

Examining the role of service quality in creating local tourism experience: a comparative study

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Abstract

This study examines the trend of local tourism in form of staycation during and after Covid-19. Two waves of data collection are conducted to compare the burnout levels, motivations for local tourism, the tourism experience, as well as the subsequent individual well-beings and tourists' behavioral intentions. In particular, the impacts of service quality on trip reflections related to freedom of control, freedom of work, involvement, arousal and spontaneity are investigated. The findings demonstrate significant differences in tourist's perceptions of local tourism after the pandemic where the tourists' burnout level, motivations and trip experience are significantly lower while the behavioral intention remains unchanged. Service quality is also noted to be a more profound factor in affecting the trip experience and the outcomes. The results provide valuable insights for industry practitioners on how to tackle and market this lucrative market.

Keywords: *post-pandemic comparative study, Staycation, service quality*

Track: *Tourism Marketing*

1. Introduction

In the past few years, the tourism landscape has been largely transformed by the pandemic for the hovering threat of infections and restrictions imposed on our daily lives. As a result, these experiences have imposed significant changes in tourists' consumption attitudes and behaviors, among which risk aversion arises as a prominent outcome (Wu & Lau, 2022). Factors related to safety and security were considered in priority for travel decisions, and destinations closer to home and flexibility in bookings are preferred (Brozović & Saito, 2022). The changes in tourists' behaviors have been reflected in the emergence of local demand in the tourism market.

Taking into consideration the changes in tourist behaviors, this study attempts to re-visit and compare the motivations and impacts of staycation, as a form of local tourism, during and after the pandemic, for insights into the future development of the local tourism market. Staycation, as a combination of “stay” and “vacation” is defined as “a vacation that is spent at one's home enjoying that entire home and one's home environs have to offer” (Fox, 2009). This vacation style allows individuals to rejuvenate and find everyday pleasure from destinations close to home (Pawłowska-Legwand & Matoga, 2016). Subsequent to the onset of the pandemic, this form of vacation has gained popularity as this is deemed the only kind of leisure available when restrictions are placed on travelling and other kinds of entertainment. Staycation is hence extended to overnight stays in exquisite hotels mainly for psychological detachment and a pathway for mental recovery.

Research on staycation has also proliferated during the pandemic, mostly focusing on the staycation experience as a means to cope with stress and grief in the difficult time (Lin, Wong, Kou, & Zhen, 2021; Pichierri, Petruzzellis, & Passaro, 2023). However, as world order restores to normal, such research has reduced to a minimal level. One reason for the loss of interest in staycation is largely due to the stereotypical association of staycation with pandemic crises, and presume that demand for local leisure is no longer essential when the crisis is over. This study

argues that staycation remains as a leisure lifestyle for escapism and detachment from daily chores, even after the pandemic (Qiu, King, Tang, & Fan, 2024; Saidin, Zulkefli, Mansor, Hashim, & Tri, 2024). The staycation market is still lucrative as a result of the perceived turbulences of wars and the risk-averse attitudes of individuals (Saidin et al., 2024). In addition, hotels' efforts to design and market attractive staycation packages have also lured local customers' interests (Qiu et al., 2024). It is noted that while the staycation experience during the pandemic has kindled individuals' interests in domestic traveling, the future staycation intention largely depends on what the staycation packages can offer, including festive themes and discounts (Moon & Chan, 2022).

This study attempts to take a fresh look at the local tourism after the pandemic as a form of regular leisure, detaching its role as a countermeasure during the crisis. To do so, two waves of data collection were conducted in 2021 and 2023 to receive 384 and 542 responses to elicit local customer's motivations and recollections of the staycation experience during and after the pandemic. The data was collected in Macao where attractive staycation packages are abundantly offered by the mega hotels. By comparing (1) burnout, (2) motivations, (3) trip reflections, (4) perceived service quality, (5) life satisfaction and (6) behavioral intentions, this study aims to delve into the changes in local tourists' attitudes and shed insights for the value of staycation as a lifestyle and suggestions are provided for practitioners in their staycation package design.

2. Conceptual Framework

Neal, Sirgy, and Uysal (1999) have proposed a leisure life satisfaction model that suggests a relationship between positive trip reflections and overall satisfaction of life validated by subsequent research (Uysal, Sirgy, Woo, & Kim, 2016). Accordingly, this paper adopts some of the identified trip reflections for the context of staycation, including perceived freedom from control, perceived freedom from work, involvement, arousal and spontaneity to investigate their impacts on enhancing leisure life satisfaction. This model postulates that satisfaction with the

leisure life domain manifested through positive trip reflections will spill over to overall life satisfaction. Trip reflections are memories that linger in the mind of the travelers after the trip. It is argued that the holistic trip experience is derived from both the tourism services during the trip and the reflections after the trip (Neal et al., 1999; Neal, Uysal, & Sirgy, 2007). While the service/activities encountered during the trip capture the instant and transitory perceptions from the travelers, it is the mental process in the form of individuals' memory that materializes the experience and allows revival of the feelings regarding the trip even after a long time (Gilbert & Abdullah, 2004; Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2012). A recollection of the trip experience and its relevance to the individual will be drawn when travelers reflect on their trip within a temporal-spatial relation (Tulving, 2002).

