that North Korea is much poorer than us, at least 30 years behind us.* (P22)

> *Although many people say that North Korea is like China in the 1970s and 1980s, it is quite different now. What remains the same may be some systems or part of the lifestyle. But there are still big differences between our political party system and their current political party, since we are socialist with Chinese characteristics. In the era I live in, I think there is very little common ground.* (P3)

When visiting North Korea, participants invoked their social identity as "Chinese people" to encourage preferential treatment from North Koreans (i.e., authority staff and tourism staff) and then gain a sense of superiority and pride. Ellemers et al. (1999) observed that people can choose a more favourable social identity to gain better self-esteem, as in the case of P6:

> *For example, I feel that North Korea still values us after seeing some places where we can buy things in RMB. And they are also very friendly to us Chinese tourists. In terms of the customs, there is no special strict requirement for us, only asking to take out the mobile phone from the bag and put it in [a] pocket. But there is no inspection, so North Korea still makes some efforts for Chinese tourists.*

Socialist and non-socialist camps. Figure 1 illustrates that the second type of intergroup comparison, also a newly identified aspect in this study, applies to disparities between the socialist and non-socialist camps. Participants' perceived similarities between China and North Korea were largely based on both being socialist countries. The apparent overlap in their political systems has led the two sides to compose a socialist camp. Regarding certain shared situations, Chinese tourists tended to align North Korea with China, creating a counterbalance to the non-socialist camp. XC09 remarked:

> *This kind of organizational discipline can only be found in socialist countries. Look at the Western young tour members! When aren't they loosely and thinly scattered? I guess in North Korea, [Western tourists] have finished all the queening that they have to do in their life spans.*

In brief, Chinese tourists conducted intergroup comparison through two means of comparison and expressed mixed evaluations of North Korea and North Koreans. These tourists focused on the strengths of their own group while defending (or processing) aspects that were unfavourable to in-groups, echoing Yang, French, Lee, and Watabe's (2020) recent finding that symbolically comparing China to other nations can give Chinese a sense of pride.

4.3. Group commitment: Diversified emotional responses

The above discussion shows that Chinese tourists conducted intergroup comparison based on intergroup similarities while visiting North Korea. This process altered their self-esteem at the group and collective levels. Perceptions of diverse aspects of self-cognition and self-evaluation can also lead to changes in group commitment and may have unique manifestations (Tajfel, 1982). The following subsections continue to show how forms of self-categorization and levels of group comparison affected Chinese tourists' intergroup relations and behavioral responses.

Group level. According to SIT, people prefer to project positive rather than negative impressions of themselves (Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel, 1979). Favourable self-evaluation after group division and comparison prompted some Chinese tourists to engage in group favouritism to reinforce this group advantage. Rationalizing negative aspects of the in-group further maintained and enhanced their group identity. P31 referred to some North Korean guides' penchant for bragging:

> *[North Korean guides] also say that Chinese people are stressed and tired, unlike in North Korea, where people are happy. We think it is funny to hear them brag. We have been living in China for so many years, and if we calculate their GDP, we know that North Korea cannot do many things. I am very glad that China did not take the path of North Korea, otherwise we would be finished. Like I guess I would have starved to death, huh?*

Group self-esteem evidently raised the status of both individual tourists and the Chinese group to which they belong. Chinese tourists displayed a growing emotional attachment to their social identity as well: they leveraged in-group favouritism to maintain positive self-esteem, which minimized or eliminated any shame or mental imbalance they experienced when traveling in North Korea (Brown, 2000).

Collective level. In the international community, China and North Korea are influenced by intergroup similarities and are known as "socialist brothers." These countries may temporarily set aside their internal differences to unite (Collins, 2012). Intergroup differentiation and bonding encouraged some Chinese tourists to view North Koreans more as in-group members than as out-groups to create emotional connections. P26 stated:

> *Like tourism, we are willing to send money to North Korea. Japan is certainly good, but we do not go there! We will not go there even for free, not to mention spending money. We have a grudge against it, so we do not go there. We are both socialist countries. The feelings do exist that we want to see if it is really the case in North Korea. After all, seeing is believing.*

Chinese tourists' emotional belonging, collective cohesion, and self-categorization as "Chinese people" transcended to the overarching category of "socialism." This outcome echoes the "brotherhood" between China and North Korea (e.g., Young, 2021) exemplified by Chinese tourists' emotional commitment and behavior.

