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Tourists' perceptions of and reactions to child sex tourism: An exploratory qualitative investigation

Abstract

Purpose – Using a qualitative approach, this study outlines Chinese outbound tourists' perceptions and reactions to issues related to child sex tourism.

Design/methodology/approach – Twenty-seven in-depth interviews were conducted and data were analysed. Manual coding was chosen as an efficient method to process qualitative interview data given the relatively small sample size in this study.

Findings – Three main themes emerged from analysis: 1) tourists' negative perceptions of child sex tourism; 2) tourist boycotts against child sex tourism destinations and activities as reactions to this socially deviant and illegal phenomenon; and 3) tourist advocacy to enhance public awareness of child sex tourism. These themes suggest that tourists, as key tourism stakeholders, have difficulty accepting that child sex tourism occurs and would like to identify solutions to end illegal activities. Tourist boycotts would positively affect sustainable tourism development by eliminating illegal businesses, including those involving child prostitution, from the tourism industry. The qualitative method is applied here to develop a conceptual framework explaining tourists' perceptions of and reactions to child sex tourism.

Practical implications – A conceptual framework of Chinese individuals' perceptions of and reactions to child sex tourism has been devised using a qualitative approach. Although this framework takes child sex tourism as its focus, it can also be applied to better understand tourists' perspectives of other socially deviant or illegal behaviours within the tourism industry. The findings of this study provide valuable implications for various tourism stakeholders.

Originality/value – The current study makes significant theoretical and practical contributions to an under-researched topic – child sex tourism. A conceptual framework of Chinese individuals' perceptions of and reactions to child sex tourism has been devised using a qualitative approach. Findings from this study may inspire campaigns to protect children from being drawn into sex tourism. Efforts could also be undertaken to rescue children who have already been victimised by illegal businesses.

Keywords: child sex tourism; socially deviant tourism activities; illegal tourism activities; social issues in tourism; tourist perceptions and reactions; tourist boycott and advocacy

1. Research background & literature review

According to Davidson (2004), “One form of movement from affluent to developing countries that has been a focus of anxiety over the past decade is the phenomenon known as ‘child sex tourism’” (p. 31). Child sex tourism occurs when individuals travel to engage in commercial sex with children (Panko & George, 2012). These practices, whether domestic or international, are illegal and oppose global social norms (Ying & Wen, 2019). In a review of the literature on sex trafficking, Wen, Klarin, Goh, and Aston (2020) extracted implications for hospitality and tourism practitioners. They specifically cited child exploitation, sexual abuse, and health problems as requiring further investigation relative to child sex tourism.

Researchers have also examined positive outcomes associated with tourism and hospitality. Foci include what industry development can bring to destinations and local communities as well as how tourists can benefit from travel and tourism. A notable benefit of the tourism industry is its contribution to five major socioeconomic goals for destinations: income generation, job creation, foreign exchange revenue, improved living standards, and poverty reduction (Li, Jin, & Shi, 2018). Recently, however, researchers have begun to consider tourism’s role in and effects on society through a different, less positive, lens (e.g., Fennel, 2012; Paraskevas & Brookes, 2018; Shaheer, Insch, & Carr, 2018). Indeed, the tourism industry’s contributions are not uniformly positive; tourism and hospitality may generate social and environmental harm in addition to—and even alongside—myriad benefits (Hall, 2009; Fletcher, Mas, Blanco-Romero, & Blazquez-Salom, 2019; Milano, Novelli, & Cheer, 2019). When considering the darker side of tourism, severe social issues emerge along with tourists’ demands and activities that influence tourism marketing. Take, for instance, the following report from Romo (2017); this harrowing account is one example of how the tourism industry may contribute to insidious ends:

Karla Jacinto was lured into a brothel at the age of 12 and forced into prostitution in Mexico City before being rescued by authorities. During her 4 years of enslavement, she was raped and sexually assaulted 43,200 times – by 30 men per day, 7 days a week for 2,555 days partially in the name of sex tourism.

Commercial sex tourism has been broadly defined, encompassing various forms of legal sexual contact between tourists and local sexual service providers. Associated practices in which tourists participate while travelling can range from sex shows to penetrative intercourse with sex workers (Ying & Wen, 2019). Across various cultures and religions, as Carr (2016) noted, most sex tourism research is underpinned by a social righteousness perspective framing sex tourism as deviant. Sex has also been acknowledged as an integral component of the tourist experience (Berdychevsky, Poria, & Uriely, 2013); however, its relationship with tourism remains under-researched (Carr, 2016; Ying & Wen, 2019). So-called ‘sex tourism’ can be further classified into several types, such as gay sex tourism (Carr, 2016), female/male sex tourism (Carr, 2016; Richards & Reid, 2015), and child sex tourism (Panko & George, 2012). Prostitution—the exchange of sexual services for money—is one of the most well-known sex tourism activities (Spurrier, 2020).