As the hotel stay is a core component of the staycation experience, the perceived service quality of the hotel presumably will affect the overall staycation trip reflection (Neal et al., 2007). In this study, the overall hotel assessment is incorporated into the model to examine the impacts of the various trip reflections to generate positive outcomes. Two outcomes are included in the model including the individual level of quality of life as well as the behavioral intentions for staycation. Taken together, the following framework is proposed:

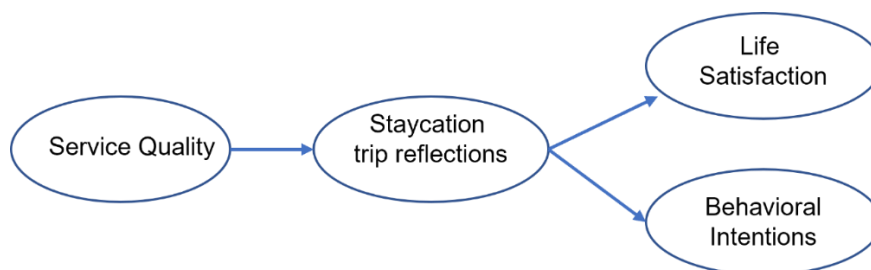


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

3. Methodology

Two stages of data were collected in Macao SAR in 2021 and 2024 to represent period in the midst and that after the pandemic. This study defines staycation as one that includes at least

one overnight stay in a local hotel since an overnight away from home would allow better mental recovery through psychological detachment (De Bloom, Nawijn, Geurts, Kinnunen, & Korpela, 2017). Data were collected via convenience sampling through a self-administered questionnaire. Two screening questions were set to ensure the respondents were appropriate.

A total of 384 and 542 responses were received during the two rounds of data collection with a response rate of 85.2% and 83.8%. The respondents were mostly female, which constituted 61% of the sample in the first round (T1) and 66.7% in the second round (T2). Regarding age, most of the respondents were below 35 years old (73.2% in T1 and 81.5% in T2). Less than half of the sample had an undergraduate degree or above (35.4% in T1 and 47.8% in T2). Around 35.4% (T1) and 41.6% (T2) of the respondents reported a monthly income of less than MOP 10,000. The measures in the questionnaire were adopted from previous literature based on a 1-7 Likert scale, as follows (Table 1):

Table 1. Summary of the questionnaire constructs

Constructs	Items	Source
1. Burnout level	Three-items	Schermuly and Meyer (2016)
2. Motivations	Eight-items	Duman, Erkaya, and Topaloglu (2020)
3. Service Quality	Three-items	Neal et al. (2007)
4. Trip Reflections	Fifteen-items	Neal et al. (2007)
5. Life Satisfaction	Three-items	Sirgy, Kruger, Lee, and Yu (2011)
6. Behavioral Intentions	Three-items	Dillette, Douglas, and Martin (2018)
7. Control Variables (Gender, Age, Education)		

4. Findings

The mean and standard deviation of the staycation-related constructs during and after the pandemic are summarized in Table 2. Independent t-tests are also performed to examine any significant differences between the means of the two periods (T1 and T2). It is noted that most of the constructs related to staycation demonstrate significant differences during and after the

pandemic, except for arousal trip reflections and the outcomes. This indicates that staycation is not effective in inducing arousal experience during or after the pandemic with relatively lower means of 4.48 and 4.51 compared to other trip reflections. In addition, the outcomes of staycation of behavioral intentions and life satisfaction do not exhibit changes when the pandemic is over, confirming that the staycation experience continues to be attractive and impose benefits on individuals. However, local tourists demonstrate a significantly higher level of burnout level, motivation, perceived service quality and trip reflections during the pandemic. The results confirm that staycation was highly sought after during the pandemic and is deemed a desirable measure to cope with the unusual situation. Yet as people get used to staycation and consider it part of the lifestyle, the behavioral intentions and benefits to life satisfaction remain.

