



Multimedia Electronic Word-of-Mouth and Sense of Place: Tourism Marketing for Macau in the Post-Pandemic Era

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ABSTRACT

It is a crucial question for local governments and managers of tourism destinations to strategically restore tourism in the post-pandemic era. Taking Macau, a famous tourism city as a case study, this paper explored the underlying mechanism of visitors' visit intention. We utilized multimedia electronic word-of-mouth (MeWOM) as a strategic marketing tool for the hospitality and tourism industry and established a theoretical framework. We proposed a sense of place as a mechanism to explain the effect of MeWOM on visit intention. In addition, we examined tourists' perceptions in the post-pandemic context, including perceived sudden lockdown, psychological resilience, and state boredom as moderators. The present research provides implications for tourism marketing and managerial practices.

Keywords: Electronic word-of-mouth, tourism marketing, sense of place, visit intention, post-pandemic

1. Introduction

With COVID-19 restrictions lifted in most countries since early 2022, the tourism industry is looking forward to recovering and formulating marketing strategies to attract international visitors in the post-pandemic era. Macau, a famous tourism city well known as the "Las Vegas in Asia", is also seeking the chance to recover the economy and tourism business. Although Macau began to retake visitors after reopening the board in May 2020, the effect of reopening was slightly weak. In addition, two consecutive sudden lockdowns in August and September 2021 shook local businesses and tourist expectations again. Concerns have not stopped in the post-COVID-19 era as the hospitality and tourism industries suffered heavy losses in 2021. In the summer of 2022, the city was locked down again due to hundreds of infection cases, although most parts of the world had reopened. Because the majority of visitors come from mainland China, Macau's tourism industry needs to cope with the situation as the city has struggled in a post-pandemic tourism recovery due to the strict COVID-19 policy of China. In December 2022, after mainland China suddenly announced a new COVID policy, Macau also mitigated restrictions. While the tourism industry is expecting a recovery, it is still a question whether tourists will have the intention to visit Macau. Therefore, this study focuses on two research questions. First, how to conduct effective marketing to stimulate tourists' visit intention? And second, how will tourists' perceptions, especially those from mainland China, influence the effectiveness of tourism marketing?

With the development of social media review platforms, consumers have gotten used to reading online reviews before making travel plans. Online word-of-mouth (WOM) has become an effective method to reach and influence customers (Koivisto & Mattila, 2020; Lee & Hong, 2021). Therefore, Word-of-mouth marketing is an essential strategy in the tourism industry. These comments on the Internet provide useful information for

potential tourists and form their understanding of the place they plan to visit. Hence, we argue that a sense of place plays a crucial role in tourists' decision-making (Abou-Shouk et al., 2018). In addition, tourists' experience and perception during the pandemic may take effect in the post-pandemic era. Currently, the experiences of others and perceived risk of self are gaining unprecedented attention from tourism practitioners, visitors, and governments. Past research has discussed the effect of the pandemic on tourism, which includes psychological factors (such as attitudinal changes and loyalty towards traveling), and physical factors (such as the change in airlines and travel agencies), while the exact factors remain undetermined (Zhang & Tang, 2021). A better understanding of these factors will play a significant role in the sustainable development of the tourism industry. Due to COVID restrictions, individuals had experienced a long period of boredom, which urges the need to relax (Eastwood et al., 2012). Yet, various individuals have had different degrees of psychological problems during the pandemic. Their resilience may influence their behavior in the post-pandemic era (Skalski et al., 2021). Furthermore, individuals' perceptions of the risks of sudden lockdowns may also hinder their travel plans (Pantano et al., 2021).

Building on digital marketing theories, the present study aims to explore the relationships among tourists' perceptions of others' experiences sharing on the Internet, tourists' perceived risk, tourists' psychological perception, and their visit intention in the post-pandemic era. More specifically, this study aims to investigate whether and how tourists' psychological perception affects their visit intention in the post-pandemic era.

2. Theoretical Model

Since the coronavirus becomes weaker and the whole world is gradually reopened, numerous businesses are looking forward to a rebound in consumption. With the lifting of restrictions, tourism activity has partially resumed. Nonetheless, the number of visitors to Macau remained lower than expected.