In the case of child sex tourism, children are made available to interested tourists for the purpose of sexual gratification (George & Panko, 2011). Lim (1998) conceptualised child sex tourism as being motivated by tourists’ needs to victimise children sexually. Yet such tourist behaviour is considered universally criminal irrespective of associated definitions (Panko &

George, 2012). According to World Vision (2010), children as young as age 5 may be forced into the trade as a means of paying family debts. Others are forcibly recruited off the street to work in brothels, where they are required to have sex with as many as 30 men per day as in Karla Jacinto's case (Romo, 2017). Child sex tourism is a billion-dollar global industry sustained by a demand for underage sexual partners; the practice results in the victimisation of over two million children per year (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2014). According to Leung (2003), vulnerable children may include those who live in poverty, are marginalised, or are prepubescent; emerging tourism trends have also been identified as potential underlying causes.

Child sex tourism is a global issue. Between 5,000 and 7,000 Nepali girls are trafficked annually across the border to India, where most become sex workers in brothels in Mumbai and New Delhi (Gupta, 2019). An estimated 10,000 women and girls from neighbouring countries have been lured into commercial sex establishments in Thailand. Americans constitute one-fourth of industry clientele, netting \$20 billion in profit per year. Given these figures, it remains unclear why the issue has not garnered sufficient public, preventative, and legislative attention in the U.S. (Kosuri & Jeglic, 2017; United Nations Human Rights, 2013). Ryan and Hall (2001) stated that child sex tourism began to attract scholarly attention in the 1970s. Even so, the extent of academic debate around this issue—especially in tourism and hospitality—remains low even today (Wen et al., 2020), potentially due to the topic's controversial nature.

Hospitality and tourism businesses can play supporting roles (either indirectly or directly) in illegal and socially deviant activities, such as sex trafficking and child sex tourism, through logistical, accommodation, and hospitality services (Paraskevas & Brookes, 2018). As of this writing, only two studies on child sex tourism have been published in tourism and hospitality journals (Leung, 2003; Tepelus, 2008); other studies have appeared in the literature on human rights (Brungs, 2002), law (Curley, 2014), social justice (Bandyopadhyay, 2012), sex studies (Kosuri & Jeglic, 2017), and children and youth studies (George & Panko, 2011). Most relevant studies have been either conceptual or descriptive. Researchers have considered treatment modalities for child victims (Panko & George, 2012), synthesised a conceptual model capturing the scope of child sex tourism (George & Panko, 2011), and proposed policy options to combat the practice (Chemin & Mbiekop, 2015). Still others have reviewed legal tools to address it (Vrancken & Chetty, 2009), suggested cooperation between law enforcement and civil society as a preventative measure (Curley, 2014), and summarised feasible approaches to mitigate child sex tourism (Tepelus, 2008). Interestingly, only two empirical studies on child sex tourism appear to have been published (Kosuri & Jeglic, 2017; Montgomery, 2008). Kosuri and Jeglic (2017) investigated Americans' perceptions of child sex abuse and its relationship with offense locations (i.e., the U.S., Netherlands, or Thailand) and victims' cultural backgrounds on the basis of online surveys. Findings indicated that individuals perceived U.S.-based sexual offenses as more severe than those committed outside the U.S. Similarly, sexual crimes were deemed less severe when they occurred in an Eastern 'other' culture rather than in Western cultures. Montgomery (2008) investigated child sex tourists via ethnographic work in a small Thai community, analysing the qualities these tourists found attractive in Thai children and women. Age did not seem to matter as much as appearance: the selected tourists perceived Thai women as childlike while some children appeared precociously mature; distinctions between child and adult and innocence and experience were blurred. Other studies of child sex

tourism have been conducted in America (Kosuri & Jeglic, 2017), India (Bandyopadhyay, 2012; Chemin & Mbiekop, 2015), South Africa (Vrancken & Chetty, 2009), Southeast Asia (Curley, 2014), Thailand (Montgomery, 2008), and Australia (Brungs, 2002).

Overall, a review of the literature pertaining to child sex tourism across disciplines reveals the following gaps: (1) limited attention to the topic of child sex tourism in the tourism literature underscores the need for additional research, given the tourism industry's growing importance worldwide; (2) child sex tourism studies have been broadly conceptual and descriptive, leaving room for empirical work; (3) most child sex tourism studies have emphasised laws, regulations, and relevant strategies to combat this practice with less focus on tourists' perceptions, despite travellers being recognised as key tourism stakeholders; (4) the effects of child sex tourism issues on tourism marketing and tourist behaviour are understudied; and (5) although child sex tourism has been discussed within specific cultural settings (e.g., the United States), further investigation is needed to examine this phenomenon in other contexts (e.g., from Chinese individuals' perspectives) to better understand how tourists from diverse backgrounds perceive this serious global issue.

