A Research on Mandarin–Japanese–English Trilingual Chinese Tourists' Service Language Preferences When Traveling in Japan

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ABSTRACT

Despite the important role language plays in international tourism, language influence in touristic service encounters remains a relatively neglected area of research. This study investigates multilingual consumers' service language preferences in touristic situations. A total of 131 Chinese tourists were asked to rate their comfort level when serviced by a Japanese or Chinese employee in several representative service encounters that they may experience in Japan. The results revealed that multilingual consumers show different service language preferences in different service encounters. However, they do not always attach much importance to native language services in such touristic situations. Moreover, service employee's nationality can influence consumers' perception and satisfaction toward a particular service language. These findings help marketers and service providers achieve a deeper understanding of international consumers' psychology and behavior, and are designed to foster further improvement in service quality in the hospitality industry.

Keywords: language preference, touristic service encounters, purchase-decision involvement, nationality
JEL Classification Codes: C12, L83, M31

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1. Introduction and background

As a sector accounting for 10% of the world's GDP, 7% of global trade, and one in ten jobs (UNWTO, 2018)[1], international tourism has a significant impact on economic growth. The Japanese government has been proactively attracting international tourists for a long time. Tourism is positioned as a pillar of Japan's growth strategy and also as a trump card for vitalizing local economies (Abe, 2016). With the government's continuous efforts, such as the relaxation of visa requirements and extension of consumption tax exemption system, inbound tourism has become one of the few sectors to see rapid growth in today's Japanese economy.

The annual expenditure by international visitors in Japan totaled 4.8 trillion yen in 2019, with tourists from mainland China contributing approximately 36.8% of the overall amount (JTA, 2020)[2]. Simultaneously, Chinese tourists also account for the largest portion of overall foreign visitors to Japan for several years (JNTO, 2020)[3]. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization, Chinese tourists overseas spent 277.3 billion U.S. dollars in 2018 (Figure 1) and will continuously play a key role in the sector's development. Given that China has grown to the world's most powerful outbound market and the No.1 source of overseas visitors for Japan (Figure 2), to further attract more Chinese visitors, great efforts have been made by Japan to improve its services and facilities, including building a better language environment.

Japanese-language learners in China reached a total population of over one million in 2018, making China the country with the largest number of Japanese-language students, at present (The Japan Foundation, 2019)[4]. With a substantial improvement in the relations between China and Japan, the number of these prospective tourists continues to grow. Simultaneously, most of those Chinese who are able to communicate in Japanese can also speak English, as Chinese people make an early start at learning English (Hu, 2007). Since language plays a significant role in international tourism, for the importance of communicative interaction between consumers and service personnel in a service encounter is widely recognized (Holmqvist and Grönroos, 2012), it is necessary for service providers in Japan to understand the language preferences of these continuously increasing multilingual consumers in touristic situations.

Studies on multilingual consumers' service language preferences mainly argue for the significant benefits brought about by using customers' national languages

1 The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) is the United Nations agency responsible for promoting responsible, sustainable, and universally accessible tourism.

2 The Japan Tourism Agency (JTA) is an agency of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism.

3 The Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) is an independent administrative institution of the government of Japan that provides information about Japan to promote travel to and in the country.

4 The Japan Foundation is an incorporated administrative agency in Japan that dedicated to carrying out comprehensive international cultural exchange programs throughout the world.

Figure 1: Top 10 countries by outbound spending (USD billion), 2018
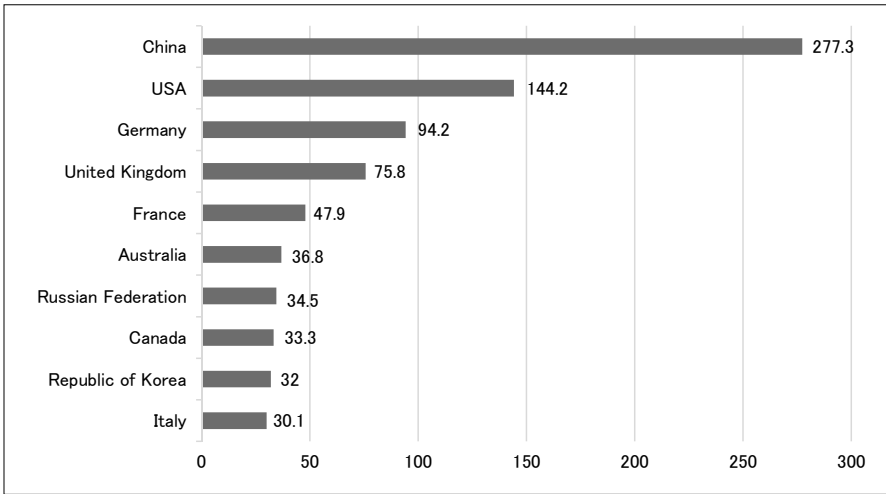
Source: UNWTO Annual Report 2018

Figure 2: Number of international tourists and tourism expenditure in Japan by region and country, 2019
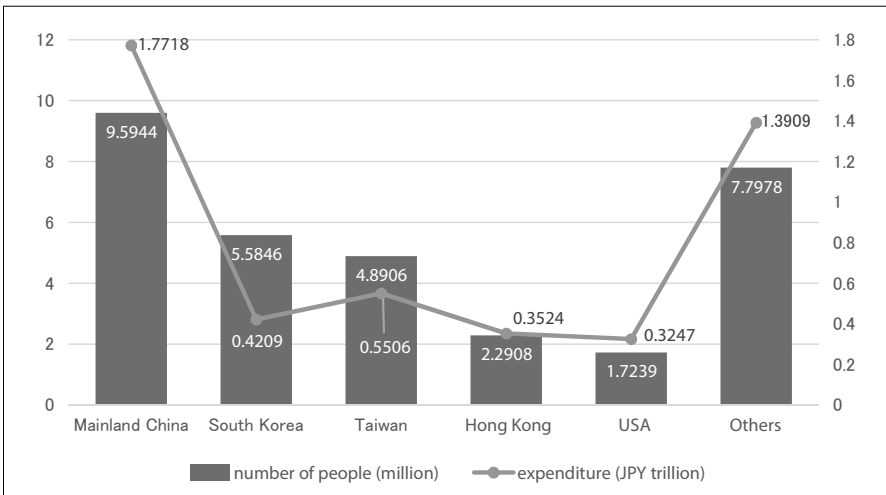
Source: Japan National Tourism Organization and Japan Tourism Agency

