Window to the Destination: Tourists' Local Experience via "Online Experiences" on Airbnb Amid the Pandemic

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Abstract. This study aims to explore the composition of virtual guided tour experience on Airbnb and to develop a formation process of virtual guided tour experience. A case study based on the qualitative analysis was conducted with a dataset of online reviews towards an Online Experience in Beijing, China. A three-stage process of virtual guided tour experience was concluded, including experience encounter, experience evaluation, and behavioral intention. Experience encounter describes the experience composition from four dimensions: interpretation quality, host credibility, tourist-host social contact, and peer interaction; Experience evaluation is involved with benefits mainly gained from the enhanced understanding of local culture and the satisfaction attributed by the sense of telepresence; Further, behavioral intention covers both online and offline willingness to recommend or repurchase the virtual tour, or visit the destination in person after the pandemic. Theoretical and practical implications in navigating tourism recovery were discussed.

Keywords: Local experience · Staycation · Airbnb · Online experiences · Tourist-host social contact · The COVID-19 crisis

1 Introduction

Due to the restrictions on travel especially international air travel, staycations are becoming the alternatives for travel to the destinations amid the COVID-19. Despite that, the changing travel patterns generate new growth opportunities to independent service providers [1]. For instance, to navigate the business recovery, Airbnb released the "Online Experiences" program as the virtual tour activities without leaving home, switching the engaging activities designed by the locals to online tours or classes. Understanding the new growth space in sharing economy for coping with the pandemic crisis is therefore essential since adversity breeds innovation. The composition and its consequences of the virtual guided tour experience, however, are still ambiguous. Although sharing platforms such as Airbnb have attracted increasing attention in the industry and academics, the majority focus in previous studies is still limited in the issues of short-term rentals. On the other hand, researchers have confirmed the role of Airbnb in creating authentic tourism experiences by connecting the tourists directly with the locals [2, 3]. Yet how tourists understand and evaluate their experience in

virtual tours guided by the locals remains unknown. To address the knowledge gaps, two research questions were raised: 1) what is the composition of consumer experience in virtual guided tours hosted by the locals? and 2) what is the formulation process of consumer experience of virtual guided tours?

2   Consumer Experience and Virtual Guided Tour

Consumer experience framework in hospitality and tourism was developed by [4] based on the diverse theoretical underpinnings of consumer experience. It postulates that consumer experience is formed by the core experience values (emotive, cognitive, extraordinary, ordinary) with the impact of the peripheral factors related to physical and human interaction dimensions (individual characteristics, physical experience, human interaction, and situation factors). Accordingly, the composition of virtual guided tour experience can be multidimensional and can transpire as the peripheral factors elicit the core experience values. However, given the contextual nature of consumer experience, there is still much to know about tourists' local experience through the involvement of virtual tours guided by the locals in the specific times of the pandemic.

Virtual tour guided by the locals is a new type for users on sharing platforms to share their underutilized services (i.e., information or knowledge of the destination). Scholars have extended the research on local experience to food-sharing services and advanced our understanding of meal-sharing experiences with local foods [5, 6] and peer-to-peer dining experiences [7]. For instance, [5] identified a five-component construct of street food experience in local-guided tour, including "local guide's attributes, perceived food authenticity, local culture, perceived cleanliness, and novelty." They further found social interaction, awe, and servicescape can also be the key components of meal-sharing experience with local foods [6]. Such forms of tours are unique with more authentic engagement in the destination because the local experiences are cocreated by the residents (hosts) and visitors [7]. That is, social interaction is at the heart of consumer experience to the tours designated and organized by the locals. However, the standstill of traveling brought by the COVID-19 prevented these peer-to-peer social interactions, leading the industry and tourists to embrace the alternative models of traveling such as virtual tourism and online experiences [8]. Although it was noted that consumers' experience in virtual tours amid the pandemic significantly increase their visit or purchasing desire [9], a critical gap exists in the understanding of consumer experience in the new service, virtual tour guided by the locals.