The recovery of Macau's tourism industry remains in doubt. In this context, the purpose of this study is to propose a word-of-mouth marketing strategy related to potential tourists' psychological mechanisms and their willingness to visit. We hope this study could provide a reference for similar follow-up research and business planning of enterprises in the post-pandemic era.

Word-of-mouth (WOM) is regarded as a more trustworthy information source than commercial marketing, and it is a useful tool to help consumers make wiser purchasing decisions. These interpersonal and functional influences are particularly significant for users while purchasing tourism and hospitality products (Chen & Law, 2016; Confente, 2014). Most consumers are more likely to trust earned media, such as WOM, and recommendations from others, rather than advertisements.

The tourism industry is a great instance in which consumers share their opinions offline and online (Chen et al., 2018; Lai, 2020), especially with the development and advancement of the Internet and digitalization, multimedia has accelerated the creation and communication of user-generated content (UGC). Multimedia included multiple types of media, including not only texts but also pictures, sounds, and videos. Readers can search for a variety of valuable travel-related

information (e.g., text-based comments, photos at tourism sites, sound records, videos, and vlogs) through online reviews posted by peer travelers, as well as giving a "like" to some posts and interacting with travelers on social media sites. By reading online reviews, potential visitors can check the physical environment and facilities, thus also learning from reviewers' feedback and experiences, with the imagination of the possible scenarios when they visit a place (Gössling et al., 2016; Line et al., 2015; Ye et al., 2020).

Considering the proliferation of UGC and the powerful influence of eWOM, many companies are incorporating social media channels into their e-marketing campaigns. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the underlying mechanisms between the word of mouth and potential visitors.

Drawing on the theories of word-of-mouth marketing and place branding, we proposed a conceptual model of multimedia eWOM and its influence on visit intention. Specifically, the model scrutinizes the indirect effect between electronic word-of-mouth and visit intention through the sense of place. In addition, three post-pandemic perceptual factors moderate the indirect effects. The theoretical model is shown below in Figure 1 and propositions are developed in Section 4.

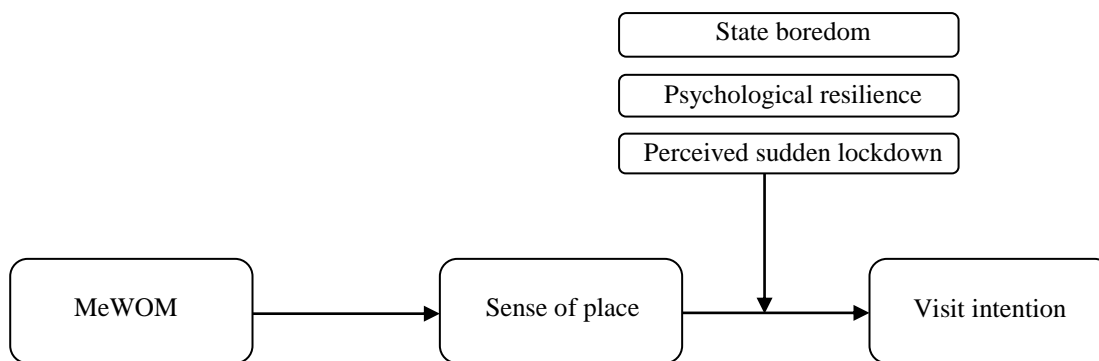


Figure 1. The theoretical model of this study

Table 1 Interview question design

No.	Questions
1	Have you seen any tourism reviews on the Internet? Can you recall some of them?
2	What did you perceive from the texts in the reviews?
3	What did you perceive from the pictures in the reviews?
4	What did you perceive from the sounds in the reviews?
5	What did you perceive from the videos in the reviews?
6	How did you feel after you read/saw/heard these reviews, including texts, pictures and videos?
7	What did you feel in these three years of COVID restrictions when you were not able to travel, especially for cross-board trips?
8	How would you describe your ability in coping with the status and inconvenience during the COVID-19 pandemic?
9	Do you think there is any potential that your city or Macau will suddenly upgrade COVID policy such as quarantine and lockdown during your visit in Macau?
10	Will you be interested in visiting Macau?



