The Influence of Cultural Similarity and Individual Factors on Visitation

Siew Imm Ng*1, Julie Anne Lee2 and Geoffrey N. Soutar2
1Universiti Putra Malaysia, Penang, MALAYSIA;
2Universiti of Western Australia, AUSTRALIA

This paper examined how Chinese, German and American individuals’ perceptions of cultural similarity/difference influence intentions to travel to New Zealand, a novel long-haul destination. The relationship was examined along with a set of potentially influential individual difference variables, including international travel experience, uncertainty avoidance, novelty seeking and ethnocentrism. Cultural similarity was a common positive predictor of travel intentions toward New Zealand across all three countries. Respondent’s travel experience and novelty seeking were also important positive influences for this long-haul destination, at least for Americans and Germans. Respondent’s level of uncertainty avoidance was only significant for Germany, where those with higher uncertainty were less likely to intend to visit New Zealand. Ethnocentrism was not a significant predictor in any country. These findings suggest that the perception of cultural similarity, which can be influenced by marketing campaigns, has a positive influence on travel intentions. Tourism marketers should stress elements of cultural similarity in their campaigns, especially for those markets where there may be lower levels of knowledge about the destination.

Keywords: cultural similarity, intentions, New Zealand, novelty seeking, uncertainty avoidance, travel experience

* Email: siewimm@econ.upm.edu.my
Introduction

Tourism is a growing and crucially important industry around the world. Indeed, the 2006 Travel and Tourism Economic Research Report (WTTC, 2006) noted that the tourism and travel industry was expected to contribute nearly four percent of the world’s total GDP in 2006. In addition, the Report stressed that the tourism industry was expected to have provided 234 million jobs worldwide in 2006, which would make up almost nine percent of total employment or almost one in every eleven jobs worldwide. However, the tourism industry is extremely competitive and it is costly for smaller destinations to establish a presence in larger tourism markets.

Large markets, such as the United States of America (the US), Germany and China, are the focus of many competitive marketing campaigns from a range of large, established destinations. Smaller destinations find it more difficult to market their destination competitively in these countries. As such, it is important that they understand how they might best position their destination.

This study focuses on New Zealand, which is a long haul, novel destination for tourists from the US, Germany and China. New Zealand is a relatively small destination, but tourism is a major part of the economy as it contributed almost $7 billion (or 5%) to the country’s gross domestic product in 2006 and made up 19% of New Zealand’s exports (TSA, 2006). One of the main concerns industry members and tourism organisations in New Zealand have is to identify effective ways to attract tourists.

Of the 7 million people who visited New Zealand in 2006, only 5% came from the three major tourism source markets (the US, Germany and China) that, together, account for approximately two thirds of the world’s tourism expenditure (WTO 2005). As can be seen in Table 1, Americans accounted for 3% of New Zealand’s visitors, while Germans and Chinese accounted for only 1% each. Indeed, New Zealand attracted less than 1% of the total outbound trips from these countries in 2006.

While these large markets have considerable potential in terms of possible visitor numbers, smaller destinations, such as New Zealand, need to understand some of the broader yet understudied perceptual issues that influence potential tourist’s decisions. This information can then be used to enhance the potential of their current targeted strategies.

In contrast to past studies that focused on culture level similarity data, the current study attempts to clarify the influence of cultural similarity on tourist’s intentions by focusing on individual’s perceptions of their cultural similarity to that of New Zealand. The use of individual level data allowed other potentially influential individual level factors, such as international travel experience, uncertainty avoidance, novelty seeking and ethnocentrism to be included in this study.
Table 1 Visitor Arrivals to New Zealand by Country of Residence in 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of Visitor Arrival</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>59,353</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>225,629</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>105,716</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other countries</td>
<td>6,739,184</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Arrival</td>
<td>7,129,882</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Statistic New Zealand
(Retrieved March 10, 2008)