(Holmqvist, 2011; Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh, 2013; Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist, 2013). However, this study doubts if it is the best approach to service customers in their native languages in cross-cultural service encounters. Current research on language use in cross-cultural service encounters focuses exclusively on multilingual countries, that is to say, in domestic situations. This research extends these studies by suggesting that in touristic situations when consumers want to experience original and authentic local service, multilingual consumers will not attach much importance to native language service, and possibly show interest in local language service in certain circumstances. As prior studies have shown that consumers' language preferences change in accordance with the situations they are in (Bell and Puzakova, 2017; Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh, 2013; Kraak and Holmqvist, 2017), the proposition in this study will be tested by a quantitative study examining multilingual Chinese consumers' service language preferences when serviced by a Japanese and a Chinese employee, respectively, in several representative service encounters that they may experience when traveling in Japan. Given that previous studies on multilingual service encounters are conducted in western countries (Alvarez et al., 2017; Morales et el., 1999; Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist, 2013) or focus on language use in situations without active consumer interaction (Krishna and Ahluwalia, 2008; Luna and Peracchio, 2005; Noriega and Blair, 2008), this study also contributes to the literature by shifting the focus to the eastern world and concentrating on the active and direct interaction between consumers and service personnel, as both different national or cultural characteristics and verbal communication during a service encounter play important roles in shaping consumers' attitudes and behaviors (Harrison-Walker, 2001; Kuo, 2007; Pantouvakis, 2013).

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1. Language in touristic situations

With the development of service marketing, the importance of good communication in service interactions between consumers and service providers, as a crucial aspect of service evaluation, is increasingly gaining attention (Gabbott and Hogg, 2001; Sparks and Callan, 1992; Svensson and Grönroos, 2008). In service contexts, the nature of the servicescape can affect both cognitive and emotional outcomes for consumers (Wakefield and Blodgett, 1994). The value that consumers perceive explicitly derives from the interaction between consumers and service providers (Bendapudi and Leone, 2003). Since the consumer's active role and the significance of the communicative interaction are built on the assumption that the consumer and the service provider are able to effortlessly interact and communicate, the crucial role language plays in service contexts is well acknowledged (Holmqvist and Grönroos, 2012). When it comes to cross-cultural interaction, the receiver's native and foreign language capabilities are considered as major causes that lead to communication issues (Marcella and Davies, 2004).

Obviously, language plays a significant role in international tourism, as it may strengthen the pleasantness and satisfaction during the travel, or act as a barrier. The communication in touristic situations is undoubtedly of high temporariness of the foreigners and a high degree of linguistic accommodation of the locals to them (Cohen and Cooper, 1986). A tourist must integrate into a culturally distinct environment in which he or she will react with different degrees of comfort and enthusiasm (Kastenholz, 2010). Moreover, hospitality service providers engage in tailoring their service offerings and communication approaches based on the customer's cultural background to provide better services (Wang et al., 2015). Further, one study shows that tourists speaking different native languages from service employees tend to pay more attention to communication itself compared with those sharing the same native language, who assess more dimensions of the service (Prayag and Ryan, 2012). Therefore, the satisfaction derived from the tourism experience is much contingent upon language proximity or adaption.

Globally, multilingual countries are more prevalent than those with a single official language (Holmqvist and Grönroos, 2012). International tourism, with more than three million tourists crossing international borders every day and approximately 1.2 billion people traveling abroad per year (UNWTO, 2018), is also receiving considerable attention in recent years. These globally multilingual settings make it necessary for marketers to understand the circumstances under which multilingual customers show preference to native language service or engage in communicating in a non-native language.

2.2. Purchase-decision involvement

Involvement is considered to be a key concept in personal purchasing behavior because it reflects a strong motivation in the form of perceived individual relevance of goods or services (Lee and Kim, 2018). Research on consumer involvement goes back to Sherif and Cantril's (1947) early work. They use "ego involvement" to emphasize the personal and emotional nature of involvement. Accordingly, Day (1970) defines involvement as "the general level of interest in the object or the centrality of the object to the person's ego structure." In Zaichkowsky's (1985) study, involvement is defined as "a person's perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values, and interests," which explains how much time, energy, and resources customers devote to the purchase process (Kim and Lee, 2017). All of these explanations contribute to the thought that involvement requires a goal-object and exists whenever an issue or object is related to a unique cluster of attitudes and values that constitute a person's ego (Bloch and Richins, 1983).

Because of the different applications of the term *involvement*, involvement has diverse definitions and measures and is seldom used alone by researchers. In purchase decision research, the concern is that the decision is relevant, and hence, that the consumer will be motivated to make a careful purchase decision (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Involvement is further described as a measure of the level of product interest and the product's importance to the consumer. Scholars have utilized the level of

involvement with a good or service to differentiate the degree of effort in terms of time or energy that a person will spend in the buying process (Lee and Kim, 2018). Houston and Rothschild (1978) believe that different situations and people are two factors that lead to various levels of involvement. They further present a relatively comprehensive framework of involvement consisting of situational, enduring, and response involvement that influence the consumer's level of involvement (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Moreover, Zaichkowsky (1985) has developed a four-faceted scale, comprising perceived differences among brands, brand preferences, interest in gathering information about the product category, and comparison of product attributes among brands, to measure the construct of involvement. In the same year, Laurent and Kapferer (1985) suggested that marketing researchers use an "involvement profile" that consists of importance, pleasure, sign, risk importance, and risk probability to specify the level of consumer involvement. They believe that one could not capture the consumer's involvement through a single index, and all facets of the involvement profile must simultaneously be taken into account because different facets have different influences on selected aspects of consumer behavior. However, this approach does not explicitly recognize the distinction between product-level and purchase-decision level involvement, and none of the four factors is directly connected with purchase-decision involvement (PDI).

Given the absence of a measurement scale for PDI, Mittal (1989) defines PDI as the extent of interest and concern that a consumer brings to affect a purchase-decision task; further, he proposes a purchase-involvement measurement scale composed of four items, namely, degree of caring, perceived brand differences, importance of right brand selections, and concern with the outcome (Mittal, 1989). This purchase-involvement scale is short and simple, at the same time does fine in most research studies on the concept of attitude. Consequently, it provides marketing researchers and practitioners with measures of characterizing the purchase of a product as high or low on purchase involvement for the target customers as a whole.

2.3. Language preferences in service encounters

Researchers have advanced various motives, such as social presence, emotional connotations, and demographic factors, that influence multilingual consumers' service language preferences (Bell and Puzakova, 2017; Holmqvist, 2011; Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist, 2013). Moreover, consumers' willingness to switch to a non-native language appears to be connected with the context in which the interaction takes place.

2.3.1. High purchase-decision involvement situations

As indicated in prior studies, differences in consumers' service language preference are considered to exist in different consumer involvement levels. Moreover, most of the current literature on language use or preference in cross-cultural servicescape tends to address situations in which customers prefer to use their native language. Holmqvist (2011, 2013) conducted several studies concerning bilingual consumers'

perceived importance of native language use in domestic service encounters and found that the use of native language is preferred by consumers, especially when they are in high service involvement circumstances (Holmqvist, 2011; Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh, 2013; McDougall and Levesque, 2000).