However, even with a collective level of identification, Chinese tourists endured an identity crisis (Sarup, 1996) when faced with a destination considered on par with China (i.e., North Korea). Their emotional commitment did not frame North Koreans as true in-group members in spite of acknowledging a shared socialist relationship between the two countries. Instead, tourists balanced the identity threat that North Koreans posed through cautionary tactics such as 'metaphorical commitment'. Specifically, the interpretation of history provided by North Korean tour guides was inconsistent with the knowledge of history possessed by Chinese tourists (Li &Wang, 2020). Such divergence led Chinese tourists to believe that the North Korean authority was trying to downplay China's assistance in order to project an image of a self-sufficient and powerful nation, rather than narrating the real history (Li &Wang, 2020; Wassler & Schuckert, 2017). Influenced by such experiences, the group commitment of Chinese tourists has been strengthened unprecedentedly. Consequently, at the collective level, Chinese tourists adopted such metaphorical tactics as the ostensible pretense of praising the 'friendliness' from North Korea, which is actually not accepted. Some Chinese also speculated that North Koreans may have ulterior motives. An identity crisis was particularly apparent in interviewees such as P35:

The friendship and relationship between China and North Korea are still rather special. Now the Chinese tourists are whom North Korea receives the most, and to be frank, it's us Chinese who are supporting their construction, so they kind of want to please us. But in Panmunjom, it is obvious that the guides have been emphasizing how great North Korea is. Basically [they] do not mention China's contribution to North Korea, which kind of makes us feel upset ... I think North Koreans value the contribution of Chinese tourists' consumption more and are not necessarily really grateful to China.

Chinese tourists were found to have experienced anger and disappointment after the tour, especially when faced with the 'ungrateful' explanations and interpretations provided by North Korean tour guides (Li & Wang, 2020). The authenticity of North Korean propaganda and "performance" were also questioned by Chinese tourists (Li & Wang, 2020; Wassler & Schuckert, 2017). It indicated that Chinese tourists were slightly wary of North Korea and did not regard it as an "insider of brotherhood". Therefore, our finding of Chinese tourists' emotional commitment to their group and collective identities through group favouritism and metaphorical commitment, respectively, has echoed the SIT proposition that groups with similar values display stronger intergroup discrimination than groups with different values and intragroup favouritism can therefore heighten to reaffirm a group's distinctiveness (Tajfel, 1979, 1982; Turner, 1978).

In summary, as depicted in Figure 1, the three aspects of self-categorization and two levels of social comparison led to distinct manifestations of group commitment among Chinese tourists. Such commitment varied from national identity and favouritism at the group level to the reinforcement of a farther-reaching group identity at the collective level.

5. Conclusion and discussion

Guided by SIT, this study has explained how Chinese tourists constructed and represented their social identities in North Korea upon encountering similar others. More importantly, a framework was crafted to analyse the features and levels of tourists' social identities while visiting a similar-others destination. This model covers the cognitive, evaluative, and emotional components of SIT and comprises three constituent elements: intergroup similarity, intergroup comparison, and group commitment (see Figure 1). Regarding the cognitive dimension, Chinese tourists gradually activated perceptions of themselves and their multiple self-categorizations in reference to their perceived intergroup similarity with hosts (i.e., North Koreans). These visitors effectively treated similar others as a mirror. Results suggest that Chinese tourists' identities are both fixed and malleable: visitors maintained the umbrella label of "Chinese tourists in North Korea" but displayed separate self-categorizations under this umbrella, namely ordinary tourists, preferentially treated tourists, and vicarious tourists. Consequently, in the evaluative domain, Chinese tourists engaged in intergroup comparison to maintain a dominant in-group identity when faced with similar others, thus demonstrating positive group self-esteem. The emotional dimension included two levels of group commitment that strengthened the social identity of "being Chinese." Group commitment involves molding self-perceptions and self-attitudes in a similar-others destination. Social identities can then be curated and consolidated accordingly (Hogg et al., 1995).

5.1. Theoretical implications

First, the theoretical framework (Figure 1) developed in this study deepens the understanding of tourists' intergroup social identities in the context of visiting a similar-others destination. The framework demonstrates the process of how tourists negotiate their intergroup social

identity construction through visiting similar-other destinations. This research responds to the call to understanding the interactive and contingency nature of social identity in tourism(Zhang, Wang & Rickly, 2021). In doing so, this study introduces the idea of *similar others* to argue that while previous studies assume significant identity differences between hosts and guests, in many cases tourists and hosts' identities could be similar and therefore influence intergroup identity and behaviour. Here, our work accounted for the social and historical backgrounds of Chinese tourists and North Koreans to holistically evaluate how Chinese visitors feel about similar others and themselves (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002).