Problem statement

Some researchers have suggested that tourism is driven by cultural similarity as part of the validation of the similarity-attraction hypothesis. For instance, Jackson (2001) examined the influence of country level cultural distance on country level travel behaviour. That study found that people from more individualist countries (e.g. Australia and the USA) tended to visit culturally similar destinations. Consistently, Ng, Lee and Soutar (2007) found that perceived cultural distance was a significant negative predictor of Australian’s travel intentions to international destinations. However, no similar study has been done to assess if tourists visiting New Zealand are partly motivated by cultural similarity. Thus, this study adds values to extant literature by producing further validation on the findings reported by Jackson (2001) and Ng, Lee and Soutar (2007) that tourists were motivated by cultural similarity to a certain extent in making destination selection decisions. On top of that, other potentially influential individual differences factors were also included in this study.

Thus, the following section first reviews the main theoretical basis for the study, the similarity-attraction hypothesis. Then, it covers literature on perceived similarity and individual level factors such as international novelty seeking, travel experience, uncertainty avoidance and ethnocentrism. At the end of each variable review, a hypothesis was developed for testing in this study.

Similarity-attraction Hypothesis

The similarity-attraction hypothesis proposes that individuals have a preference for those who are similar to them (Bochner 2003; Byrne and Nelson 1965). Aspects of similarity could be broad: values, religion, group affiliation, skills, physical attributes, age, language, occupation, social class, nationality, ethnicity, residential location, etc. This commonly accepted phenomenon (preference for similar others) was tested by psychologists in as early as 1960’s and has found support at both interpersonal and inter-group levels.

Similarity-attraction hypothesis has been found relevant to explain phenomena in multiple contexts. First, in the international business context, cultural similarity is positively related to successful cooperation (Chen and Boggs 1998; Lin and Germaine 1998; Van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee 2002). For instance, Van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee (2002) examined 78 international cooperation cases and found that cultural similarity in national and
corporate culture is associated with successful cooperation. Similarly, Chen and Boggs (1998) found that the prospect for long-term cooperation was higher when the joint venture partner firms were of culturally similar countries in their attempt to examine long term cooperation of Chinese firms.

Second, in international marketing research, Swift (1999) found that the more similar the culture of an overseas market was to the culture of Britain, the more respondents tended to like that overseas market. He suggested that people feel more secure when they are familiar with their surroundings.

Third, in international posting researchers, many found that individuals were generally more willing to accept expatriate assignments to culturally similar countries than dissimilar countries (Aryee, Chay and Chew 1996; Noe and Barber 1993; Wan, Hui and Tiang 2003). This was because lesser adjustments are needed.

Fourth, in an organisational context, Ashkanasy and O’Connor (1997) found that value similarity between leader and member affects the quality of leader-member exchanges (LMX). LMX was higher when leaders and members share achievement and obedience values. In studying consumers’ perceptions on pesticides, nuclear power, and artificial sweeteners, Siegrist, Cvetkovich and Roth (2000) found that salient value similarity determined the level of social trust respondents had in institutions responsible for regulating the technology or the product.

Fifth, in the trade context, Yu and Zietlow (1995) found that cultural similarity is one of the significant indicators of bilateral trade relationships in the Pacific Basin. They reported that sharing similar cultures not only reflects the tendency of the people in two countries to consume similar goods but indicates a lower cost of doing business between them. Along the same line, Martinez-Zarzoso (2003) found that two countries that share a common language traded 242 percent more in 1999 than countries speaking a different language. This was also in line with Samovar and Porter’s (1988) suggestions that cultural similarity makes the sharing of meaning possible as communication or language style used and nonverbal behaviour shown were influenced greatly by culture.

Sixth, in buyer-seller relationships, Armstrong and Yee (2001) found that perceived similarity in the cultural values between the seller and buyer increased the trust between the transacting parties. Consistent with this, Anderson and Weitz (1989) found that cultural similarity increases the communication level in the dyad; in contrast, cultural barriers due to different values embraced reduced trust between the parties.