Extant literature emphasizes the importance of keeping customers informed in a language they can understand, that is to say, focuses on rather mundane service contexts where language use is purely communicative (Kraak and Holmqvist, 2017). Especially in high consumer involvement situations such as visiting a doctor or buying a precision electronic product that require a high degree of customer participation, language undoubtedly plays a significant role as a means of communication. In these circumstances, the use of special vocabulary may lead to misunderstandings that trigger comprehension problems, and thus, makes an impact on either the consumer themselves or their finances (Holmqvist et al., 2014). Given these considerations, it could be particularly important for consumers to use their first language in situations wherein consumers feel a certain loss of control (Holmqvist et al., 2014). Consumers would find it important to use their native language in high involvement circumstances to understand everything about the service and obtain a desired outcome (Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist, 2013).

Based on the aforementioned studies, this study postulates that in touristic situations, wherein linguistic adaption is needed, consumers prefer to use their native language in high consumer involvement situations, and thus, proposes the following hypothesis:

> H1: Mandarin–English–Japanese trilingual Chinese consumers prefer to be serviced in Chinese in high PDI settings when traveling in Japan.

Considering that Chinese tourists may be serviced by either a Japanese staff or a Chinese staff in Japan, H1 is further divided into two specific situations:

> H1-1: When being serviced by a Japanese staff in high PDI settings in Japan, Mandarin–English–Japanese trilingual Chinese consumers prefer speaking Chinese to Japanese, or English.

> H1-2: When being serviced by a Chinese staff in high PDI settings in Japan, Mandarin–English–Japanese trilingual Chinese consumers prefer speaking Chinese to Japanese or English.

2.3.2. Low purchase-decision involvement situations

Concerning low consumer involvement circumstances, in a fast-food restaurant, for example, service provided is considered moderate contact and standardized. Consumers perceive such service to be more standardized and find it difficult to differentiate offerings between service providers, and thus, be less involved (Kinard and Capella, 2006). In this situation, the outcome of the services is less dependent on co-operation between the service personnel and consumer, and consumers might feel comfortable even when serviced in their second language (Holmqvist and Van Vaerenbergh, 2013).

However, there are other motives that encourage multilingual customers to speak their non-native language. One prior study examines the social and environmental contextual factors on the service language preference and finds that service language preference depends on social presence (Bell and Puzakova, 2017). For example, some French customers may intentionally speak English in British pubs situated in France just because they want to show off their second language skills in front of their friends (Kraak and Holmqvist, 2017). Moreover, people who master a second language seldom having a chance to use tend to enjoy the opportunity to speak their second language (MacIntyre et al., 1999). Researchers have found that people may enjoy speaking a second language and feel good about themselves when they can carry out a communication in the foreign language they learn (Clément et al., 2003). Given these reasons, the following hypothesis is proposed:

> H2: Mandarin–English–Japanese trilingual Chinese consumers prefer to be serviced in Japanese in low PDI settings when traveling in Japan.

This hypothesis also consists of two parts:

> H2-1: When being serviced by a Japanese staff in low PDI settings in Japan, Mandarin–English–Japanese trilingual Chinese consumers prefer speaking Japanese to Chinese or English.

> H2-2: When being serviced by a Chinese staff in low PDI settings in Japan, Mandarin–English–Japanese trilingual Chinese consumers prefer speaking Japanese to Chinese or English.

2.3.3. Cross-cultural contexts

The role of language serves a broader purpose than merely as a means of communication (Kraak and Holmqvist, 2017). Languages, which used to be seen as the packaging of cultural forms or practices, can also be a part of products for tourist consumption (Chen and Hu, 2010; Kato, 2017). Kraak and Holmqvist (2017) argue that besides customer's perception of language in direct communication

with service employee, language could exert an even more extensive influence, contributing to how customers perceive the authenticity of the whole experience. Under certain circumstances, consumers' usual preference for their native language may give way to the desire to use a second language, particularly when engaging in a customer experience that is hedonic, and offers a temporary transformation. In some situations, tourism experience, for example, the possibility to communicate in a second language could enhance the customer's engaging experience that represents a break from the ordinary. Moreover, the service employees' language use could factor in the authenticity of the service establishment (Kraak and Holmqvist, 2017).

Coinciding with this opinion, another study conducted to examine how German-speaking visitors to Christchurch, New Zealand, experience German language promotional and interpretive material shows a similar proposal (Huisman and Moore, 1999). The general view of the visitors in that study is that too much German-language information reduces the challenge and enjoyment of the trip. It seems reasonable to speculate that for many tourists, there is little desire for host people to accommodate their language. Given the above-mentioned studies, this study postulates that changes in tourists' service language preferences may occur in those touristic circumstances that aim at providing tourists with original and authentic local services. Simultaneously, these situations should be distinguished from the former two situations. Thus, the third hypothesis is proposed as follows:

> H3: Mandarin–English–Japanese trilingual Chinese consumers prefer to be serviced in Japanese when consuming Japanese cultural services when traveling in Japan.

Since the English language service provided by a Chinese employee is considered to be unacceptable and divorced from reality, this situation seldom implemented or found in realistic settings is neglected when creating H3-2.

> H3-1: When being serviced by a Japanese staff in service encounters related to Japanese culture in Japan, Mandarin–English–Japanese trilingual Chinese consumers prefer speaking Japanese to Chinese or English.

> H3-2: When being serviced by a Chinese staff in service encounters related to Japanese culture in Japan, Mandarin–English–Japanese trilingual Chinese consumers prefer speaking Japanese to Chinese.

