Detecting hot spring tourism in post COVID-19 pandemic: compensatory travel experiences and its restorative effect

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Detecting Hot Spring Tourism in Post-COVID-19 Pandemic: Compensatory Travel Experiences and its Restorative Effect

Introduction

The public health emergency of the COVID-19 (Corona-virus disease) pandemic has greatly impacted the tourism industry and caused the serious degression of the regional tourism economy. To prevent virus transmission, people have to strictly adhere to the prevention regulation. They may have suffered stay-at-home, restriction of mobility(S. Wang et al., 2021), social isolation(Hwang et al., 2020), or even threaten of salient mortality during the pandemic, especially at the peak of the outbreak. Those negative experiences had caused various psychological issues such as boredom(Yu et al., 2021), depression, and anxiety(Choi et al., 2020; Loades et al., 2020). Considering such negative effects on people's psychological state and mental health, it is necessary to distract people's attention from the usual environment and get recovered. When the reports showed that the pandemic became moderated and social-distance regulation measures were lifted, most people may consider that signal as "all clear" and engage in outdoor travel activities to compensate themselves(Miao et al., 2021). Regarding the travel restrictions still applied to international tourism among countries, the domestic short-distance travel seems to be a possible compensatory activity to relieve those negative issues.

Previous research on compensatory consumption has already identified its alternative essence to offset unbalanced psychological states such as stressful situations(Ruvio et al., 2014; Van Kempen, 2007) and boredom (Woodruffe-Burton, 1998) through the engagement of consuming certain goods or related services(Mandel et al., 2017). The compensatory consumption types are variable but mainly focused on shopping(Atalay & Meloy, 2011), eating (Grunert, 1995) activities, and their therapy effects(Chaudhuri et al., 2011). With the impact of pandemics and public health crises, people were also increasingly focusing on the health and wellness attributes of consuming products(He & Harris, 2020).

For hot spring tourism, it has benefits on mental health such as relaxation(Adongo et al., 2017; Kamata, 2018), and stress release(Yang et al., 2018). Some scholars, moreover, already found the restorative quality of hot spring relevant activities, such as spas (G. Chen et al., 2017). Therefore, the effect of such travel type can be taken into consideration in the compensatory consumption field besides previously mentioned shopping activities. In China, the recovery function in both physical and psychological aspects of hot springs has been widely acknowledged and is attractive for tourists given the prosperous hot spring resort market of the whole country. After a temporarily suspended during the pandemic, hot spring resorts have seen a rapid boom of visitors since the winter of 2020 in China. Taking the Guangdong province as an example, hot spring resort bookings skyrocketed by a 75 % increase in December 2020 in this province(Khan, 2021). However, those previous studies are in the normal situation. There is a lack of research regarding the experience of visitors of hot spring resorts and the potential restorativeness in the context of the post-lockdown/COVID-19.

Furthermore, the possible restorative effect of compensatory consumption, although a newly emerging phenomenon, has been revealed on their perceived mood(Atalay & Meloy, 2011; D. Kim & Jang, 2017) and self-concept(Rustagi & Shrum, 2019). Concerning tourism, the research regarding its potential as compensatory is still handful. Thus, the questions of this study were as

follows: first, what and how the compensatory travel experience for the people who join in tourism activity during the public health crisis is demonstrated. Furthermore, whether and how such activity could contribute to their restorativeness for the stress from the pandemic.

In addition, the concept of restorative servicescape, which is based on the ART (attention restorative theory), has been applied in the hospitality and tourism domain to examine tourists' perceived restorativeness in the context of the human build environment and related services which can contribute to human mental health (Rosenbaum et al., 2016; Rosenbaum & Wong, 2015). In this research, we employ this conceptual foundation and extrapolated it to a broader emphasis on refreshment and spiritual restoration (not only attention fatigue) in the context of compensatory travel.

To answer the above research questions, this study first will analyze the compensatory experience of hot spring tourism, then the link between experience and restorativeness. Meanwhile, the importance of the concept of destination image for tourism recovery and attracting visitors after the pandemics have already been noticed by both industrial and academic aspects (Ahmad et al., 2021; Seyfi et al., 2021). Moreover, some of the new emerging studies have revealed the effect of destination image on tourists' psychological experience within this special crisis, such as the well-being and compensatory effect(Moreno-González et al., 2020; Tung et al., 2021). Based on the above argument, this study adopted the destination image of hot spring resorts as the mediating factor to evaluate its indirect effect between the compensatory consumption experience and the visitors' perceived restorativeness.