China has been named the largest source country for international tourism since 2012 (i.e. during pre-pandemics era) (Zhong, Wu, & Morrison, 2015). The country has therefore elicited intense interest from industry professionals and scholars. Tourism scholars have conducted many studies focusing on Chinese tourists' motivations resulting in great value to the Chinese tourism market. For instance, numerous studies have explored Chinese tourists' perceptions of touristic phenomena to tap into the Chinese market (i.e., Wen et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2021) and others have identified factors that influence tourism engagement (i.e., Chu et al., 2019; Huang et al., 2019). More importantly, researchers have recently begun to examine controversial topics in tourism and hospitality (e.g., drug tourism and sex tourism) from a Chinese perspective to better understand these tourists' points of view and behavioural intentions (Wen, Meng, Ying, Qi, & Lockyer, 2018; Ying & Wen, 2019). These papers used quantitative and mixed methods to discuss predictive motivations and behaviours; however, in the tourism domain, authors have not conceptualized sex tourism or discussed perceptions of sex tourism. Given the complexities involved with the conceptualisation of child sex tourism, qualitative research is needed to generalize the perceptions of child sex tourism and travel behaviors from the perspective of Chinese tourists. As a complement to such work, the present study sheds light on (1) Chinese tourists' perceptions of and reactions to child sex tourism in particular destinations; and (2) how such perceptions may influence these travellers' participation in tourism and travel-related behaviours.

2. Methodology

The exploratory nature of this study was underpinned by an inductive approach through which the author sought to develop a conceptual framework explaining individuals' perceptions of and reactions to child sex tourism. This study employed a qualitative method. In-depth semi-structured interviews were deemed suitable for data collection given the following principles: development of a holistic viewpoint, a philosophy of naturalistic inquiry, and an inductive approach to data analysis (Patton, 1980). The qualitative approach is intended to unearth theoretical insights and innovations while avoiding traditional logical deductive reasoning; accordingly, this research method is considered emergent explicit (Connell & Lowe, 1997;

Martin & Woodside, 2008). In addition, this approach afforded the author an opportunity to delve deeper into interviewees' responses. All interviewees were allowed to address whatever issues they found important, forming a basis for comparison amongst participants.

Child sex tourism is an understandably sensitive topic that could present challenges for data collection. The author therefore chose to collaborate with a professional research company based in Beijing, China, to facilitate data collection. According to Corbin and Strauss (1990), qualitative approach samples are not drawn from specific groups or units of time, but are instead chosen on the basis of focal concepts, properties, dimensions, and characteristics. Thus, a purposive sampling technique was used to guide participant selection. The target participants for this study consisted of active Chinese outbound tourists who had travelled overseas at least 5 times within the past 2 years. Due to the nature of the sample population (Chinese tourists whose mother tongue was Mandarin), bilingual English-Chinese interview questions were provided. The original interview questions were translated into Chinese by our research assistant who is proficient in both languages.

The author acknowledged the practical difficulties in differentiating tourists' perceptions of and reactions to child sex prostitution in certain tourism destinations and how these reactions might influence participants' tourism engagement and behaviour, especially amongst Chinese tourists who might not otherwise give much thought to this phenomenon. Therefore, the study sample consisted of individuals who were already aware of child sex prostitution in a tourism context and expressed interest in sharing their views on the matter. These individuals thus demonstrated a relatively deeper understanding of child prostitution in tourism; as such, they were assumed to be better able to articulate their perceptions of and anticipated reactions to this issue and to identify related potential influences on their travel engagement and behaviour in the near future. This sampling strategy generally enables researchers to exercise their best judgement in choosing participants who can thoroughly respond to the research questions and help fulfil the study objectives (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2003).

To facilitate recruitment, the authors prepared an informational sheet about this study supplemented by relevant news and annual reports published via social media and official organisations (e.g., End Child Prostitution and Trafficking [ECPAT]). These materials were sent to the collaborating research company. All interview participants were drawn from the company's database. Initially, 250 active Chinese outbound tourists who exhibited sociodemographic diversity were contacted in November 2019, from whom the final sample was filtered. Ultimately, 56 potential participants responded; 29 expressed an interest in discussing child sex tourism and reported being knowledgeable about this issue in tourism, hospitality, and broader contexts. In the end, 27 participants agreed to participate in formal in-depth interviews with the author. To ensure sufficient sample size, three additional respondents were invited for in-depth interviews for saturation testing, the resulting indicated no new nodes or concepts after completing these consecutive interviews, suggesting that there is an achievement in terms of theoretical saturation. (Fusch and Ness, 2015). This sample size is also similar to recent studies on emerging topics in tourism and hospitality (Li, Liu, Cai, & Scott, 2020; Neuhofer, Celuch, & To, 2020).