Figure 3: A quick guide of the hypothesis (PDI: Purchase-Decision Involvement)
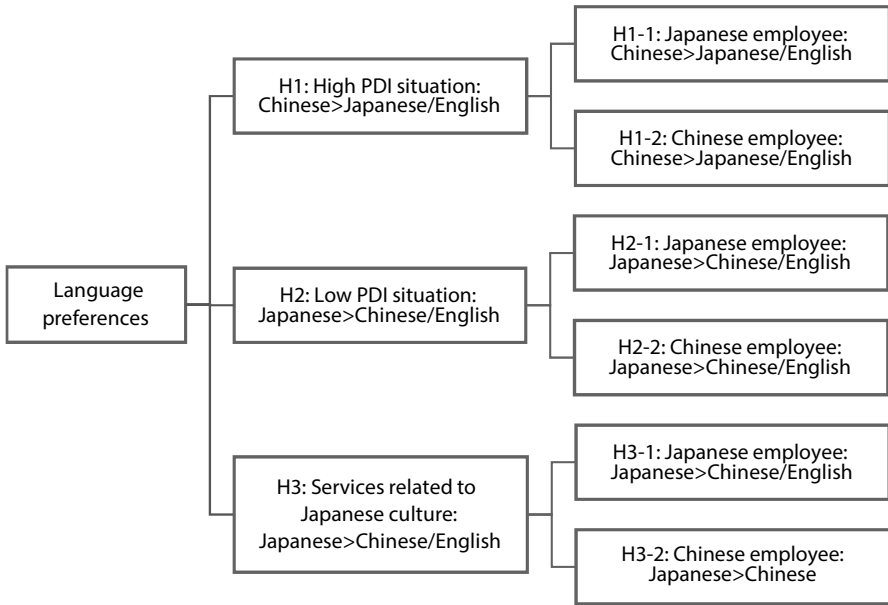
3. Methodology

3.1. Questionnaire design

The questionnaire focused on three service encounters, namely, one high PDI situation (buying a digital camera in an electronic store), one low PDI situation (buying toothpaste in a drug store), and one Japanese cultural situation (enjoying an overnight *onsen ryokan* stay). An overnight stay in an *onsen ryokan* was adopted in this study considering that it is an easily affordable and accessible way to experience traditional Japanese culture. Moreover, for foreigners not familiar with the local culture, communication with servicers is inevitable.

The questionnaire was composed of three parts in terms of the three aforementioned particular service encounters, and each encounter comprised a set of combinations of service employee's different nationalities (Japanese, Chinese) and specific service language (Japanese, Chinese, English). The respondents were asked to rate their comfort level across these settings on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = very uncomfortable; 7 = very comfortable). Considering the particular touristic circumstances and individual differences in levels of involvement in a given purchase-decision situation, this study also incorporated the 4-item PDI measurement scale developed by Mittal in 1989. The scale was used here, also on a 7-point Likert scale, to test if the first two situations of buying a digital camera and buying toothpaste belonged to high PDI situations and low PDI situations,

respectively, as supposed. The respondents were also asked to rate their skills, concluding both perceived language proficiency and obtained language certificates, in Japanese and English at the end of the questionnaire for reference.

3.2. Sample and participants

The questionnaires were distributed to Chinese tourists who can speak both Japanese and English, and are able to record their experience of traveling in Japan in recent years. Considering a wide range in communicative competence can be found in both Japanese and English among multilingual consumers, this study focused on those who had passed JLPT N2 (Japanese-Language Proficiency Test, Level N2) and CET4 (College English Test Band-4) and could carry on a conversation in both Japanese and English. Tencent Questionnaire, a popular online questionnaire tool, was used to collect the data. Each respondent was paid ¥15, even if they did not fully complete the questionnaires. As a result, 134 respondents were identified, based on snowball sampling, in two weeks. After eliminating unusable and extreme outlier responses and forms that could not be processed, 131 responses were deemed suitable for data analysis.

3.3. Statistical analysis

The analysis began with paired sample t-test to check if differences exist in respondents' perception of each PDI item between high and low PDI situations supposed by this study. Then, two-way repeated measures (nationality*language) ANOVA test was used for the independent and dependent variables in both the situations. When statistically significant effect among the observation of the within-subjects (nationality*language) was identified, pairwise comparisons were made among respondents' comfort level in different settings. Regarding the situations of an overnight stay in an *onsen ryokan*, this study directly performed one-way repeated measures (language) ANOVA and then applied pairwise comparison between languages. Additionally, Kendall's tau-b was used to test whether there was an association between gender and comfort level. All statistical procedures were performed using SPSS for Mac, version 25.

4. Results

4.1. Basic information of the participants

Table 1 shows the basic information about the participants. In terms of demographics, participants aged between 21 and 30 years, approximately 90% (n = 120) of the total number. There were more females (n = 91) than males (n = 40) in this survey. Regarding Japanese and English abilities, 35.1% (n = 46) respondents reported that they could easily converse about everyday things in Japanese, and 40.5%

(n = 53) thought that they could carry on a basic conversation in English. These two groups accounted for the largest percentage on both sides. Besides, 62.6% (n = 82) respondents had passed JLPT N1 (Japanese-Language Proficiency Test, Level N1) before they traveled to Japan. The number of those who passed TEM8 (Test for English Majors-Band 8, the higher level of a national test for English major college students in mainland China) took up 16% (n = 21) of the total number, 60.3% (n = 79) for TEM4 (Test for English Majors-Band 4, the lower level of a national test for English major college students in mainland China) or CET6 (College English Test Band-6, the higher level of a national English test for college students in mainland China), and 23.7% (n = 31) for CET4 (College English Test Band-4, the lower level of a national English test for college students in mainland China).

Table 1: Basic information of the participants

Variable	N (%)
Gender	
Male	40 (30.5%)
Female	91 (69.5%)
Age (year)	
<25	69 (52.7%)
26–30	52 (39.7%)
>31	10 (7.6%)
Perceived Japanese language proficiency	
Know a few common words	17 (13%)
Can carry on a basic conversation	28 (21.4%)
Can easily converse about everyday things	46 (35.1%)
Proficient in conversing at higher levels such as in the workplace	40 (30.5%)
Perceived English language proficiency	
Know a few common words	5 (3.8%)
Can carry on a basic conversation	53 (40.5%)
Can easily converse about everyday things	52 (39.7%)
Proficient at conversing at higher levels such as in the workplace	21 (23.7%)
Japanese certificate	
JLPT N1	82 (62.6%)
JLPT N2	49 (37.4%)
English certificate	
TEM8	21 (16%)
TEM4 or CET6	79 (60.3%)
CET4	31 (23.7%)

4.2. Evaluation of purchase-decision involvement level

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare respondents' perceptions of four pairs of PDI items in high and low PDI situations supposed by this study. Figure 4 and Table 2 present the results of this analysis, and Pairs 1–4 in Table 2 represent the sets of four PDI items, namely, degree of caring, perceived brand differences, importance of right brand selections, and concern with the outcome, respectively derived from low and high PDI situations.