This study also focuses on an important but neglected context: tourists visiting a destination thought to have similar others. Despite researchers (e.g., McKercher & Decosta, 2007; Mou & Brito, 2021) intermittently exploring intergroup similarities between hosts and guests and between tourists themselves, the effects of such common ground on tourists' social identities have been overlooked. To advance our understanding of complex intergroup identity construction through travelling, this study investigates Chinese tourists' social identities when encountering North Koreans and building a corresponding theoretical framework.

Second, findings shed light on how tourists develop and maintain social identities while traveling to a destination in which they encounter, and are heavily influenced by, similar others. Scholars have emphasized "shared national memories" (Park, 2010) and "common historical perceptions" (Packer et al., 2019) in the establishment and representation of tourists' social identities. The present study revealed that Chinese tourists are primarily driven by levels of intergroup comparison that shift when visiting a similar-others destination. These tourists' emotional group commitment fluctuates in kind. This pattern supports the assertion under SIT that the relationship between one's individual self and collective self is not antagonistic (Hornsey, 2008).

5.2. Practical implications

The findings of this study offer implications for the marketing and management of such destinations that are deemed as similar-others destinations by their major source markets. Such similar-others destinations may include Hong Kong SAR, Macau SAR, and Taiwan in the eyes of Mainland Chinese tourists, North Korea as perceived by South Korean and Chinese tourists, as well as Russia as deemed by tourists from other former Soviet Union countries. First, destinations should constantly highlight the friendly and unique relationships with their similar-others source markets in their marketing activities. In the case of North Korea attracting Chinese tourists, as mentioned in prior studies (e.g., Chen et al., 2021; Li &Wang, 2020), North Korea's destination image as China's "socialist brother" should be continuously emphasized to further reach the Chinese market and to promote its tourism industry and the overall economy. Second, the tourism industry in similar-others destinations should also strive to enhance the experience of tourists from their corresponding similar-others markets by arousing their positive collective-level affection and nostalgic memories, and avoiding negative emotions. In the context of Chinese travellers visiting North Korea, the local authority is highly recommended to pay particular attention to adjust and improve destination attributes (e.g., accommodation, transports, souvenirs, and tour guiding) that could help arouse Chinese tourists' collective memories of the socialist history shared by two nations, so as to transform "ordinary tourists" into "preferentially treated tourists", and even "vicarious tourists". Of equal importance, the North Korea authority should avoid evoking negative reactions among their Chinese travellers as similar-others (e.g., excessive political glorification of North Korea, neglect of China's contributions to North Korea, and strict controls on Chinese tourists). Third, local tour guides should be properly educated with the historical, cultural, and societal aspects of their source markets, so that tourists can resonate with their hosts in a similar-others destination.

> **Commented [CZ(1):** 这个不是太好吧就是说 generalisation 不太大。 Intruduction 我是这么写的我改了一下你看看
>
> While previous identities research assume significant identity differences between hosts and guests in international travel context (E.g., Zhang, Pearce, Chen, 2019), the idea of *similar others* breaks this assumption and argue that in many cases tourists and hosts' identities could be similar

5.3. Limitations and future research directions

This study is not without limitations that open avenues for inspection. First, given challenges in accessing North Korean locals for research purposes, this study examined this population based on Chinese tourists' experiences. Subsequent work should feature primary data (e.g., as gathered via interviews) from North Korean locals if possible. Second, during data collection, this study captured Chinese visitors' recall of their travel experiences to reveal their identity construction and representation. When conditions permit, scholars should seize more immediate interview opportunities to obtain in-depth information about tourists' experiences. Third, coded thematic analysis was adopted here to conduct an exploratory study. Investigations of other similar contexts, such as South Korean tourists visiting North Korea, Mainland Chinese tourists in Taiwan, Hong Kong SAR, Macau SAR, as well as Macau SAR tourists in Portugal, would empirically verify the conceptual framework presented herein.

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Table 1
Profile of interviewees