Finally, in the country image context, Wong and Lamb (1983) suggested that similarity in cultural and belief systems may foster a more positive Country of Origin (COO) image. This was confirmed by Watson and Wright (2000) that highly ethnocentric consumers rated products imported from a culturally similar country as more favourable. In contrast, Zhang (1996) investigated Chinese consumers’ evaluation of foreign products and found that cultural similarity did not seem to moderate the COO effect. They speculated that it was probably due to the Chinese perception of Western product superiority.

Although there were conflicting findings in the last two contexts, seller-buyer relationships and country image, most of the literature above suggests that cultural similarity leads to more favourable relationships at the interpersonal, organisational and even cross-national contexts. Thus, we have justified and established the theoretical foundation of the study that generally, cultural similarity leads to positive relationships or more favourable decisions.
Perceived cultural similarity

Using country level data, Ng et al. (2007) found that cultural similarity positively influenced Australians’ intention to visit a broad range of overseas destinations. That is, the more culturally similar a foreign destination was to Australia, the more likely it was that Australians would visit that destination. Their research supported anecdotal evidence (Chen 2000; Kaynak and Kucukemiroglu 1993; Pacific Asia Travel Association 1995; Wong and Kwong 2004) that suggested cultural similarity may impact on tourists’ intentions to visit destinations.

The similarity-attraction hypothesis offers some insight into why cultural similarity might influence tourists’ decision making and behaviour. The hypothesis, which was initially popularised by Byrne and Nelson (1965), suggests that people are attracted to others who have similar attitudes and beliefs. Although the hypothesis originated in social psychology, it has found considerable support in business contexts, including human resource management (Farh et. al. 1998; O’Reilly et. al. 1989), mentoring relationships (Ensher and Murphy 1997; Turban et. al. 2002) and buyer-seller relationships (Smith 1998).

In addition, a positive relationship between similarity and country image is supported by many of the more than 300 articles that have examined country-of-origin (COO) issues (Nebenzahl et al. 2003). While there are many factors that affect COO images, the political, economic, cultural and social environments have been found to influence the willingness of foreign consumers to purchase that country’s products, independently of the products’ perceived quality. For instance, Wong and Lamb (1983) found that Americans were more prepared to buy products from politically democratic countries, while Watson and Wright (2000) found that highly ethnocentric consumers rated products imported from culturally similar country more favourably. The cultural similarity between two countries also impacts on the frequency of collateral trade (Martinez-Zarzoso 2003; Yu and Zietlow 1995), as people from such countries tend to consume similar goods and language similarities reduces the cost of doing business. Thus, it can be suggested that:

H1: People who perceive New Zealand to be culturally similar to their country will have a more positive intention to visit New Zealand.

Inherent Novelty Seeking

Some researchers have suggested it is not cultural similarity, but cultural dissimilarity that influences travel intentions (McKercher and Cros 2003; O’Leary and Deegan 2003). While cultural similarity has found more support empirically, there are some interesting arguments that at least some people may seek novel experiences when deciding on the destinations they visit. In fact, novelty is possible even in culturally similar destinations.

Pearson (1970, p.199) defined novelty seeking as “a disposition toward changing, new or unexpected experiences versus a disposition to avoid these experiences,” while Hirschman (1980) suggested that novelty seeking had two different aspects, namely:

1. A focus on seeking new and potentially discrepant information (Fiske and Maddi 1961).
2. A focus on variety seeking, which relates to the extent to which people vary their choices among known stimuli.

In the present study, the focus was on new experience seeking, which refers to an internal drive to seek new information (Pearson 1970). As such, it is an aspect of personality that is free from any situational context. Lee and Crompton (1992) suggested that novelty seeking
was an underlying force that motivated tourists to travel. Indeed, novelty and strangeness have often been suggested as important reasons for international travel (McIntosh, Goeldner and Ritchie 1994).