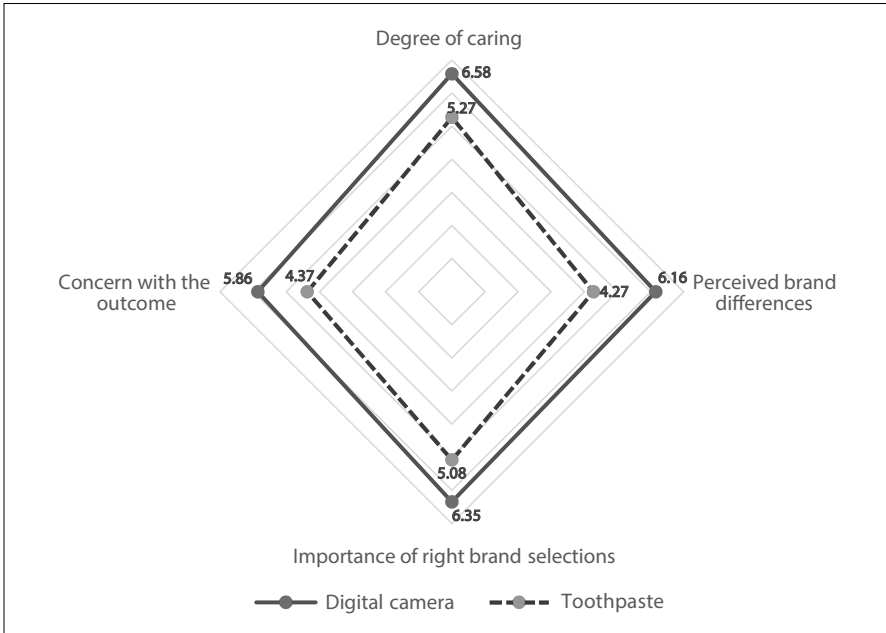**Figure 4:** Mean values of the four PDI items supposed in this study

Table 2: Paired differences of four pairs of PDI items

	Mean	SD	SEM	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	−1.313	1.382	.121	−1.552	−1.074	−10.877	130	.000
Pair 2	−1.885	1.596	.139	−2.161	−1.61	−13.519	130	.000
Pair 3	−1.267	1.621	.142	−1.547	−.987	−8.947	130	.000
Pair 4	−1.489	1.729	.151	−1.787	−1.19	−9.852	130	.000

Abbreviations: SD: Standard Deviation; SEM: Standard Error Mean; Sig.: Significance

As Table 2 indicates, the statistically significant difference was observed in each pair, for the p-values were less than 0.05. The results indicated that all of the four items were rated higher in the digital camera group than in the toothpaste group. Therefore, this study considers the scene of buying a digital camera in an electronic store and buying toothpaste in a drug store as a high PDI situation and low PDI situation, respectively.

4.3. High purchase-decision involvement situations

To examine H1, the data were analyzed by a two-way repeated measures ANOVA, with the service personnel's nationality (2 levels: Japanese, Chinese) and service language (3 levels: Japanese, Chinese, English) as the independent variables, and the respondents' comfort level as the dependent variable. There was no outlier detected by studentized residuals; Table 3 shows the data's descriptive statistics. Because the within-subject (nationality*language) failed to pass the Mauchly's sphericity test ($x^2 = 21.558$, $p < 0.05$), the Greenhouse–Geisser correction was employed, and the statistical significance of the within-subjects nationality*language was then proved ($F(1.733, 225.323) = 101.984$, $p < 0.05$). Moreover, the interaction of *nationality* with *language* can be observed in Figure 5.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of high purchase-decision involvement situation

Nationality*Language	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Japanese*Japanese	4.95	1.291	131
Japanese*Chinese	5.48	1.638	131
Japanese*English	3.92	1.735	131
Chinese*Japanese	3.36	1.746	131
Chinese*Chinese	6.47	.880	131
Chinese*English	2.92	1.554	131

Figure 5: Interaction of nationality with language in high purchase-decision involvement situation
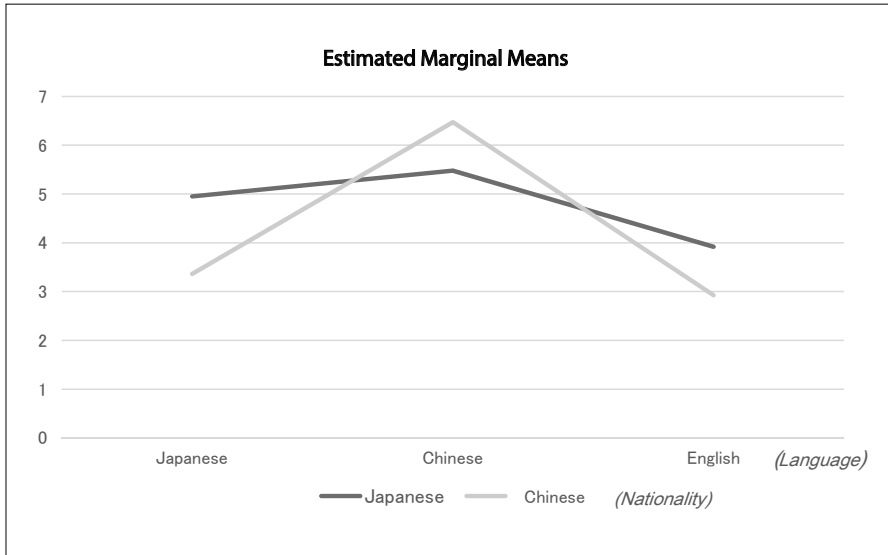
Both H1-1 and H2-2 were tested by examining the main effect of language (3 levels). Pairwise comparisons were based on the premise that the service employee was of the same nationality. When the service staff was a Japanese, the within-subject *language* failed to pass the Mauchly's sphericity test ($p = 0.011 < 0.05$). By Greenhouse–Geisser correction, the statistical significance of language was proved ($F(1.873, 243.491) = 37.462$, $p < 0.05$). Concerning H1-2, when the service staff was a Chinese, *language* passed the Mauchly's sphericity test, and was of statistical significance ($F(2, 260) = 280.739$, $p < 0.05$).

   As shown in Tables 3, 4, and 5, respondents showed a preference for Chinese language service. The mean value of Chinese and Japanese language reached 5.48 and 4.95, respectively, when a customer was serviced by a Japanese employee compared with 3.92 for English service. As a result, H1-1 was supported. When the service employee was Chinese, the score for Chinese language service reached 6.47, which was also the highest score for all six possible combinations, and consequently, H1-2 was proved. Comparing with this, Japanese service and English service scored 3.36 and 2.92, respectively. In terms of the obtained mean value, being serviced in Chinese was the top-rated choice on both sides, and thus, H1 was supported.

Table 4: The results of pairwise comparisons on the premise of high purchase-decision involvement and Japanese staff

Language 1	Language 2	Mean Difference (1-2)	Std. Error	Sig.[b]	95% Confidence Interval for Difference[b]	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Japanese	Chinese	−.534*	.198	.024	−1.015	−.054
	English	1.023*	.190	.000	.562	1.484
Chinese	Japanese	.534*	.198	.024	−.054	1.015
	English	1.557*	.158	.000	1.174	1.940
English	Japanese	−1.023*	.190	.000	−1.484	−.562
	Chinese	−1.557*	.158	.000	−1.940	−1.174

Based on estimated marginal means.* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
[b]Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni.
Mean difference in this table refers to the difference between the mean value of Language 1 and Language 2.