3. Research Method

We employed a qualitative case study method to investigate the effect of multimedia electronic word-of-mouth (MeWOM) on tourists' visit intention in the post-pandemic era. In-depth interviews were adopted to collect data. As the majority of tourists visiting Macau are from mainland China, especially Guangdong province, which is neighbored Macau, we conducted the interviews in Guangzhou. Guangzhou, the provincial capital of Guangdong, is a first-tier metropolis in southern China. It shares the same root of the Cantonese culture with Macau. We recruited eight participants, consisting of five females and three males, aged from 25 to 40. Each respondent was familiar with the use of smart mobile devices and social media platforms, representing the primary group of hyper-interactive travel consumers.

Each interview consisted of four sections (see Table 1). In the first part, we focused on interviewees' perceptions of multimedia electronic word-of-mouth generated by past tourists (Q1-5). In the second part, we discussed with interviewees their sense of place, i.e., their emotional tie-based personal attachment towards the tourism destination after reading online reviews (Q6). In the third part, we addressed interviewees' perceptions and attitudes towards tourism in the post-pandemic era, including state boredom, psychological resilience, and perceived sudden lockdown (Q7-9). Finally, we asked them about their willingness to visit Macau as a tourism destination (Q10). The interviews lasted 30-60 minutes. The conversations were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

4. Propositions and Findings

4.1. Multimedia electronic word-of-mouth and visit intention

Multimedia electronic word-of-mouth plays an important reference role in tourist planning. With the popularity of social media platforms, ordinary consumers have become a dominant role in generating eWOM, and other consumers are more likely to believe and follow them. With the accumulation of reviews, they gradually become the key opinion leaders whose helpful reviews have a significant impact on the attitudes, emotions, and behaviors of potential readers. By referencing key opinion leaders' experiences, it can provide readers with useful content and reference on tourist planning (Koivisto & Mattila, 2020; Lee et al., 2017). As a result, it is very typical for people to read reviews before deciding where to visit and write reviews after visiting.

As technology has improved, consumer reviews have moved from pure text to multimedia expression. Information comment is an intuitive summary based on visitors' perceptual knowledge and subjective evaluations. Reviews with pictures and emoticons directly express visitors' emotions, while video reviews can accurately depict scenic spots. Multimedia functions improve the efficiency and effect of social-emotional communication influentially (Zhang et al., 2019). For readers who have never been to a place, word-of-mouth can improve their trust and perceived usefulness, helping them to get a vivid impression of the destination. In that case, multimedia electronic

word of mouth can enhance consumers' purchasing intentions and visit intentions.

Proposition 1: Multimedia electronic word-of-mouth is positively related to visiting intention.

The interview results corroborated the emphasis on multimedia electronic word-of-mouth. The results indicated that readers found the tourism reviews useful and engaging when presenting visual and auditory details. As one of our participants stated,

Travel vlogs provide me with a captivating insight into the world of travel and adventure, whether the global pandemic or not, it makes me want to pack my bag right now.

Interviewees also stated that, if the content is presented in a visual style, it would enhance their understanding of the place and help them make the decision faster. Our study revealed that multimedia electronic word-of-mouth has a significant influence on visit intention. Travelers shared their expertise and experiences in their vlogs and taught readers how to navigate the unfamiliar tourism status in the comment section. It made it easier for readers to obtain more details in less time and increases their interest in travel.

I have no time to read a lengthy text review, I followed lots of travel vloggers on YouTube. Following in the footsteps of travel vloggers, I can explore the places I am interested in from the comfort of my sofa.

Along with the development of social media platforms and the popularity of the nomadic lifestyle, many travelers have flocked to video-based platforms to share their travel experiences, resulting in a huge volume of MeWOM for related content. Findings from our study indicated that the potential tourists frequently looked up relevant MeWOM before making travel decisions.

4.2. The role of sense of place in visit intention

The first research on the sense of place was mentioned in 1980 to examine the effective link between tourist sites and recreational activities. Williams et al. (1992) concluded that a sense of place is related to four wild settings, including place attachment, place identity, place image, and agency commitment. Stedman (2003) considered that sense of place is an attitude toward a particular place. Furthermore, Lee et al. (2012) evaluated that place attachment has a significant influence on destination selection and revisit intentions. In addition, Mussalam & Tajeddini (2016) found that the individual attributes toward a place (e.g., a local delicacy, resources, and customs) can affect their visit intention. In general, the sense of place refers to an emotional bond between a person and a place, through its distinctive physical attributes (landscape, architectural building, and so on) and personal attachment (emotions and feelings).