Literature Review

Hot spring tourism

As a sub-category of wellness tourism(Huang et al., 2019), hot spring tourism was recognized as a typical form of water-based and health-related tourism for visitors who are concerned about their health and wellbeing (Liu et al., 2021). Past research had discussed the motivation and experience of hot spring tourists, such relax, escape, and rejuvenation (Ahani et al., 2019; Dryglas & Salamaga, 2018; Frost & Laing, 2016). Some scholars indicated that environment and facilities are important factors that affect hot spring visitors perceived evaluation and experience(Lee, 2010; Lo et al., 2013). Recently, psychological benefits and sensory restorative are taken into consideration in hot spring tourism(G. Chen et al., 2017; Thal & Hudson, 2019). And the importance of well-being and quality of life in hot spring travel activities was emphasized too(Adongo et al., 2017; Baloglu et al., 2019), especially in the context of wellness tourism. However, very little research has considered the hot spring resort as a restorative servicescape that providing not only physical health but also restorative sense and keeping mental health. As scholars had demonstrated that tourists' perceived well-being and quality of life were influenced by perceived restorativeness in their leisure activities(Hipp et al., 2016; Qiu et al., 2021; Rosenbaum & Wong, 2015). Thus, the quality of perceived restorativeness of hot spring visitors is deserved to be explored.

A hot spring destination is not just ahead institution but a tourist attraction. In other words, destination images at the post-visit stage were generally correlated with consumers perceived satisfaction, well-being, and expectation of health improvement (Moreno-González et al., 2020), but rarely linked with their sense of recovery. Previous research on famous hot spring destinations has revealed that consumers' perceptual image was associated with their evaluation and behavior intentions towards the destination(Xu et al., 2018). They took the hot springs as an element in the

cognitive aspects of their examined destination image, and often put it in the context of culture(Park et al., 2017). Meanwhile, Lo et al., (2013)indicated that tourists' affective experience was important in the realms of experiential spa activity. Scholars also demonstrated that those activities directly enhanced their sense of emotional well-being and happiness (C.-J. Chen & Li, 2020). Because of this, there is a need to explore the tourists' perceived destination image of hot springs and its relationships with experiences and restorations.

Proactive compensatory consumption

People often suffer from some psychological discomforts (e. g. anxiety; depression) or unpleasant feelings, which are caused by some unsolvable threats or perceived self-discrepancy. The desire to remedy the psychological inconsistency and compensate for their perceived loss thus triggered one's motivation to participate in the consumption of products or services in alternative ways(Koles et al., 2018; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008). The global public health crisis triggered by COVID-19 not only caused most people to lose some extent of individual initiative in life but also threatened the lives and health of some people and their families. This makes people desire to seek and perform compensatory activities to compensate for their perceived loss and alleviate the tensions and mental stress.

Although there are multiple avenues available for coping with the psychological deficit, one route is through symbolic consumption, which largely originates from Wicklund and Gollwitzer's (1981) symbolic self-completion theory. The key concept of the symbolic self-completion theory is that people cope with the perceived discrepancy by engaging in some behaviors that signal mastery in the correspondent domain. This theory has been widely used by researchers in many experimental studies and also uncovered evidence related to one's appearance (Hoegg et al., 2014), affiliation(Mead et al., 2011), social power(Bian et al., 2015; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008) and so on. Through these studies, the symbolic compensatory consumption behavior need not result in over-consumption; instead, the coping activity leads to compensation effects such as repairing one's self-concept(Rustagi & Shrum, 2019) and improving negative mood(Atalay & Meloy, 2011; D. Kim & Jang, 2017). Many previous studies have demonstrated that an individual can compensate one-self by this coping strategy, however, the process of experiencing compensation was not getting enough noticed by scholars.

Researchers indicated that consumers' subjective feelings after consuming are not only attributed to the possession of goods but also the experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Schmitt et al., 2015). And a joyful experience of consuming may relieve tensions and alleviate the psychological discomforts. Therefore, this research posits the consuming experience is crucial in the process of proactive compensatory consumption and will lead to the quality of the compensatory effect. Despite those empirical studies focused on compensatory behavior in the context of real and normal life, the quality of experience and its affection has yet to be explored, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, this research aims to answer what is the proactive compensatory travel experience and how it compensates for one's perceived psychological need (e. g. restoration) through travel activities.