Table 5. Results of pairwise comparisons on the premise of high purchase-decision involvement and Chinese staff

Language 1	Language 2	Mean Difference (1-2)	Std. Error	Sig.[b]	95% Confidence Interval for Difference[b]	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Japanese	Chinese	−3.115*	.174	.000	−3.537	−2.692
	English	.443*	.158	.018	.059	.826
Chinese	Japanese	3.115*	.174	.000	2.692	3.537
	English	3.557*	.158	.000	3.174	3.940
English	Japanese	−.443*	.158	.018	−.826	−.059
	Chinese	−3.557*	.158	.000	−3.940	−3.174

Based on estimated marginal means.* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
[b]Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni.
Mean difference in this table refers to the difference between the mean value of Language 1 and Language 2.

4.4. Low purchase-decision involvement situations

The same data analysis process was conducted to test H2. Data were analyzed by two-way repeated measures ANOVA, with the service employee's nationality and service language as the independent variables and the respondents' comfort level as the dependent variable. Studentized residuals found no outlier. Table 6 shows the descriptive statistics of the sample in this group. This time the within-subject (nationality*language) successfully passed the Mauchly's sphericity test ($c2 = 2.692$, $p > 0.05$), and the statistical significance of the within-subjects was also proved ($F(2, 260) = 90.644$, $p < 0.05$). Figure 6 shows the interaction of *nationality* with *language*.

Table 6: Descriptive statistics of low purchase-decision involvement situation

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Japanese*Japanese	5.13	1.291	131
Japanese*Chinese	5.31	1.529	131
Japanese*English	3.76	1.697	131
Chinese*Japanese	3.55	1.720	131
Chinese*Chinese	6.18	1.006	131
Chinese*English	3.05	1.602	131

Figure 6: Interaction of nationality with language in low purchase-decision involvement situation
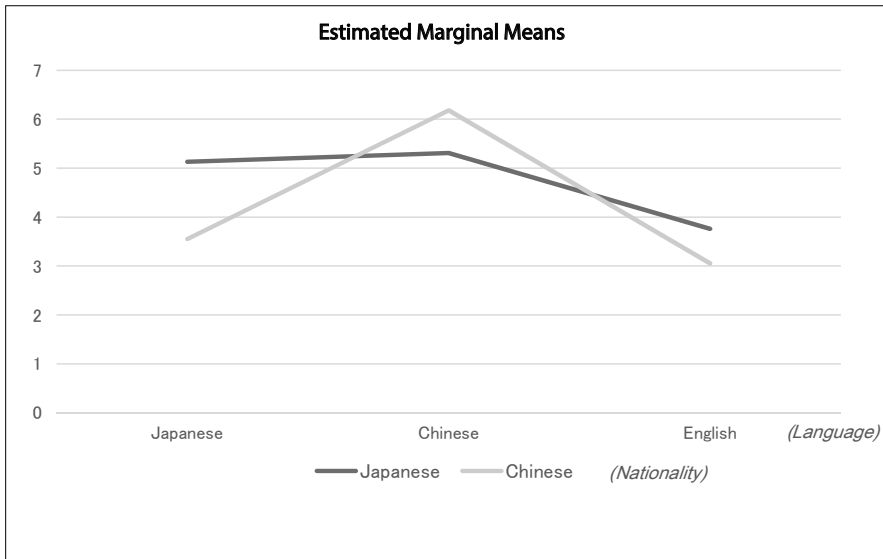
H2-1 and H2-2 were also tested by examining the main effect of language (3 levels). Pairwise comparisons between different languages were made based on the premise that the service staff's nationality was the same. When the service staff was a Japanese, the within-subject *language* failed to pass the Mauchly's sphericity test (p = 0.000 < 0.05). The statistical significance of *language* was then proved by means of Greenhouse–Geisser correction (F(1.712, 222.542) = 45.886, p < 0.05). When the service staff was a Chinese, the language's statistical significance was also demonstrated by Greenhouse–Geisser correction (F(1.876, 243.884) = 237.240, p < 0.05).

Tables 6, 7, and 8 show that respondents' perceived level of comforts toward a specific service language considerably changed between two groups divided by the service staff's nationality. When the service staff is Japanese, there seemed to be no significant difference between respondents' perception of Chinese service (M = 5.31) and Japanese service (M = 5.13), for the p-value was higher than 0.05. Regarding English service, the mean value dropped to 3.76. Thus, H2-1 was partially supported.

Table 7: Results of pairwise comparisons on the premise of low purchase-decision involvement and Japanese staff

Language 1	Language 2	Mean Difference (1-2)	Std. Error	Sig.[b]	95% Confidence Interval for Difference[b]	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Japanese	Chinese	−.176	.189	1.000	−.635	.284
	English	1.374*	.199	.000	.891	1.857
Chinese	Japanese	.176	.189	1.000	.284	.635
	English	1.550*	.137	.000	1.218	1.881
English	Japanese	−1.374*	.199	.000	−1.857	−.891
	Chinese	−1.550*	.137	.000	−1.881	−1.218

Based on estimated marginal means.* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
[b]Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni.
Mean difference in this table refers to the difference between the mean value of Language 1 and Language 2.

However, when serviced by Chinese staff, respondents showed a preference for Chinese language service. The three languages were rated as follows: Japanese (M = 3.55), Chinese (M = 6.18), and English (M = 3.05). As a result, H2-2 was not proved, and consequently, H2 was unsupported.

Table 8: Results of pairwise comparisons on the premise of low purchase-decision involvement and Chinese staff

Language 1	Language 2	Mean Difference (1-2)	Std. Error	Sig.[b]	95% Confidence Interval for Difference[b]	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Japanese	Chinese	−2.634*	.167	.000	−3.039	−2.228
	English	.504*	.134	.001	−.179	.828
Chinese	Japanese	2.634*	.167	.000	2.228	3.039
	English	3.137*	.161	.000	2.747	3.528
English	Japanese	−.504*	.134	.001	−.828	−.179
	Chinese	−3.137*	.161	.000	−3.528	−2.747

Based on estimated marginal means.* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
[b]Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni.
Mean difference in this table refers to the difference between the mean value of Language 1 and Language 2.

4.5. When enjoying services related to Japanese culture

This study performed one-way repeated measures ANOVA and then applied pairwise comparison between languages to test H3. In the case of fronting a Japanese employee, 11 outliers in the group being serviced in English were detected by boxplot and neglected. The within-subject *language* passed the Mauchly's sphericity test (c2 = 4.992, p > 0.05), and the statistical significance of the within-subjects *language* on respondents' comfort level was demonstrated (F(2, 260) = 39.599, p < 0.05).