Interviews were conducted December 2–31, 2019 via WeChat's video call function, similar to Skype. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the topics of interest, the author invited a bilingual Mandarin–English research assistant to engage in data collection. Table 1 presents

a general profile of the participants. Of the 27 interviewees, 19 were between 46 and 60 years old, 7 were between 31 and 45 years old, and 1 was between 21 and 30 years old. Twenty out of 27 interviewees were men, and 7 were women. Ten were civil servants, nine worked in tertiary education, and five were retired. The 27 interviewees held at least a bachelor's degree, and 16 had completed a master's (59%); and 6 had earned a doctorate (22%). In addition, all 27 interviewees had travelled at least 5 times within the past 2 years: 11 had travelled 5 times, 13 had travelled between 6 and 10 times, and 3 had travelled more than 10 times. The Chinese typically consider crimes involving children to be evil and immoral based on the country's traditions, culture, and educational system (Perren & Alsaker, 2006).

<Table 1 inserts about here>

Interviews lasted between 20 and 35 minutes and were audio-recorded with interviewees' consent. Following Charmaz's recommendation (2006), the interview protocol was semi-structured and consisted of open-ended questions. As indicated in the crime and deviance literature, the main interview topics were chosen to understand human behaviours including human perceptions, relations, and intended actions towards certain crimes and socially deviant behaviours (e.g., Balemba, Beauregard, & Mieczkowski, 2012; Ghetti & Redlich, 2001; Su et al., 2022; Walter et al., 2020; Wortley et al., 2019). Therefore, questions covered three broad categories (i.e., perceptions, reactions, and intended actions) that were relevant to the research objectives, and they focused on three main questions: (1) What are your perceptions of child sex tourism in overseas tourism destinations? (2) What are your reactions to child sex tourism, and how might this issue influence your future engagement in outbound tourism? and (3) What actions do you think should be taken to help address child sex tourism (e.g., joining relevant organisations such as ECPAT)? Participants were allowed to freely express their views on child sex tourism; the open-ended nature of these questions was intended to promote honesty and reduce pressure to respond in a particular way.

To minimise the potential for missing data or distorted information after interview transcription, the original Chinese transcripts were analysed to ensure data quality. Manual coding was chosen as an efficient method to process the qualitative interview data given the relatively small sample size in this study. After reviewing all transcripts, the author and research assistant discussed the coding scheme at length before coding transcripts based on the three aforementioned categories. Intercoder reliability was assessed by comparing the author's and assistant's codes and calculating the reliability coefficient (i.e., the ratio of coding agreement to the total number of coding decisions) (Holsti, 1969); this careful data analysis process yielded intercoder reliability that far exceeded the recommended threshold of 80% (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998). Another colleague was invited to review all codes and helped to finalise the results by making decisions about three codes on which the author and research assistant expressed differing opinions.

After analysing the data in Chinese, the author and research assistant back-translated relevant results and participant commentary into English per Behling and Law's (2000) suggestion. A third-party professional translator specialising in Chinese and English also reviewed each translated version for major discrepancies in phrasing and expression. The translator then finalised the translations following two rounds of discussion with the author and research assistant. English-language excerpts are presented in the following sections.

3. Results

The study's findings were organised around three emergent themes: (1) tourists' negative perceptions of child sex tourism; (2) tourists' boycotts against child sex tourism; and (3) tourists' suggested strategies to combat child sex tourism. Accompanying subthemes are also discussed. Participant quotes have been lightly edited and condensed for coherence.

3.1. Tourists' perceptions of child sex tourism

All interviewees expressed extremely negative perceptions of child sex tourism. Given this commonality, the author paid particular attention to the extent to which child sex tourism may influence participants' travel-related decisions and behaviours. Participants described child sex tourism as "handwringing," "painful," "heartbreaking," "wicked," "abominable," "disgusting," and "nasty". Most interviewees also indicated that they seldom associated child prostitution with tourism and hospitality, specifically with respect to child sex tourism. Although participants were encouraged to remain neutral in their responses, the author noted that most participants became emotional when discussing this issue. Participants 23, 11, and 12 mused,

Every child should have a happy, peaceful childhood. It's important for a good life and career. Over the past couple decades, I've read some stuff about child sex trafficking, child prostitution, and child sex slavery around the world—but it seems like it happens more in Southeast Asia. I've heard that sex tourism is popular in some places, but you never want to put 'child' and 'sex tourism' together, you know? I try to tell myself it's rare. [But] I know I'm just lying to myself so I don't have to face the ugly parts of the world. For child sex tourism, I just want to know why it happens and whether professionals can find a solution. It's like, "You must be able to help these children who are in hell, going through unbelievable suffering, right?!" The idea of child sex tourism always shocks me. And it sticks with me whenever I think about it. Of course, if anywhere tried to [encourage] child prostitution and child sex tourism, I—and not just me, anyone with a conscience—would never visit! (Participant 23; 60-year-old man)