However, tourists differ in their desire for novel experiences (Cohen 1972; Elsrud, 2001). Snepenger (1987), for example, found that 26% of the tourists who visited Alaska were novelty seekers, while Kau and Judy (1999) found that Singaporean tourists could be classified into four groups around the novelty-familiarity continuum. Novelty seeking tendencies have also been found to differ by nationality, with Americans being perceived to be the most interested in novelty than Koreans or Japanese (Pizam and Jeong 1996).

High novelty seeking individuals seek out varied, new and intense experiences that promise new sensations, such as exotic travel, to gain different cultural experiences (Copeland and Hamer 1998). Novelty-seekers value stimulation and surprise (Lee and Crompton 1992) and are more likely to participate in activities they have not experienced before (Bevins 2001). New Zealand, which is well-known for its unique Maori culture, animal and bird habitats and is the nearest country to the Antarctic, is likely to be attractive to novelty seekers who are looking for new and varied experiences, suggesting that:

*H2: Novelty-seeking tourists will have a positive intention to visit New Zealand.*

**Travel experience**

Travel experience has been found to influence the choice of destination, especially long-haul destinations. Less experienced tourists prefer familiar destinations where they can speak their own language and eat familiar food (Goelder and Ritchie 2003). Indeed, Lepp and Gibson (2003) found less experienced tourists were more concerned with health and food than were their experienced counterparts, suggesting less experienced travelers were more likely to visit places that provide a familiar environment. Pearce (1988) also found that less experienced tourists were more likely to emphasise lower order needs, such as food and safety. New Zealand, which is located more than 9000 kilometers from the United States, Germany and China, is unlikely to be seen as a “familiar location”. Thus, it is likely that experienced travelers are more likely to visit New Zealand:

*H3: Experienced tourists will have a positive intention to visit New Zealand.*

**Uncertainty Avoidance**

Long-haul destinations may also involve more uncertainty about the type of travel experience they will provide. Hofstede (1991, p.113) defined uncertainty avoidance (UA) as the extent to which people feel “threatened by uncertain or unknown situations.” Low UA individuals are more likely to accept uncertainty and tolerate dissimilar ideas, while high UA individuals are more likely to appreciate standards and norms that enable them to predict reactions and control their environment (Yoo and Donthu 2002). Money and Crotts (2003) defined UA as a measure of intolerance for risk. While uncertainty is different to risk, as it is related to ambiguity, rather than to specific outcomes, an UA tendency is likely to increase perceptions of risk, which are a major concern to international travelers (Lepp and Gibson 2003; Pizam, Tarlow and Bloom 1997; Yavas 1987).

Money and Crotts (2003) found that high UA groups used more risk-reducing travel behaviours, such as using pre-packaged tours, taking shorter trips and visiting fewer
destinations. It seems high UA individuals, who prefer a predictable and safe trip, are less likely to visit destinations requiring long flying hours as it is associated with higher risk (Harrison-Hill 2001). This is relevant to New Zealand which is a long haul holiday (about 20 hours flight from the United States, 30 hours flight from Germany and 15 hours flight from China), suggesting that:

**H4: Uncertainty avoidant people will have a less positive intention to visit New Zealand.**

**Ethnocentrism**

Ethnocentrism has been found to influence people’s product purchases from foreign countries, but it is not known whether it will influence tourists’ destination decisions. Sumner (1906) defined ethnocentrism as a tendency for people to perceive their own group as the centre and to scale and rate out-groups with reference to their own group. There is a growing interest in ethnocentrism in diverse disciplines, such as social psychology (Brauer 2001), anthropology (Cashdan 2001), interethnic relations (Hooghe 2003), intercultural training (Klak and Martin 2003) and international marketing (Lee and Sirgy 1999; Shimp and Sharma 1987). Although researchers have not studied ethnocentrism’s influence on tourists’ behaviour, it may influence tourist’s intercultural decisions. Ethnocentric people view in-group members as superior and feel their in-group is the centre of what is reasonable and proper in life (Brislin 2000). As such, they try to maintain social distance from out-group members (Gudykunst 1991). This suggests ethnocentric individuals are less likely to travel overseas and are, thus, less likely to visit New Zealand, suggesting that:

**H5: Ethnocentric tourists will have a negative intention to visit New Zealand.**

As already noted, a study was undertaken to test these hypotheses. The measures used, the data collection undertaken and the analysis of the collected data are discussed in subsequent sections.