When the employee's nationality was Chinese, 6 outliers expressing reluctance to be serviced by Chinese staff in Chinese were detected by boxplot and then neglected. The statistically significant main effect of *language* on respondents' comfort level was also proved (F(1, 130) = 118.769, p < 0.05).

Table 9 shows the descriptive statistics of the data collected in the group experiencing an *onsen ryokan*. The results of pairwise comparisons of service by Japanese employee or Chinese employee were listed in Table 10 and Table 11, respectively. When confronted with Japanese staff, participants showed a higher preference for both Chinese (M = 5. 80) and Japanese (M = 5.79) compared to English (M = 4.55). The subtle difference between Japanese and Chinese service can be neglected, seeing that the p-value is more than 0.1. When the employee was a Chinese, respondents preferred Chinese (M = 6.10) to Japanese (M = 3.91). The results revealed that under the condition of enjoying services related to Japanese culture, respondents showed the same preference for Japanese and Chinese compared with English when serviced by a Japanese, and preferred Chinese to Japanese when serviced by a Chinese. Thus, H3 was partially supported.

Table 9: Descriptive statistics of the group experiencing *onsen ryokan*

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Japanese*Japanese	5.79	1.284	131
Japanese*Chinese	5.80	1.385	131
Japanese*English	4.55	1.456	131
Chinese*Japanese	3.91	1.927	131
Chinese*Chinese	6.10	1.445	131

Table 10: Results of pairwise comparisons of fronting a Japanese staff in an *onsen ryokan*

Language 1	Language 2	Mean Difference (1-2)	Std. Error	Sig.[b]	95% Confidence Interval for Difference[b]	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Japanese	Chinese	−.008	.176	1.000	−.433	.418
	English	1.244*	.161	.000	.854	1.634
Chinese	Japanese	.008	.176	1.000	−.418	.433
	English	1.252*	.148	.000	.892	1.612
English	Japanese	−1.244*	.161	.000	−1.634	−.854
	Chinese	−1.252*	.148	.000	−1.612	−.892

Based on estimated marginal means.* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
[b]Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni.
Mean difference in this table refers to the difference between the mean value of Language 1 and Language 2.

Table 11: Results of pairwise comparisons of fronting a Chinese staff in an *onsen ryokan*

Language 1	Language 2	Mean Difference (1-2)	Std. Error	Sig.[b]	95% Confidence Interval for Difference[b]	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Japanese	Chinese	−2.191*	.201	.000	−2.589	−1.793
Chinese	Japanese	2.191*	.201	.000	1.793	2.589

Based on estimated marginal means.* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
[b]Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni.
Mean difference in this table refers to the difference between the mean value of Language 1 and Language 2.

4.6. Relationship between gender and comfort level

Considering the biased sample may influence the accuracy of the results, a Kendall's tau-b correlation was run to test the relationship between respondents' comfort level (1 = very uncomfortable; 7 = very comfortable) and gender (1 = male, 2 = female). Table 12 shows that in most cases, gender did not exhibit a statistically significant correlation with the comfort level. Even in those cases with a p-value less than 0.05, the correlations between two variables were extremely weak (r = −0.188, 0.162, and −0.215).

Table 12: Correlation coefficients of comfort level and gender (N = 131)

Comfort level (Nationality*Language)		Gender	Sig. (2-tailed)
Digital camera	Japanese*Japanese	−.188*	.017
	Japanese*Chinese	.162*	.04
	Japanese*English	−.014	.858
	Chinese*Japanese	.085	.276
	Chinese*Chinese	.008	.923
	Chinese*English	.087	.265
Toothpaste	Japanese*Japanese	−.056	.478
	Japanese*Chinese	.126	.11
	Japanese*English	−.026	.736
	Chinese*Japanese	.023	.767
	Chinese*Chinese	.039	.641
	Chinese*English	.059	.447
Onsen ryokan	Japanese*Japanese	−.215**	.007
	Japanese*Chinese	.112	.162
	Japanese*English	−.118	.135
	Chinese*Japanese	.002	.98
	Chinese*Chinese	−.075	.359

Table 12 shows Kendal's tau-b correlation coefficient. * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

5. Discussion and implications

This study examines the trilingual Chinese consumers' service language preferences during their travel in Japan. Given the scarce literature on marketing that addresses the language problem in direct communication from the perspective of consumers under touristic circumstances, this study attempts to fill this gap by studying Chinese tourists' consumer behavior in Japan. Extant marketing literature on multilingual consumers' service language preferences in cross-cultural contexts tends to argue for the benefits of servicing consumers in their native language. However, this study doubts if multilingual consumers regard the use of their native language as important when traveling abroad.

This study divides the service encounters that Chinese tourists may experience in Japan into three types: high PDI situation, low PDI situation, and Japanese cultural service encounter. Because the study is in such cross-cultural contexts and there are a large number of Chinese employees in Japan's service industry, the influence of service employee's nationality is taken into consideration, rather than exclusively focus on the effect of *language*. Considering the accuracy of the results

might be influenced by the gender bias in the sample of this study, Kendall's tau-b correlation was conducted to test the relationship between respondents' comfort level and gender, and the results showed that there is no apparent correlation between these two variables. Although some of the hypotheses are not supported, this study extends the previous studies by suggesting that when confronted with touristic situations, consumers also change their service language preferences as their environment changes, but do not attach as much importance to native language service as they do in domestic contexts. Different service languages, as expected, offer different levels of comforts, and service language's influence should be discussed together with service employee's nationality. This is to say, in touristic circumstances, consumers' perception of a certain service language is also influenced by the employee's nationality.