When people read multimedia electronic word-of-mouth, it is easy to be infected with positive emotions (e.g., joy, satisfaction, excitement) and feel as if they have been transported to the scene. Besides, tourism is a social activity, which is a meaningful way to seek social belonging and maintain social



connections (Gössling et al., 2016), and it is common for many visitors to record and share their quality time with their friends and family in their posts. While reading these relationship reviews, readers may be reminded of some people who are important to them and imagine if they were doing the same thing in the same place. These factors mentioned above would distinguish the destination and keep it memorable in tourists' minds, thus forming a "sense of place" that tourists feel towards the destination. According to Ramkissoon et al. (2012), place attachment is positively related to tourist satisfaction and future visits. Tourists who generated a "sense of place" are more likely to have a positive attitude towards the destination with enormous interest and have a loyal intention to revisit the destination in the future. Thus,

Proposition 2: Sense of place mediates the relationship between multimedia electronic word-of-mouth and visit intention.

A place may be connected with complex factors, such as meanings, unique physical features, and symbols, which make it distinguished and keep it memorable for tourists. According to the analysis in our study, when tourists have a cognitive or emotional relationship with a place or undergo a unique experience there, they are more likely to generate a sense of place toward the place. In addition, it has been found that this feeling is a mediator that affects the intention to visit. For example, most of the participants were excited and nostalgic when we mentioned the online reviews of visiting Macau, which resonated with them.

These reviews remind me of the wonderful time in Macau three years ago. Not only will the streets be adorned with fantastic lights and gorgeous Christmas decorations, but we will also enjoy the special shopping privileges in the mall. I am looking forward to spending Christmas with my couple again this year.

4.3. Tourists' perceptions in the post-pandemic context

Some post-pandemic perceptual factors may influence the indirect effects between word of mouth and visit intention through a sense of place. Macau had experienced three waves of strikes from the impact of coronavirus (McCartney, 2020), and the expected recovery after the third wave was suddenly interrupted by the shock of two lockdowns in August and September 2021. As a result, tourists' perception in the post-pandemic context may influence their tourism decisions.

Due to the extreme severity of the COVID-19 outbreak, most Chinese people adopt active health-protective behaviors and stay at home, which considerably limits engagement with the outside world, reduces individuals' arousal levels, and creates a sense of boredom (Van Tilburg & Igou, 2017). State boredom refers to an aversive state of not doing anything satisfying activities (Eastwood et al., 2012), which brings individuals an insufferable feeling. Such a feeling of boredom internally forces individuals to make changes and obtain refreshments (Pantano et al., 2021). Currently, people are more likely to engage in a variety of outside and social activities intensely, including

shopping, sightseeing, and traveling. Simultaneously, readers usually browse others' travel experiences through electronic word-of-mouth to relieve their boredom and satisfy their desire for sensation-seeking, thus further triggering their visit intention. Considering traveling as a way to against boredom, readers may overlook obstacles such as risk and expense.

Proposition 3: State boredom moderates the indirect effect of multimedia electronic word-of-mouth on visit intention through a sense of place, such that the indirect effect is stronger when state boredom is higher.

During the pandemic, the vast majority of Chinese have been following the lockdown because they were afraid of catching the virus. As a result, individuals were limited to staying at home. Away from external stimulation and the outside world, people feel anxious, bored, and tired. Generally, our study supported the proposition. We found that the perceived severity of COVID-19 could lead to people increasing boredom, resulting in longing for social and outdoor activities. As a consequence, these changes led to a raised post-pandemic tourist willingness. As interviewees mentioned,

My life is simply between company and home, day in and day out. In the 3rd year of the epidemic, I miss traveling more than ever.

My commute is ten feet from my bed to my desk, and I feel both tired and depressed when I wake up.

Most of the participants expressed that they were hard to obsess over programs after nearly three years of pandemic restrictions because they felt pointless and monotonous. People desire to seek the meaning and value of their social outside activities to solve the problem of boredom and escape emotional discomfort. Therefore, it makes people keen on new travel experiences intensely. For instance, China experienced a substantial uptick in tourism on the National Day holiday (October 1) in 2022, suggesting that individuals are likely to satisfy their needs and want for external stimulation.