Perceived Restorativeness

The concept of perceived restorativeness was stem from Attention Restoration Theory (ART) and Stress Recovery Theory (SRT), which designed for measuring psychological factors thought to work in restorative experience. The former refers to alleviating directed attention fatigue through experiencing the comfortable surroundings(Kaplan, 1995), while the later refers to engaging in

activities exposed in nature environments can release one's mental stress(Ulrich, 1983; Ulrich et al., 1991).

Perceived restorativeness was utilized to reflect people's feelings of restoration, which can not only examine the restorative effect of environments(Herzog et al., 2003; Norling et al., 2008) but also investigate the tourists' perceived restorative quality in tourism and hospitality research domain(Lehto, 2013; T. C. Wang et al., 2019), such as river-rafting(Garg et al., 2010), zoo visitation(Pals et al., 2009), vacation (Lehto, 2013), human-built or augmented reality environments(Gill et al., 2019). Therefore, the phenomenon that people obtain perceptual restoration through outdoor activities or travel has attracted the attention of scholars(Noël et al., 2021; Qiu et al., 2021).

Scholars believed that people who have experienced a pandemic will proactively participate in travel as an alternative way to compensate for themselves(Lu et al., 2022; Miao et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). As so far there was no evidence to support that the quality of hot spring travel experience can fulfill the need for restoration in the context of compensatory consumption, this study will explore this effect relationship by investigating the hot spring tourism domain. Therefore, we may postulate the hypotheses as follow:

H1: Tourists' compensatory experience quality of hot spring tourism has a positive influence on perceived restorativeness.

Destination image

Destination image is generally defined as a holistic subjective interpretation that a tourist holds about a place (Agapito et al., 2013), it's the sum of the knowledge, feelings, and overall perception. There were two predominant components namely cognitive and affective image: the cognitive component refers to the perceived belief, knowledge, and evaluation of a tourist towards the destination attributes and the affective component represents a person's feelings and emotions about a destination(Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020).

Some research has demonstrated that the quality of a traveler's experience is a strong antecedent to image, perceived value, and satisfaction(Ghorbanzadeh et al., 2020; Jin et al., 2015; J.-H. Kim, 2018; Sharma & Nayak, 2020). Therefore, the destination image may mediate the relationships between compensatory experience quality and other subsequent variables. Scopelliti and Giuliani (2004) indicated that affective evaluation of the place experience was important in shaping the meanings of the human-environment interaction as well as cognitive evaluations. To better understand the mediating effect of each component of the destination image, both cognitive and affective components will be examined in this study respectively. Therefore, we may postulate the hypotheses as follow:

H2a: Compensatory experience quality has a positive influence on the cognitive image.

H2b: Cognitive image has a positive influence on perceived restorativeness.

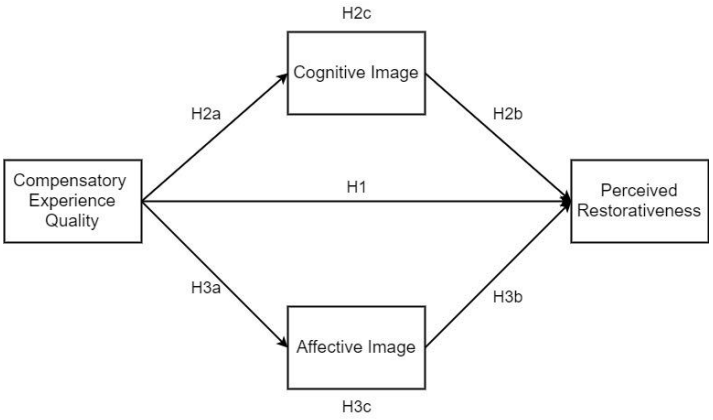
H2c: Cognitive image mediates the impacts of compensatory experience quality on perceived restorativeness.

H3a: Compensatory experience quality has a positive influence on the effective image.

H3b: Affective image has a positive influence on perceived restorativeness.