5.1. Overall evaluation of the results

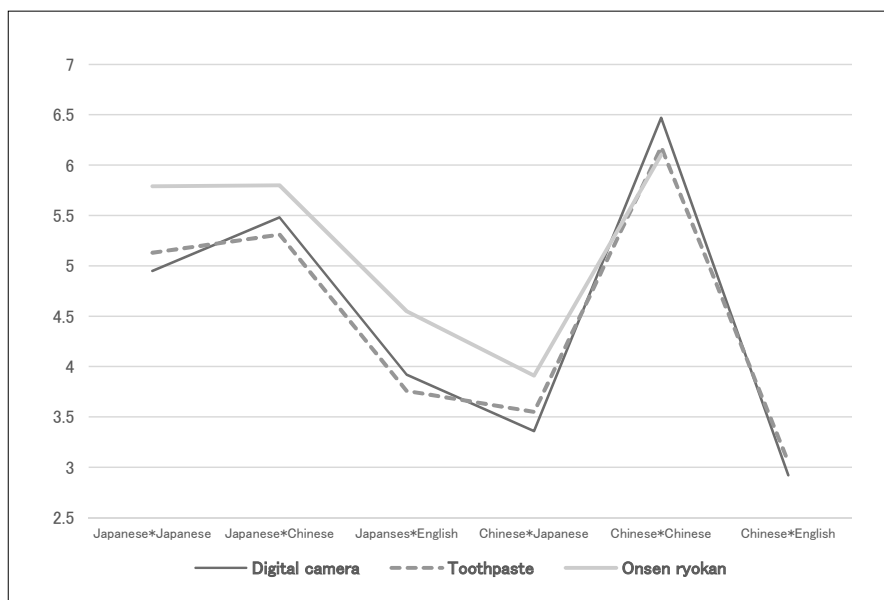**Figure 7:** Mean values of respondents'comfort level in all the situations

Figure 7 shows the mean values of the respondents' comfort level in the settings discussed in this study. The figure shows that being serviced in Chinese by a Chinese employee is the top-rated choice in all three situations. Simultaneously, three combinations (nationality*language), namely, Japanese*English, Chinese*Japanese, and Chinese*English have low ratings. In the high PDI situation, respondents prefer the Chinese language to the other two languages, both in Japanese and Chinese employee's group. The mean value of the combination of Chinese*Chinese reaches

6.47. However, in the low PDI circumstance, when fronting a Japanese staff, there is no significant difference between the means of Chinese and Japanese service. We can also say that respondents' perceptions of the Chinese and Japanese language are similar, compared with English as the lowest-rated language. Considering the service encounter related to Japanese culture, all the combinations, including Japanese employee, are rated higher than they are in both high and low PDI situations. Furthermore, there were no significant differences among the mean values of Japanese*Japanese, Japanese*Chinese, and Chinese*Chinese, especially between the first two combinations.

5.2. High purchase-decision involvement situations

Although H1 is supported, there are still some unexpected results in the first situation. It was noticed that although respondents seem to attach more importance to Chinese language use in high PDI situation, Chinese does not show superiority to Japanese when respondents are supposed to front a Japanese employee. This study elucidates this by conducting additional online interviews with a small group of respondents. The results showed that unlike daily shopping, customers as tourists tend to spend less time on making purchasing-decisions than they do in domestic circumstances. They would rather enjoy themselves in other things like sightseeing than waste time in a shopping mall. Even in the situations considered as high PDI service encounters in this study, consumers also spend less time in shopping than they do in their home countries because they tend to do more preparations and make planned purchases when traveling abroad. Both aforementioned reasons result in less interaction between consumers and service personnel, and thus, contribute to the result that in high PDI service encounters in touristic situations, there is no distinct difference between consumers' perception of Chinese and Japanese service provided by a Japanese employee. These reasons also explain why the differences between respondents' perception in high PDI situation and low PDI situation are so subtle and difficult to be noticed in this study.

5.3. Low purchase-decision involvement situations

As to the low PDI situation, most results fail to meet the expectations. Similar to high PDI situation, English language service is always accompanied by low scores, especially when it is provided by a Chinese employee. Most respondents hold the opinion that it is strange to be serviced in a non-native language by a Chinese employee, which can also explain the low scores of Chinese*Japanese in all four situations. At the same time, because of the difficulties that might occur during communication, English language service is also the least preferred choice when tourists are serviced by Japanese staff. Several participants said that in most cases, they found it difficult to effortlessly communicate with a Japanese staff in English, and thus, would rather use Japanese. Conversely, the reason for Chinese language service's high scores can be explained by its convenience and high efficiency.

Although serviced by a Japanese employee in Chinese would make Chinese consumers feel cared for and respected, the combination of Chinese*Chinese remains the best choice. Many respondents are reluctant to speak Chinese with a Japanese staff, even in low PDI situations because they believe Japanese employees to have limited Chinese proficiency.

5.4. When enjoying services related to Japanese culture

There are still some results that fail to meet the expectations in the situation related to Japanese culture. When serviced by a Japanese employee, Japanese language service does not show superiority to that of Chinese because respondents, especially those who visit Japan for the first time, sometimes hesitate about using Japanese when confronted with situations related to the Japanese culture because they think they do not possess the necessary vocabulary and background knowledge. Compared with high and low PDI situations, service provided by a Japanese employee is comparatively highly rated, and contrarily, the superiority of Chinese*Chinese is less evident. Furthermore, all outliers detected during data analysis in this study emerge in this group, more precisely, are related to Chinese and English language use. There is no consensus among respondents about being serviced in Chinese and English, for several respondents feel strongly uncomfortable toward Japanese*English and Chinese*Chinese. All these phenomena show that in service encounters closely associated with the local culture, tourists tend to adopt an active role in adapting their language to the surroundings to get a taste of Japan and the Japanese culture in a better way.

6. Conclusion

Seldom research concerning language use in touristic service encounters is conducted. This study contributes to the literature by studying multilingual Chinese tourists' service language preferences in Japan. The service encounters that Chinese tourists may experience in Japan were divided into three typical settings in this study, namely, high PDI situations, low PDI situations, and Japanese cultural service encounters. The results are in accordance with previous studies showing that multilingual consumers show different service language preferences when confronted with situations of different involvement levels. Moreover, this study further finds that under such touristic circumstances, consumers' perception of a specific service language is largely influenced by the service employee's nationality. When serviced by a Japanese employee, English language service is the least preferred choice. Chinese shows slight superiority to Japanese language service only in high PDI situations, and is perceived the same as Japanese in low PDI situations and Japanese cultural situations. However, when serviced by a Chinese employee, Chinese is preferred compared with Japanese and English language services in all the situations. These findings help marketers and service providers achieve a deeper

understanding of the international consumer psychology and behavior, and are designed to foster further improvement in service quality in the hospitality industry.

7. Limitations and future work

This research has several limitations, which suggest that further research should be conducted. This study is limited in that the questionnaires were distributed online, and the answers were based on respondents' past experience and imagination. Although extreme outlier responses were eliminated, unreliability and inaccuracies may still exist in the data collected. Future research, therefore, should improve the data quality by ways such as adding data and responses collected offline.

Further, the overall study is yet in the rough, and more efforts should be made to improve the details. Although the effect of service employee's nationality on consumers' perception of service language is proved in this study, further research is needed to clarify the reasons on how the effect varies among nationalities. Furthermore, the study of consumers' language preferences in touristic service encounters is extremely complicated. In such bidirectional and interactional encounters, not only the employee's nationality and service language but also things such as the timing of the employee's language shift may also make a difference in consumer experience. Future research should further explore and untangle the factors that influence consumer perception of different service languages in touristic circumstances.

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