Psychological resilience refers to individuals' capacity to thrive in the face of past or present adversity (Singh & Yu, 2017), and it may indicate how successfully tourists recover from negative travel experiences in the context of post-pandemic tourism (Prayag, 2018). Different tourists may react differently to past crises and disasters, and they may cope differently with fears and additional burdens caused by COVID-19 (Rodríguez-Llanes et al., 2013). It may be easier for tourists who exhibit a higher level of psychological resilience to make a decision when they have an idea of traveling.

Proposition 4: Psychological resilience moderates the indirect effect of electronic word-of-mouth on visit intention through the sense of place, such that the indirect effect is stronger when psychological resilience is higher.

There is evidence demonstrating that psychological resilience helps reduce persistent thoughts about COVID-19, buffering negative mental effects, and weathering the storms of the pandemic. Our study revealed that individuals who possessed better psychological resilience had positive ways of coping with



the stress of the pandemic and had a positive attitude toward travel.

During the epidemic, I kept exercising and told myself I could handle it. Maybe I will make a plan to travel to Macau soon, as the policy has been relaxed.

Occasional COVID-19 cases may still be found in post-pandemic China. It is unpredictable whether a lockdown will be announced based on confirmed cases. Unexpected isolation and costs associated with lockdowns may pose additional risks to visitors to high-risk areas, including the cost of isolation in the event of sudden regional isolation, being forced to stop work, etc. (Altuntas & Gok, 2021). Thus, tourists' perception of the risk of a sudden lockdown may buffer the effect of word of mouth on visit intention.

Proposition 5: Perceived risk of sudden lockdown moderates the indirect effect of multimedia electronic word-of-mouth on visit intention through the sense of place, such that the indirect effect is weaker when the perceived risk of sudden lockdown is higher.

Tourists' perception of risk is a subjective evaluation, which may ultimately affect their decision to modify or cancel their vacation plans. In particular, the perceived risk of a sudden lockdown cannot be ignored. After all, the restrictions were only just lifted and no one could predict if there would be any changes out of expectation. An unexpected lockdown policy is an essential factor to consider before starting a trip, which affects expenses and transportation. The results of our study suggested that many potential tourists were skeptical about the sudden policy shifts. As one interviewee explained,

I am afraid of a massive COVID outbreak and the policy suddenly changing, leaving me quarantined in Macau again.

All the interviewees said they were eager to take a trip but were still concerned that their city might plunge into lockdown again even though controls had been relaxed.

Currently, I am not sure whether to go or not. I am more worried about the government will lock down the city of a sudden.

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5. Discussion

This study focuses on multimedia electronic word-of-mouth (MeWOM), highlighting the importance of pictures and videos besides traditional text-based types of eWOM. MeWOM captures contemporary tourists' online information sharing, engagement, and destination decision-making. We investigate the mechanism of sense of place, which is established from gaining knowledge based on past tourists' MeWOM, thus influencing the focus of individuals' visit intention. In addition, the present paper also examined potential tourists' perceptions in the post-pandemic era.

Using the qualitative case study method, we interviewed potential visitors of Macau. We reported the results after analyzing data collected from in-depth interviews. Consistent with the theoretical proposition, this research found that tourists put more emphasis on MeWOM, including visual-based images and video reviews. These types of reviews strongly induced visit intention. Moreover, past tourists' MeWOM evoked readers' emotional and cognitive responses toward the destination, i.e., a sense of place, and thus generated a desire to visit. Finally, our study suggested that tourists would alter their travel plans due to their COVID-19 perceptions. State boredom and psychological resilience both promoted the intention to travel, while the perception of the risk of sudden lockdown buffered the effect.

This study provides the following managerial implications. Firstly, managers need to recognize the growing importance of multimedia electronic word-of-mouth, and the empowerment it has given to consumers. Secondly, managers need to provide transparent and trustworthy information to reduce COVID-19-related travel risks, which could show the safety of tourist sites and offer advice on safe behavior during vacation. Finally, managers should conduct more forward-looking marketing research to better understand consumers' psychological changes for making informed decisions in the post-pandemic era.

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