Table 2. Independent t-test for staycation constructs during and after the pandemic (T1 & T2)

	During pandemic (T1)		After pandemic (T2)		t-test
	Mean	Std	Mean	Std	
1. Burnout	5.01	1.35	4.45	1.48	***
2. Motivations	4.90	1.20	4.61	1.28	**
3. Trip Reflections:	4.81	1.20	4.53	1.24	**
a. Perceived freedom from control	4.77	1.32	4.57	1.36	*
b. Perceived freedom from Work	4.84	1.43	4.52	1.40	**
c. Involvement	5.03	1.26	4.52	1.30	***
d. Arousal	4.48	1.38	4.51	1.35	
e. Spontaneity	4.91	1.41	4.55	1.40	***
4. Service Quality	5.29	1.21	4.74	1.36	***
8. Behavioral Intentions	4.32	1.65	4.44	1.45	
9. Life satisfaction	4.64	1.37	4.52	1.32	

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

The results of the regression analysis are shown in Table 3. Panel A demonstrates the impacts of service quality (SQ) on various trip reflections, where service quality is proven to be significant in influencing all forms of trip reflections during and after the pandemic. The results confirm the importance of service quality in creating a memorial experience for tourists regardless of the context and timing. Panel B exhibits the impacts of the trip reflections on life satisfaction.

It is noted that the life satisfaction focus shifted after the pandemic. During the pandemic, the passive trip reflections related to perceived freedom from control and work, as well as the spontaneity offered by the staycation have become the lifesavers in a distress situation when other alternatives are not available. Therefore, these kinds of trip reflections are prominent and contribute to the individual's life satisfaction. In comparison, after the pandemic, freedom from control and spontaneity is no longer deemed uncommon and their influence on life satisfaction is reduced. Instead, a more proactive trip experience such as involvement and arousal are needed to improve the life quality of individuals.

The impacts of the trip reflections on behavioral intention are shown in Panel 3. The results also concur with the previous findings that a more proactive design in the staycation package is necessary to induce further behavior intention after the pandemic in addition to the perceived benefits derived from the freedom from control and work. Taken together, while staycation continues to produce personal benefits and elicit future intention for staycation again, the staycation packages need to offer more than just an escape from work and life. Operators need to reconsider the staycation package to ensure additional elements are incorporated in the package to arouse the individual's interest in order to lure the customers in normal times.

Table 3. Results of Structural Parameter Estimates in T1 and T2.

	<u>During pandemic (T1)</u>			<u>After pandemic (T2)</u>		
<u>Panel A: Impact of service quality (SQ) on trip reflections</u>						
	<u>Standardized β</u>		<u>R²</u>	<u>Standardized β</u>		<u>R²</u>
SQ --> Freedom from Control	0.59	***	0.35	0.66	***	0.44
SQ --> Freedom from Work	0.57	***	0.33	0.64	***	0.41
SQ --> Involvement	0.64	***	0.41	0.7	***	0.49
SQ --> Arousal	0.51	***	0.26	0.69	***	0.47
SQ --> Spontaneity	0.6	***	0.36	0.71	***	0.51

Panel B: Impacts of trip reflections on life satisfaction (LS)

Freedom from Control -->			
LS	0.15	*	0.04
Freedom from Work--> LS	0.17	*	0.24 ***
Involvement--> LS	0.09		0.26 ***
Arousal--> LS	0.01		0.21 **
Spontaneity--> LS	0.41	***	0.11
R ²	0.52		0.61

Panel C: Impacts of trip reflections on behavioral intention (BI)

Freedom from Control --> BI	0.17	*	0.19 **
Freedom from Work--> BI	0.17	*	0.13 *
Involvement--> BI	0.16		0.02
Arousal--> BI	-0.03		0.43 ***
Spontaneity--> BI	0.15		0.06
R ²	0.3		0.58

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

5. Conclusion and discussions

Staycation has garnered significant attention during the pandemic and it is deemed to be an effective coping tool in response to the hardship encountered. However, it is also crucial to understand how the staycation experience has evolved especially when the pandemic is over. While the study indicates a lower level of motivation and trip reflections related to staycation after the pandemic, the life satisfaction of local tourists and behavioral intentions remain at the same level. This demonstrates that staycation will continue to offer benefits to individuals, and service quality is considered paramount for a memorial tourism experience.

The results also indicate distinct sets of staycation trip reflections that impact individuals' life satisfaction and behavioral intentions in the two periods of time. During the pandemic, people took staycation primarily to recuperate from the hardship, therefore trip reflections related to spontaneity and freedom from control and work offer an oasis for escape and contribute to the

individual's well-being. After the pandemic, staycation-taking is a choice of leisure and the focus is on the pleasure the experience provides, therefore the reflections related to involvement and arousal are also significant. It is time for hotel operators to revamp the staycation packages to include creative components to create an aroused and immersive experience. It is noteworthy that staycation is still one of the prominent travel trends going on around the world (Carey, 2024). From this perspective, the findings of the study are timely and they offer practical insights to promote and design staycation packages for tourism and destination marketers.

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