I have an 18-year old daughter, so I guess I have a more feminist view. Having a child is so special for the whole family. I can only see child sex tourism happening for two reasons. [First,] people in poverty might sell their kids to traffickers. Then those kids could be resold for sexual services, like in tourism destinations. And [second,] children who've been trafficked can be sold to other businesses. It's happening around the world; we can't deny that. Sure, trafficking is a global issue, and it's complicated, but what about child sex tourism? If tourists can behave responsibly when they travel at

home and overseas—like staying away from anything to do with child sex, no matter where—then that kind of tourism would probably [decline]. I mean, I think that if demand went down, then the value of trafficking children and selling them into sex tourism would go down, too. Maybe it's cliché, but no demand, no supply. So, I think tourists can play a big part in stopping child sex tourism. But they've got to realise it's happening and do things differently. (Participant 11; 45-year-old woman)

Whenever I think about the subjects of child prostitution and child sex tourism, I look at the sky and ask, "What's happened to the world?" This hidden phenomenon shouldn't be happening. (Participant 12; 55-year-old man)

While all participants expressed negative perceptions of child sex tourism, they were more willing to discuss at length how they might deal with such issues in tourism. Relevant findings appear in Sec. 3.2.

3.2. Tourists' reactions to child sex tourism

Participants unanimously stated they would combat child sex tourism through tourism boycotts. They discussed doing so in two ways: 1) boycotting tourism destinations where child sexual services had been or are currently available; and 2) boycotting any and all tourism services and products related to child sex tourism.

3.2.1. Boycotting destinations where child sex tourism was or is occurring

Eighteen participants shared their opinions about destinations that were either previously known for child sex tourism or where tourists could currently purchase such services. Although such destinations may no longer be associated with child sex tourism, participants were still willing to boycott them; the areas' destination images appeared to have been tarnished.

Any tourism [stakeholders], especially government officials, need to help the industry be healthy and sustainable in the long run. Child sexual services could be a hidden market in some places. Officials need to be aware of that and do whatever they can to end this market. Some places might try to change their image by staying away from child sex tourism and other 'labels' that aren't socially OK. But I think, for tourists with a sense of social responsibility and a good heart, they wouldn't go to those places even if child sex tourism weren't happening there anymore. Just knowing that it had would stay with them for a long time. It shows that tourism destinations should really think about the images they're showing tourists from different countries, cultures, and religions. Even though I'll never visit destinations [with a history of] child sex tourism, I'm glad they're doing something to stop it. (Participant 5; 52-year-old man)

I'm happy that people at the top [in a tourism context] are trying to make the world better. [The fact] that child sex tourism can be eliminated in certain places is a really good sign. Obviously more is being done to protect kids and reduce market demand. That should discourage traffickers from committing crimes against children in the long run. But personally, I'd have no reason to go to those places no matter what, like for food, culture, or sightseeing. I think a boycott's a good consequence for mistakes. Maybe it'd get destinations to think twice if they're still letting child sex tourism happen. (Participant 12; 55-year-old man)

All participants condemned tourism destinations where child sex tourism persisted, expressing much stronger boycott intentions. For example, a young participant explained,

Having children sell sex—that’s unforgivable. The media should report more on child prostitution in tourism destinations so more people know it’s happening. I’d never visit anywhere that had offered child sex tourism even if it was available a really long time ago. My generation, we like being ‘free’ when we travel. We do [participate in] legal services that we can’t get at home, like buying sex—but not from kids! Destinations that do that should be blacklisted. And tourists should know about the risk. (Participant 19; 25-year-old man)

3.2.2. Boycotting child sex tourism activities and services

Apart from participants’ boycotts against child sex tourism destinations, they uniformly mentioned consumer boycotts against any activity related to child sex tourism. One participant expressed concerns over why these issues occur in tourism and how to educate tourist groups who may visit destinations to procure sexual services from children:

People should definitely boycott illegal tourism activities, let alone those [involving] children. I think the child sex tourism market is much smaller than commercial sex tourism and happens under the table, but I wonder about people’s conscience: child traffickers, child sexual service organisers, and consumers. How do they live with themselves, with what they do to these children and their loved ones? Travellers and other people near the industry have to work together to end what’s happening to children in tourism. (Participant 1; 41-year-old woman)

I worry about how to stop people from buying sex from children in tourism destinations. I think most people wouldn’t do that, though. Only some with kinks or special desires. Maybe they’re mentally ill. So boycotting activities in child sex tourism is just the beginning. It’s more important for us to work together to educate [others] and help the people who buy sex from kids. I’ve even thought—maybe there’s some medication they could take. But I still don’t want to believe these things are real. (Participant 11; 43-year-old man)

Participants were evidently interested in raising public awareness around child sex tourism as a means of encouraging others to take action. Further recommendations for intervention are outlined below.

3.3. Tourists’ recommended strategies to address child sex tourism

Participants generally suggested two feasible strategies to combat child sex tourism: (a) advocating for the cause through official channels or social media, and (b) enhancing people’s awareness of the consequences of child sex tourism.