| Number	Gender	Age when interviewed	Profession	Membership of the Communist Party of China
P01	Female	63	School staff (retired)	No
P02	Male	66	Veteran	Yes
P03	Male	31	Staff of Hong Kong Airport	No
P04	Female	64	Veteran	Yes
P05	Female	63	Veteran	Yes
P06	Male	70	Businessman (Veteran)	Yes
P07	Male	68	Staff of State Grid Corporation of China (retired)	Yes
P08	Male	65	Peasant	No
P09	Male	64	Peasant	Yes
P10	Male	35	Student	No
P11	Female	66	Civil servant (retired)	Yes
P12	Male	67	Warehouse keeper (retired)	No
P13	Female	62	Retired	No
P14	Female	58	Retired	No
P15	Male	69	Civil servant (retired)	Yes
P16	Male	70	Civil servant (retired)	Yes
P17	Male	19	Student	No
P18	Male	69	Civil servant (retired)	Yes
P19	Male	24	Engineer	No
P20	Female	38	Enterprise manager (resigned)	No
P21	Female	44	University teacher	Yes
P22	Male	30	Sports photographer	Yes
P23	Male	20	Student	No
P24	Male	64	University teacher	No
P25	Female	33	University teacher	No
P26	Female	33	University teacher	Yes
P27	Female	36	University teacher	Yes
P28	Female	41	Teacher	Yes
P29	Male	51	Freelance photographer	No
P30	Female	34	Foreign enterprise staff	No
P31	Male	25	Student	Yes
P32	Male	38	Teacher	Yes
P33	Male	41	Foreign enterprise staff	No
P34	Female	48	Civil servant	Yes
P35	Male	43	N.A.	No
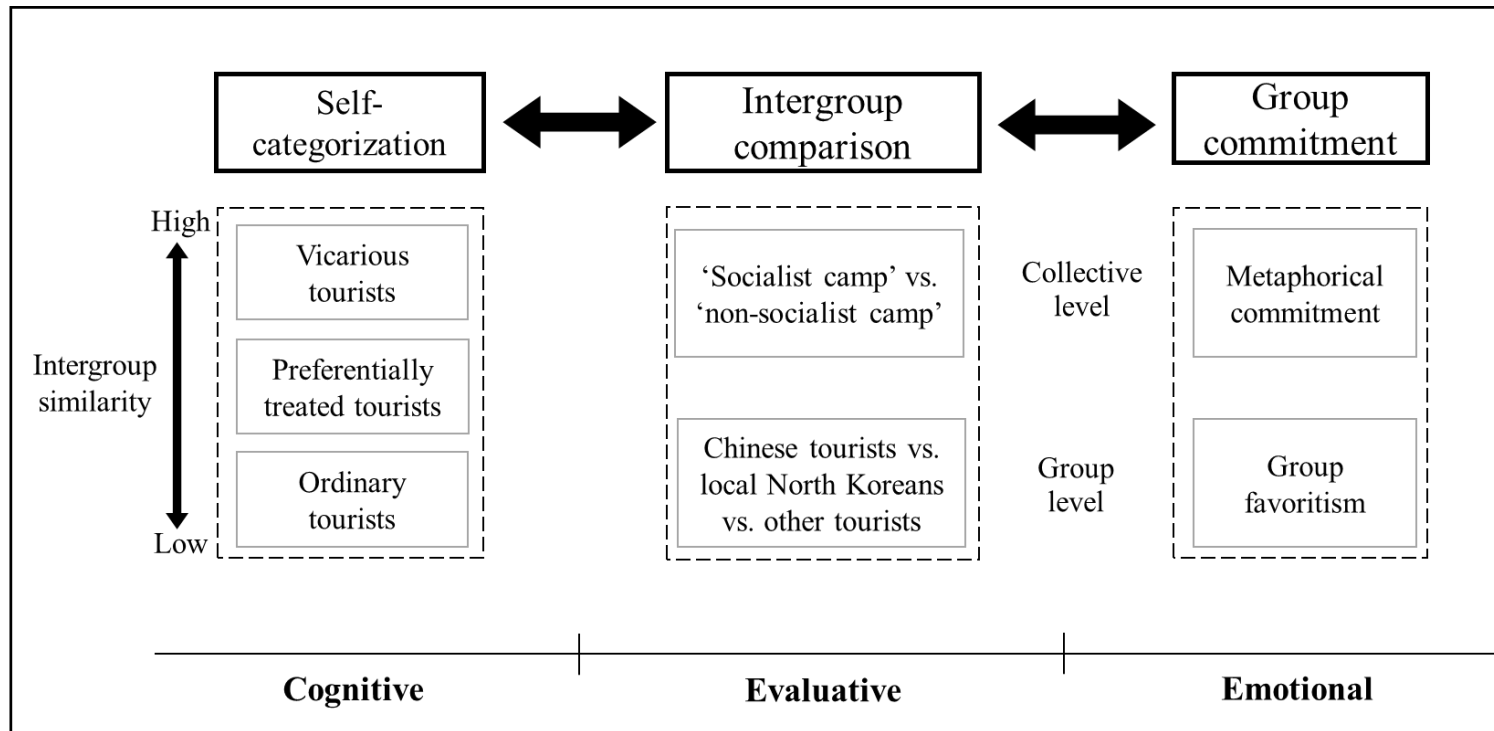
Fig. 1. Conceptual framework for the formation and representation of Chinese tourists' social identities in North Korea