3   Methodology

A qualitative approach following the interpretive paradigm was utilized because the phenomenon can be understood from the perspective of individual experiences. Tourists' online reviews about their virtual tours were adopted for the sake of generating primary and insightful data. Three selection criteria were employed to confirm the eligible virtual tours: organized by the locals, available during the pandemic, merge the experience with the local culture. Finally, one of the most popular Online Experiences

uploaded in August 2020 and led by a Beijing native on Airbnb was selected. It is focused on experiencing Great Wall from its different sections and history and the host has visited Great Wall for many times. This 45-min activity costs 120 CNY (per tourist) with maximum bookings of 10 persons each time. The listing of the reviews from August 2020 to July 2021 was ordered based on relevance, helpfulness, and length. 190 reviews were obtained and read through, among which 39 reviews in Chinese or other language were translated into English. 21 reviews that have no meaningful units or cannot form a complete sentence were filtered out. The qualitative data selection was ended when no new meaningful understanding on the virtual local experience was read. Finally, 135 reviews (11–150 words) were collected for further analysis.

The narrative information was interpreted with a thematic and paradigmatic data analysis approach. The multidimensional framework of consumer experience proposed by [4] guided the procedure. Given the contextual nature of consumer experience, the distinction in contexts (online vs. offline) and situations (normal vs. non-normal) were particularly addressed when capturing the meaningful units and formulating key themes about tourists' local experience via the virtual tour amid the pandemic. NVivo 12 was applied to code and examine the texts. Trustworthiness of data analysis was confirmed after being checked by an expert in the field of sharing service.

4   Findings and Discussion

Three stages embedded in tourists' local experience via virtual tours were concluded, delineating experience encounter, experience evaluation, and behavioral intention (Fig. 1). Experience composition covered four dimensions of the virtual tour experience, namely interpretation quality, host credibility, tourist-host social contact, and peer interaction. Each dimension was further determined by particular factors. Interpretation quality was composed of information quality, orchestration quality, and display quality of the virtual guided tour. A successful interpretation was mainly characterized by informative and insightful understanding of the destination, well-designed orchestration based on story, culture, and gamification, as well as the immersive audio-visual enjoyment; Host credibility was understood through five factors, among which appetency and ardent love to local culture were revealed as the unique reasons that bring praise to the hosts; Tourist-host social contact was qualified by instant Q&A, relationship maintenance, service recovery, and special care from the hosts before, during, and after the virtual tour; Peer interaction mainly occurred between friends or families members and was enhanced by the increasing intergenerational conversation and social bond.

Experience evaluation came from tourists' benefits and satisfaction gained from the virtual tour. Besides the educational function similar to other tourism types, virtual guided tours could offer unique tips to navigate tourist trips after the pandemic, bond their social network during the staycation time, and could also make some tourists recall the wonderful past visits to the same destinations. Tourists' satisfaction was assessed through the comparison to their expectation and their feeling in the past visits

in person. It is worthy to note that tourists' sense of telepresence, "feeling like visiting the destination for real with the hosts," became the majority motive of their satisfaction.

Tourists' behavioral intention illustrated behavioral tendencies both online and offline. Tourists tend to recommend or repurchase the virtual tours organized by the same host, or plan to attend other virtual tour activities in the future. The virtual tour experience can also catalyze tourists' offline tour after the pandemic by facilitating them to visit the destination in person whether guided or not guided by the host.
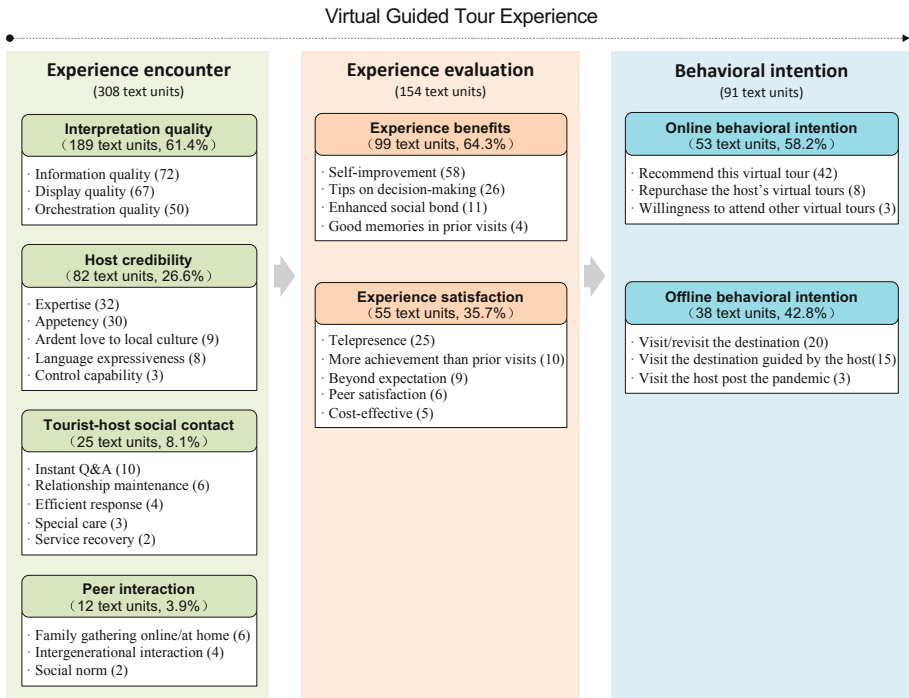
Virtual Guided Tour Experience