[Child sex tourism] is complicated. As a tourist, I’d suggest advocating for child protection or ways to rescue children who’ve been involved in sex trafficking, slavery, and exploitation. And we shouldn’t just focus on tourism—we need to look everywhere. Government departments in tourism destinations should try to prevent, monitor, and

stop child prostitution. And tourists and residents [as key tourism stakeholders] should remember that these illegal activities might not be that far away. (Participant 23; 60-year-old man)

Interviewees also emphasised raising awareness around all aspects of child sex tourism, suggesting that such information dissemination could promote preventative efforts.

I don't think normal tourists can do too much about child sex tourism. It's risky and pretty underground. But there should be reports about it on social media to raise awareness. I guess paying more attention to it could help prevent illegal activities. And local government departments should be pressured to consider these issues and rescue children who are suffering. (Participant 1; 41-year-old woman)

3.4. Conceptual framework of tourists' perceptions of and reactions to child sex tourism

Using a qualitative approach, the findings of this study were classified under three major themes: (1) tourists' negative perceptions of child sex tourism; (2) tourists' boycott behaviours against child sex tourism; and (3) recommended strategies to combat child sex tourism. Theme 2 contained two subthemes: (a) tourist boycotts against destinations known for child sex tourism; and (b) tourist boycotts against child sex tourism activities and services. Theme 3 was also characterised by subthemes: (a) advocacy to prevent and identify issues related to child sex tourism; and (b) measures to enhance the public's awareness of child sex tourism. Integrating these major themes and subthemes resulted in a conceptual framework illustrating potential tourists' perceptions of and reactions to child sex tourism; see Figure 1.

<Figure 1 inserts about here>

4. Discussion

This study aimed to explore Chinese individuals' perceptions of and reactions to child sex tourism and the effects of such issues on travellers' tourism engagement and relevant behaviours. By referring to a sample of 27 active Chinese outbound tourists who expressed interest in the topic, a qualitative approach involving open-ended and semi-structured interviews was used to address an important but woefully under-researched social issue. This study sought to make significant contributions to the limited understanding of how tourists, as a key stakeholder group in the tourism industry, perceive and react to child sex tourism in this industry. This study also uncovered how child sex tourism may influence tourism participation and relevant behaviours, such as tourist boycotts and advocacy. To the author's best knowledge, this study is the first empirical work on child sex tourism to involve in-depth interviews with Chinese individuals. The findings offer several meaningful academic and practical implications.

First, this research empirically explored Chinese individuals' perceptions of child sex tourism. Tourism scholars have investigated topics related to sex tourism in prior decades (e.g., Leheny, 1995; Omondi & Ryan, 2017; Ryan & Kinder, 1996; Spencer & Bean, 2017; Ying & Wen, 2019); however, no research appears to have comprehensively considered individuals' perceptions of child sex tourism specifically. Unsurprisingly, individuals from different social backgrounds have been found to react negatively to news of child sex tourism. Yet in the absence of reliable empirical findings, academics and practitioners cannot fully understand tourists' viewpoints on the matter, or more importantly, its potential impacts on tourism participation and travel-related behaviours. As shown in Figure 1, individuals in this study expressed highly negative perceptions of child sex tourism, describing the practice as "handwringing," "painful," and "heartbreaking". Compared to Kosuri and Jeglic's (2017) study, which only explored Americans' perceptions of child sexual abuse in different locations, the current study has unravelled perceptions of this social issue within a tourism context that can inform preventative/protectionary strategies to help government officials, the general public, and perhaps even families become more aware of how to mitigate these relevant issues. Interviewees clearly differentiated between *sex tourism*, which is legal in certain destinations and involves consenting adults, and *child sex tourism*, which is illegal and carries more sinister consequences. Thus, these findings oppose those of Montgomery (2008), who noted that some sex tourists perceived the distinction between children and adults to be blurred in the context of sex tourism. In Montgomery's (2008) study, tourists in Thailand engaged in child sex tourism, which is inherently illicit and morally reprehensible compared to commercial (i.e., legal) sex tourism in destinations such as Amsterdam. Just as other tourism research has explored stakeholders' perceptions of certain phenomena and markets (e.g., Farrell, Pfeffer, & Bright, 2015; Li, Wen, & Ying, 2018; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2016), findings from the present study constitute a foundation to promote understanding of relevant tourist behaviours.