H3c: Affective image mediates the impacts of compensatory experience quality on perceived restorativeness.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model



Methodology

This study adopted a research design using a cross-sectional sample survey. The scale items we adopted to measure all constructs were based on previous studies(C.-F. Chen & Chen, 2010; Chew & Jahari, 2014; Lehto, 2013; Morais & Lin, 2010; Xu & Chan, 2010) with modification rewording to this study context. All measurement scales were rate on a 4-point Likert-type (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree). This research target two Chinese hot spring resorts in Zhuhai and Guangzhou. Author and helpers attempt to collect data by questionnaire through approach hot spring tourists onsite. The efficiency of onsite data collecting was not ideal, and it still exists risk even during the time of "zero community transmission".

After completing the pilot test with 136 samples, the researcher and helpers adopted a snowball sampling procedure to collect data that invite respondents to answer the questionnaire online. They shared the survey invitation link (or a digital photo containing brief information and a QR code) with their friends and relatives through WeChat (a messaging and calling app). To identify the target respondents, the filtering question was set up and required to answer at the start: Have you ever visited the above hot spring resorts since the restriction of the COVID-19 pandemic was lifted? Only if the question was answered yes can move to the questions pages, otherwise, the survey will end up. The data collection period lasted about eight weeks from February to April 2021, and then 426 samples of questionnaires were collected.

Results

Descriptive analysis and exploratory factor analysis were employed by using SPSS 25.0 to assess the respondents' demographic profile and measurement constructs of variables. And the assessment of the measurement model and structural model was performed through SmartPLS3.0 in this study.

Demographic profile of respondents

In total, 44.8 percent of respondents were male, 23.7 percent were aged 18 to 24, 27.9 percent were aged 25 to 35 and 21.6 percent were aged 36 to 45. Thus, age 18 to 45 consisted of the majority

(73.2 percent) of respondents, which reflects the younger oriented of hot spring tourists. The selected survey site was located in Great-Bay-Area, a relatively developed area with younger, educated people living in. Therefore, over 68.1 percent of respondents hold a degree of college or above. 53.5 percent of respondents who visited hot spring resorts were accompanied by couple and friends. This phenomenon reflected people not only took the opportunity to relieve the stress from the pandemic but also to compensate for their perceived social loss during the period of quarantine (Lu et al., 2022).

Table 1. Results of Demographic profile(N=426)

Demographic profile		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	191	44.8
	Female	235	55.2
Educational level	Secondary School or less	50	11.7
	High School/Technical School	86	20.2
	College	92	21.6
	Bachelor	131	30.8
	Post-graduate or above	67	15.7
Age	18~ 24	101	23.7
	25 ~ 35	119	27.9
	36 ~ 45	92	21.6
	45~ 55	63	14.8
	56~ 60	26	6.1
	Over 61	25	5.9
Travel Group	Alone	37	8.7
	Spouse/partner	82	19.2
	Friends	146	34.3
	Family	113	26.5
	Group	48	11.3
Monthly income (RMB)	2000 or less	57	13.4
	2001 ~ 4000	72	16.9
	4001~ 6000	91	21.4
	6001 ~ 10000	111	26.1
	10000 ~ 20000	60	14.1
	20001 or above	35	8.2

Measurement Model

To demonstrate the validity of measurement constructs, a cross-valid was employed through random half of sampling data by performing EFA and CFA respectively. The exploratory factor analysis was conducted by principal component analysis with varimax rotation method. According to Hair(2010), eigenvalues greater than 1.0 and factor loading greater than 0.50 is recommended. Therefore, seven items were eliminated due to low communality or cross-loaded more than one factor (Reise et al., 2000). With several rerun EFA, eighteen items of CEQ generated three underlying domains which explained 59.0 percent of the variance. For PR, twenty-five items generated three underlying domains which explained 62.4 percent of the variance. All Cronbach's alpha values of all factors have exceeded the threshold value, and thus the internal construct

consistency and reliability were confirmed for further analysis. The three factors of CEQ were labeled as ‘Hedonic’, ‘Recognition’, and ‘Peace of mind’. The three factors of PR were labeled as ‘Fascination’, ‘Being away’, and ‘Compatibility & Extent’. For cognitive image and affective image, all thirteen items generated two underlying domains which explained 67.7 percent of the variance.