Experience encounter
(308 text units)

Interpretation quality
（189 text units, 61.4%）
· Information quality (72)
· Display quality (67)
· Orchestration quality (50)

Host credibility
（82 text units, 26.6%）
· Expertise (32)
· Appetency (30)
· Ardent love to local culture (9)
· Language expressiveness (8)
· Control capability (3)

Tourist-host social contact
（25 text units, 8.1%）
· Instant Q&A (10)
· Relationship maintenance (6)
· Efficient response (4)
· Special care (3)
· Service recovery (2)

Peer interaction
（12 text units, 3.9%）
· Family gathering online/at home (6)
· Intergenerational interaction (4)
· Social norm (2)

Experience evaluation
(154 text units)

Experience benefits
（99 text units, 64.3%）
· Self-improvement (58)
· Tips on decision-making (26)
· Enhanced social bond (11)
· Good memories in prior visits (4)

Experience satisfaction
（55 text units, 35.7%）
· Telepresence (25)
· More achievement than prior visits (10)
· Beyond expectation (9)
· Peer satisfaction (6)
· Cost-effective (5)

Behavioral intention
(91 text units)

Online behavioral intention
（53 text units, 58.2%）
· Recommend this virtual tour (42)
· Repurchase the host's virtual tours (8)
· Willingness to attend other virtual tours (3)

Offline behavioral intention
（38 text units, 42.8%）
· Visit/revisit the destination (20)
· Visit the destination guided by the host (15)
· Visit the host post the pandemic (3)

Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of virtual guided tour experience process

Findings of this study revealed that tourists can feel a solid space beyond the plane screen through the immersive experience based on culture and story-based interpretation supported by the local hosts. The consequences of such experiences can accelerate tourists' willingness to recommend or repurchase online experience activities, which may further switch into a real visit or revisit the destinations after the pandemic. Accordingly, a formation process of the virtual guided tour experience for tourists is developed by identifying the constructs and stages of consumer experience (Fig. 1). This process suggests that sociability and interactivity of the virtual guided tours, to a certain extent, satisfy the consumers' desires for travel amid the pandemic and induce the travel desire post-COVID-19. Despite that virtual guided tour is less likely to be substitutes of conventional travel, it can advance the innovation of travel activity by designing high-quality local experiences with the wisdom of the locals.

5   Implications

This study enriched the knowledge on virtual tours and sharing economy by developing a conceptual framework of tourists' local experience via virtual tour guided by the locals; it accounted for determinants and consequences specific to the immersive experience of the destination with experience encounter, experience evaluation, and behavioral intention. It also identified the factors constituting tourists' online local experience, which provides a comparison agenda to distinct and understand the differences between virtual tours guided by the locals and conventional tours. More importantly, this study contributed a marketing strategy to navigate tourism crisis recovery by co-creating values between the sharing platform and the locals, which will be helpful for destination marketers, small tourism operators, especially for the small independent operators. Also, it suggested that the virtual tour providers should pursue an immersive experience combining their understanding of the local culture with a high level of interactivity and sociability in designing.

6   Limitations and Future Research

Considering virtual tours' diversity, findings in this study are necessary to be further examined in other themes of experience activities guided by the locals, such as online classes about cooking, writing, dance, or other arts. Quantitative approach is need in future to test the feasibility of the proposed virtual guided tour experience process.

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