Second, after individuals in this study expressed negative viewpoints on child sex tourism, their reactions mainly involved boycotts: (a) refusing to visit destinations involved in child sex tourism in the past or present; and (b) condemning all child sex tourism activities. These results echo those of prior research (e.g., Fennell, 2012; Luo & Zhai, 2017; Shaheer et al., 2018) framing tourism boycotts as one indicator of the extent to which tourism markets have been affected by specific events. According to Shaheer et al. (2018), consumers may boycott destinations for various reasons, including defying social norms or engaging in egregious behaviour. Boycott-triggering events, and boycotts themselves, can exert adverse impacts on a destination's tourism industry. Upon reviewing 146 destination boycotts between 1948 and 2015, Shaheer et al. (2018) suggested that the growth in such boycotts could be tied to numerous developments: (1) technological innovation (e.g., social media platforms); (2) an increase in social movements; (3) an emphasis on ethical consumerism; and (4) the use of tourism as a vehicle for social change. Comparatively, the present study identified tourist boycotts against child sex tourism as a way for the public to communicate their displeasure with unacceptable norms and illegal activities. These efforts could positively influence the tourism industry as a whole. The current findings also concur with those of Shaheer et al. (2018), who indicated that tourist boycotts against social issues such as child sex tourism may be promoted via social media. Other motivating factors, as summarised earlier, include social movements as well as a focus on justice, ethical consumption, and using tourism to promote social change. These initiatives could draw more attention to children suffering in illegal industries through illegal activities such as child prostitution. Therefore, this study offers

additional empirical evidence on using tourism boycotts as a tool (i.e., to express dissatisfaction with certain tourism products and services) by taking child sex tourism as a case in point.

The present study also indicated that individuals differed in the degree to which they might boycott destinations that had been involved in child sex tourism compared to those that were currently involved. Although participants criticised tourism destinations where child prostitution had occurred, they agreed that the elimination of such businesses was encouraging. All participants were willing and eager to boycott destinations where child prostitution persisted. They also expressed intentions to spread the message via word-of-mouth and social media. All interviewees agreed to boycott activities related to child sex tourism without exception. Therefore, with respect to tourism boycotts, these findings interpret that tourists' boycott behaviours can pertain to destinations and tourism activities, respectively.

Third, these results conveyed individuals' interest in advocacy as a way to eradicate child sex tourism and to raise public awareness of this type of tourism and its consequences worldwide. Palmer, Koenig-Lewis, and Jones (2013) assessed the three dimensions of social identity (i.e., cognitive, emotional, and evaluative) and discovered that only one—cognitive identity—promoted strong advocacy behaviours in tourism. However, the current findings suggested that participants' knowledge of child prostitution and child sex tourism shaped their emotional, cognitive, and evaluative positions on the issue as socially deviant and illegal. Many expressed despair over the tragedies befalling children in the tourism industry as a result of child prostitution; however, the exact dimensions that may influence tourists' advocacy around child sex tourism require further investigation, preferably using a quantitative approach. Moreover, consistent with previous studies (e.g., Dickinson, Robbins, Filimonau, Hares, & Mika, 2013; Rattan, Eagles, & Mair, 2012; Timothy, 2000) regarding the importance of tourism awareness around social issues such as climate change, community development, and conservation, this study revealed that stakeholders' awareness of illegal tourism activities must be enhanced to effectively combat and prevent such activities in the long term.

Theoretical contributions

To the authors' best knowledge, this study is the first empirical work on child sex tourism to involve in-depth interviews with Chinese individuals. The findings offer several meaningful academic and practical implications. First, this research enriches existing knowledge of child sex tourism through exploring Chinese individuals' perceptions. Tourism scholars have investigated topics related to sex tourism in prior decades (e.g., Leheny, 1995; Omondi & Ryan, 2017; Ryan & Kinder, 1996; Spencer & Bean, 2017; Ying & Wen, 2019); however, no research appears to have comprehensively considered individuals' perceptions of child sex tourism specifically. Unsurprisingly, individuals from different social backgrounds have been found to react negatively to news of child sex tourism. Yet in the absence of reliable empirical findings, academics and practitioners cannot fully understand tourists' viewpoints on the matter, or more importantly, its potential impacts on tourism participation and travel-related behaviours.

Second, the current work used a qualitative approach to develop a conceptual framework of Chinese individuals' perceptions of and reactions to child sex tourism (Figure 1). Previous research on sex tourism adopted quantitative (Ying & Wen, 2019; Wen et al., 2021) as well as

conceptual approaches (Brooks, & Heaslip, 2018); however, there is a lack of attention paid to child sex tourism in qualitative literature. To the best of our knowledge, our work is the first empirical work that used a qualitative approach for this sensitive theme. It fills a relevant gap within tourism literature that captures a complete picture of tourists' perspectives on socially deviant or illegal behaviours such as child sex tourism.

Third, the current work serves as a theoretical foundation for understanding child sex tourism in tourism research. The developed conceptual framework consists of multi-dimensional factors that generalise the advanced understanding of phenomena related to child sex tourism: negative perception of child sex tourism, boycott of sex destination or activities, child protection avocation, and raised public awareness of child sex tourism. This conceptual framework was theorized via the inductive method. The findings might not be generalizable to all tourism destinations universally; however, this study represents an initial underpinning through a qualitative approach, and developed an in-depth understanding of tourists' perceptions of and reactions to child sex tourism.