This study used the Partial Least Square-based SEM technique to assess the research model for the following reasons: (1) Considerations of the complexity of the structural model including mediating. (2) PLS-SEM can handle both reflective and formative measures. (3) It has minimum demands regarding sample size and normality of variables(Hair et al., 2012; Reinartz et al., 2009). To conduct an assessment of the research model, a two-stage procedure proceeded. First, the indicators of reliability and validity of the measurement model (outer model) were evaluated. And then the data of sample was adopted to determine if the proposed measurement model specifies the assumed relationship between the observed variable and the underlying construct. Second, the structural model (inner model) was evaluated by assessing the path coefficients and indicators of model fit (Henseler et al., 2015).

As shown in Table 2, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of latent variables ranging from 0.523(CEQ_F2) to 0.657(PR_F1), which surpass the 0.50 threshold(Hair et al., 2016). The Cronbach’s Alpha, RhoA and Construct Reliability (CR) values of all constructs are greater than the criterion (0.70)(Hair et al., 2012).

Table 2. Construct Reliability and Validity of Measurement Model (N=426)

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
CEQ_F1	0.851	0.853	0.890	0.574
CEQ_F2	0.813	0.828	0.866	0.523
CEQ_F3	0.867	0.870	0.901	0.603
PR_F1	0.895	0.895	0.920	0.657
PR_F2	0.943	0.944	0.950	0.575
PR_F3	0.837	0.845	0.885	0.609
CI	0.897	0.897	0.916	0.548
AI	0.837	0.844	0.891	0.671

Structural Model

The results of path coefficients and significant was performed with a bootstrapping with 5000 subsamples. In terms of compensatory experience quality, it has significant positive effect on perceived restorativeness, cognitive image and affective image respectively. Thus H1, H2a and H3a were supported. Both cognitive image and affective image has significant positive influence on perceived restorativeness. Therefore, results support H2b and H3b were supported.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study was motivated by the need for research that can lead to a better understanding of the role of compensatory psychology while people participate in domestic leisure and travel after a long time at home in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. A conceptual framework was

developed and tested to demonstrate how such proactive compensatory experience quality of hot spring tourism could influence consumers' perceived restorativeness. The framework examined the mediating role of both cognitive image and affective image.

This research has contributions to the existing literature on several fronts. First, this empirical research helped us better understand the compensatory travel experience and contributed to the scope of compensatory behaviour literature. Most existing studies in compensatory consumption domain were mainly focused on the triggered motivation and the process of compensatory behavior in context of specific stimuli settings (Mandel et al., 2017). But the pandemic context had provided us with a massive sample of people who intend or even have engaged in some outdoor leisure activities to compensate themselves (Miao et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). Compared to those process-based research which in the manipulated settings, the realistic compensatory consumptions and its generated psychological influences were also important to understand. And the findings have demonstrated the pathways of experience quality of compensatory travel consumption to alleviated the negative psychological states from isolation(C.-C. Chen et al., 2016; Koles et al., 2018).

This study integrated the literature on compensatory consumption and restoration to reveal the transmitting mechanism of hot spring travel activities which from the experience quality to the restorative power. Regarding the existing positive influence of compensatory experience on the perceived restorativeness, this result demonstrated that the beneficial effect of compensatory consumption behaviour on repairing negative mood to maintain mental health(D. Kim & Jang, 2017). Moreover, the study also extends the literature on the restorative effect of hot spring travel experience to promote tourists' recovery through reduction of attention fatigue and/or stress(G. Chen et al., 2017).

Another major finding of this study was testing the two facets of destination image as mediators between compensatory experience quality and perceived restorativeness. Although abundant literature had helped us to understand the destination image in the context of different constructs, very few studies attempt to unveil the mediating effect of its components. In this study, both cognitive image and affective image played a key mediating role between these two variances. Most scholars assert that these two images exert influence on travel behaviour, whereas this finding implies that a good destination image can facilitate the results of restoration.

Management Implications

This study also indicated that compensatory experience quality can facilitated the perceived restorativeness. It is essential for those hot spring resort management to attempt to provide tourists with the genuine services and, meanwhile, ensure all the things and facilities were well sanitary and sterilized. These honest practical implications could demonstrate a responsible attitude towards tourists therefore make them perceived better quality of experience and positive image. In addition, resort management should also focus on the advantage of hot spring environments and accommodations which, for instance, optimized those therapeutic surroundings and landscapes with considering more aspects of aesthetic.

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