**The Measures**

The main focal questions asked about people’s intention to visit New Zealand, their perceptions of New Zealand’s perceived similarity to their home country (United States, Germany or China), travel experience, uncertainty avoidance tendency, novelty seeking tendency and ethnocentrism (see appendix A). In this case:

- The intention to visit item was adapted from Basala and Klenosky (2001). Respondents were asked: *Which destinations do you INTEND to go to on vacation in the next 2 years, if anywhere? By vacation we mean all types of travel except for business trips.* New Zealand was one of a list of 20 countries. The answer format included (very unlikely, somewhat unlikely, somewhat likely, very likely and definitely; coded from 1 to 5 respectively).

- The perceived cultural similarity was adapted from Nesdale and Mak (2003). Respondents were asked: *How similar or different do you think your background is to the culture and life style in these countries?.* New Zealand was one of a list of 20 countries. The answer format was a seven-point scale from (1) not at all similar to (7) very similar.
• Travel experience was adapted from Sonmez and Graef (1998). Respondents were asked: \textit{How many international vacations have you taken in the last 5 YEARS?}

• Novelty seeking was measured using the five positive items from Dabholkar and Bagozzi (2002) scale. As an example, respondents reported their level of agreement or disagreement to the item: \textit{I am always seeking new ideas and experiences.} The answer format was a seven-point scale from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree.

• Uncertainty avoidance was measured using Donthu and Yoo’s (1998) five-item scale. Respondents reported their level of agreement or disagreement to the item: \textit{It is important to have instructions spelled out in detail so that I always know what I am expected to do.} The answer format was a seven-point scale from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree.

• Ethnocentrism was measured using the 12 positive items taken from Neuliep and McCroskey’s (1997) GENE (Generalized Ethnocentrism) Scale. As an example, respondents reported their level of agreement or disagreement to the item: \textit{I have little respect for the values and customs of other cultures.} The answer format was a seven-point scale from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree.

Positive items were included in the novelty seeking scale and the GENE scale as researchers have shown that reversed worded items do not perform well in cross-cultural research for several reasons (Wong, Rindfleisch, Burroughs and Steenkamp 2003). Many respondents (especially less well educated, younger people) do not interpret negatively worded items as opposite ends of the same scale. Negatively worded items are also often not easily translated in an equivalent manner, as some languages, such as Japanese and Chinese, have different ways of marking negation or contradiction, which adds to the item confusion problem (Goldsmith and Rene 1991; Wong, Rindfleisch, Burroughs and Steenkamp 2003).

\textbf{Data Collection}

A web-based online survey was administered by a large commercial consumer research company in each country. In other words, the sampling frame used by this study was the list of panel consumers who registered as members of the commercial consumer research companies engaged by the study. All panel members fulfilling characteristics set out by the researchers were invited via email to participate in the web-based survey. Samples were chosen to reflect the age, gender and location characteristics of permanent resident adults (aged 18 to 75) in Germany, USA, and three major cities in China (Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou). It was felt necessary to restrict the Chinese sample to the main three cities, as these respondents were most likely to have the resources to travel. As international travel was the focal concern, only those respondents who had travelled to international destinations within the last five years or who intended to travel to international destinations within the next two years were selected for the survey. In addition, the sample was limited to those who do not work in advertising, marketing research or the tourism industries. A minimum quota of 200 completed surveys was set in each country due to budgetary constraints. A total of 669 responses were obtained from the three countries of interest (262 from the United States, 202 from Germany and 205 from China).