Managerial implications

Since traffickers and child sex service providers are a global issue with links to multiple industries, the present study also provides several managerial implications that could contribute to a solution to this issue. From a managerial perspective, this study's focus on tourists' perspectives uncovered useful information for tourism stakeholders. First, the current findings provide insights into tourists' negative perceptions of and reactions to child sex tourism and to illegal and socially deviant activities. International governments could use these guidelines to benefit their local law and legislations. For instance, trafficking children has been labelled as a crime according to international law and many national and regional legal systems across the globe (Rafiek, 2018; Brooks, & Heaslip, 2018). International cooperation between local and international governments should be leveraged to restrict child sex tourism initiatives. Several countries do not regularly enforce forbidden prostitution and are therefore recognised destinations for sex tourists. To overcome this challenge, the extraterritorial sexual exploitation of children should be treated as a crime against humanity and given global jurisdiction and penalty due to its heinous nature. On a similar note, the findings implied that international tourists should boycott against child sex tourism activities and services. To prevent and limit child sex tourism, international immigration departments should implement or evaluate visitors' passport controls including personal passport revocation of transnational child sex offenders. International borders should implement initiatives such as stamped passports or a record system for child offenders so that other countries' border patrols can make decisions on approving or rejecting their entry.

Second, results from this study also benefit tourism practitioners by providing an understanding on how sharply tourist flow decreases when child sex tourism occurs at a destination. This could result in crippling local tourism businesses' revenues. Trafficking children and engaging in child sex tourism heavily damage a destination's image. The interview results revealed that Chinese tourists have negative perceptions about child sex tourism, specifically describing

these perceptions as painful, nasty, disgusting, heartbreaking, and so on (see Figure 1); these negative perceptions contribute to building a negative destination image. Destination image is crucial for drawing potential tourists to a destination and retaining existing visitors, both of which contribute to the development of local tourism industries. In this sense, tourists' perceived destination images should be a major concern to tourism industry personnel. Hence, tourism destinations should seek to minimise or eliminate problematic activities, including those that are blatantly illegal or dangerous. The tourism industry should be advised to package and promote tour programs that exclude illegal and unethical activities. Marketing communication strategies should focus on ethical tourism consumption. The tourism industry should encourage tourists to pursue health tourism activities such as wellness tourism and sports tourism. This may enable tourists to have a healthy and relaxing trip, potentially eliminating their intentions to experience child sex tourism.

Third, the current study contributes to enhancing the public's awareness of child sex tourism. Public awareness (including that of tourism operators) around the effects of illegal activities on industry development is increasing. Building public awareness is a crucial activity for the protection of children (Rafiek, 2018). From a community safety standpoint, illegal tourism businesses can also endanger residents' security. Local children may be at risk in destinations where child prostitution occurs, and responsible parents or guardians would need to be consistently aware of their children's whereabouts. Findings from this study may inspire campaigns to protect children from being drawn into child sex tourism. Efforts could also be undertaken to rescue children who have already been victimised by illegal industry businesses. Overall, the current study not only makes contributions to tourism stakeholders but also contributions to public audiences. Through the understanding of perceptions of child sex tourism, it is advocated to restrict and boycott any business or destination in the tourism industry where child sex tourism occurs so that the criminals and criminal activity can be reduced through the interaction between supply and demand.

Limitations and further work

This study is not without limitations, although such factors offer valuable avenues for future research. First, despite the investigator and collaborating research organisation taking steps to interview 27 active Chinese outbound tourists, the sample characteristics reflect some limitations and generalisabilities. This paper concentrates on opinions from Chinese senior outbound tourists, so there may be a lack of reflection of the comprehensive views and opinions from wider communities. Further work could collect data from other tourism stakeholders including government officials, tourism practitioners, and local community members. This would allow subsequent research to present a richer perspective on child sex tourism based on multi-level insights. There could also be greater collaboration strategies with other parties to provide better implementations for this emerging issue (i.e., child sex tourism).

Second, it would be interesting for future studies to consider tourists' prior travel patterns (e.g., which countries/destinations they have visited). It would also be helpful to investigate which countries tourists associate with child sex tourism. The limited body of knowledge around this form of tourism can also be enriched by quantitative methods; approaches including survey

questionnaires would allow researchers to obtain more robust statistical results to understand this and other topics more fully. Notably, although participants in this study largely opposed child sex tourism, subsequent research should further explore tourists' actual behaviours (e.g., whether travellers have taken steps to decry sex trafficking).

Last, the sensitive nature of child sex tourism could discourage participants from sharing honest opinions (Litwin & Ngan, 2019) during face-to-face interviews. Scholars who broach this topic further could incorporate a version of the Implicit Association Test from social psychology to ascertain participants' subconscious reactions to this type of tourism. Child sex tourism might also emerge in new destinations as tourism expands. This study's results thus uncover new research avenues overall. By laying the groundwork for next-level social, economic, and political practices, the authors seek to inspire tourism scholars to investigate child sex tourism. A more active research stream could potentially bring multidisciplinary experts and industry practitioners together to devise strategies to prevent child sex tourism and protect children, their families, and local communities from the negative effects of tourism development.

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