\textbf{Data Analysis}

While intention to visit, perceived cultural similarity and travel experience were single item measures, uncertainty avoidance, novelty seeking and ethnocentrism were multiple item measures. The means, standard deviations and, where relevant, the reliability (coefficient alpha) of all of the constructs of interest are shown in Table 2. On average, Chinese
respondents were more likely to visit New Zealand (mean = 2.84 on a 5-pt scale) than were American (mean = 2.42; t = 3.91, p < .001) or German respondents (mean = 2.20; t = 5.92, p < .001). As was expected given Hofstede’s (1980) research, American respondents felt that New Zealand was more culturally similar (mean = 4.83 on a 7-pt scale) than did the German (mean = 4.02; t = 4.78, p < .001) or the Chinese respondents (mean = 2.98; t = 11.56, p < .001). On average, American respondents had taken 2.60 international trips during the past five years, while German respondents had taken 2.19 such trips and Chinese respondents had taken 2.16 such trips, suggesting similar overall recent travel experiences.

The three multiple item scales (uncertainty avoidance, novelty seeking and ethnocentrism) had coefficient alphas above 0.70 across the three countries, suggesting they were reliable (Hair et al. 1998). Respondents in each country tried to avoid uncertainty as the mean scores ranged from 4.92 to 5.13. Chinese respondents had a higher uncertainty avoidance tendency than did the German respondents (t = 2.80; p < .01). On average, respondents in each country sought novelty as the means ranged from 4.79 to 4.90. Respondents in each country had low to medium ethnocentrism as the means ranged from 2.42 to 3.57. Chinese respondents were more ethnocentric (mean = 3.57) than were the American (mean = 2.80; t = 9.30, p < .001) or German respondents (mean = 2.42; t = 14.04, p < .001).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>United States</th>
<th></th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th></th>
<th>China</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>α</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>α</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intention to visit New Zealand (1 item)</strong></td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perceived cultural similarity (1 item)</strong></td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Uncertainty Avoidance (5 items)</strong></td>
<td>4.95</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Novelty Seeking (5 items)</strong></td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnocentrism (12 items)</strong></td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Multiple regression analysis was used to examine which of the five constructs were significant predictors of people’s intention to visit New Zealand in each of the three countries. The results obtained are shown in Table 3. As can be seen from the Table, the
regression was significant in each country, as the F values ranged from 4.41 to 8.23 (p < .001). The percentage of variance in people’s intention explained by the independent variables (shown by the adjusted R squared values) ranging from 6% to 15% across three samples. As the adjusted R squared values were not high, it seems there are other factors that were not included in the present study that influence people’s intention to visit New Zealand.

### Table 3 Regression equations for intention to visit New Zealand (Standardised regression coefficients)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>USA</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>China</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Similarity</td>
<td>.16**</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>.25**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel Experience</td>
<td>.17**</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty Avoidance</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.14*</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novelty Seeking</td>
<td>.13*</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnocentrism</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>8.23</td>
<td>4.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** p < .01, * p < .05

Perceived cultural similarity was a significant positive predictor of intention to visit New Zealand in each case, supporting Hypothesis 1. Travel experience was a significant positive predictor for the American and German samples, but it was not significant for the Chinese sample although the coefficient was positive (b =0.12) as had been hypothesised. Uncertainty avoidance was a significant negative predictor of intention to visit for the German sample, but it was not significant for the other two samples. Novelty seeking tendency was a significant positive predictor for the American and German samples, but not for the Chinese sample. Finally, ethnocentrism was not a significant predictor in any of the countries.

### Conclusion and implications for practitioners

This study clarifies the influence of perceptions of cultural similarity and other individual differences factors on travel intentions. Of the five predictors, perceived cultural similarity was the most consistent influence on the intention to visit New Zealand. The positive influence of cultural similarity on intentions to travel to New Zealand was found in all three country samples. This suggests that the similarity-attraction hypothesis is applicable in a tourism context, confirming the earlier arguments of Ng et al. (2007) and the empirical results based on Australian tourists (an individualist culture).
It was found that tourists from the US and Germany with higher novelty seeking tendencies were more likely to intend to visit New Zealand, as were those with more travel experience. Since novelty seeking was positively related to intention to travel to New Zealand in both the American (more culturally similar to New Zealand) and the German (less culturally similar to New Zealand) samples and unrelated in the Chinese (least culturally similar to New Zealand) sample, it is likely that novelty seeking tendency is less related to cultural novelty than are the other experiences a destination can offer. Uncertainty avoidance was only significantly negatively related to intentions to visit New Zealand for the German tourists. This may be due to the higher level of cultural UA in Germany (UA=65), than either in the US (46) or in China (30) (Hofstede 2001). Uncertainty may not be as important for individuals who live in cultures where there is less need for certainty. Finally, ethnocentrism was not a significant predictor in any country. While it has been shown that ethnocentrism influences the purchase of foreign products, it seems to have less influence on the choice of tourist destination.

The present study has a number of implications for New Zealand tourism operators. Overlaying current strategy with one that also stresses elements of cultural similarity is likely to increase the effectiveness of the country’s tourism destination promotions. While tourists may be motivated to experience differences (e.g. activities, weather, scenery, people, heritage), cultural similarity increases their comfort and is a pull factor that encourages people to visit. For example, stressing a similar cultural presence might make potential international tourists feel more comfortable and secure. Lepp and Gibson (2003) found that people’s risk perceptions were greater when they visited less familiar (or more culturally distant) destinations due to their ignorance of local customs, etc. Stressing elements of home culture similarity, such as food and language availability, may increase their level of comfort with a potential destination.

The study also suggests that customised promotional messages may be more effective as different individual factors influenced people’s intentions to visit New Zealand. Americans with more travel experience and with a high novelty seeking tendency were more likely to visit New Zealand. Germans with more travel experience and with a high novelty seeking tendency and a low uncertainty avoidance tendency were more likely to visit New Zealand. However, Chinese respondents were only influenced by perceived cultural similarity.

For a small, novel, long-haul destination such as New Zealand, there is an opportunity to incorporate the cultural similarity message and the varied and new experiences that are not provided by other destinations, at least in the US and Germany. If New Zealand stresses similar experience to those offered by countries nearer to home, tourists may not be able to justify travelling extra miles to enjoy the same experiences. In addition, the study suggests that Germans may respond more positively if uncertainty is reduced. Since uncertainty is different from risk (see Hofstede 2001), it is best reduced by providing additional relevant information, rather than incorporating messages about safety.

Limitations and recommendation for future research

There are several limitations that should be considered when evaluating the present study. One potential limitation relates to the sample’s representativeness. While the sample was drawn to be representative in terms of age, gender, and location, the sample was not representative on factors that relate to computer use. Despite these limitations, it is important to note the sample has some strengths. First, it is an adult multi-country sample. Second, it focused on a matched sample of potential tourists, that is, those who have traveled internationally in the past five years or who intend to do so in the next two years.
The regression model that was used to predict the intention to visit New Zealand had only low to moderate explained variance. Future research is needed to identify other potential predictors of people’s intention to visit New Zealand. In particular, research into the predictors of Chinese nationals’ decision to visit New Zealand warrants closer scrutiny as the present study found that only one (of the five included) predictor was significant in explaining their intention to visit New Zealand.

References


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APPENDIX A: Selected Questionnaire Items

Q1. Which destinations do you INTEND to go to on vacation in the next 2 years, if anywhere? By vacation we mean all types of travel except for business trips.
(Click one response for each location)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Very Unlikely</th>
<th>Somewhat Unlikely</th>
<th>Somewhat Likely</th>
<th>Very Likely</th>
<th>Definitely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q2. How similar or different do you think your background is to the culture and life style in these countries?
If 1 is not at all similar and 7 is very similar, click on the column number that best represents your view of the cultural and life style similarity.
(Click one response for each location)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similarity Level</th>
<th>Not at all similar</th>
<th>Very similar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q3. How many international vacations have you taken in the last 5 YEARS?
(Answer must be 0 or greater)

Q4. How strongly do you agree or disagree with each statement?
(Click one response for each statement)