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Research note

Post-pandemic and post-traumatic tourism behavior

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, a multi-faceted crisis and a potentially traumatic event, is both a personally impactful event and a globally shared experience (e.g., Williamson et al., 2021). However, exposure to highly stressful events can also be a precursor to post-traumatic growth, the positive personal growth people experience when emerging from adversity (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). In this perspective article, we aim to examine post-pandemic tourism behavior through the theoretical lens of post-traumatic growth. Casting COVID-19 as a catalyst for personal growth, we explore how post-pandemic travel and tourism activities manifest as the consequences of post-traumatic growth as well as the means for it. More importantly, we attempt to understand how post-traumatic growth and post-pandemic restructured assumptions about travel and tourism jointly influence the post-pandemic and post-traumatic tourism behavior.

Post-pandemic and post-traumatic tourism behavior

Prior literature recognizes five major domains of post-traumatic growth: changed priorities and a deeper appreciation of life; development of closer social relationships; resilience; openness to new life possibilities; and greater existential or spiritual growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Post-traumatic growth entails a process of shattering the old “assumptive world,”—one’s general understanding of the world—and restructuring the fundamental components of a new one in its place. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a seismic force of disruption to the act of travel. Restrictions in movements, border closures, cancellations of flights and other transportation means, and closures of tourist destinations have drastically shattered the pre-pandemic assumptions people held for travel and tourism. The pandemic also accelerated some geopolitical trends such as de-globalization, isolationism, and regionalism. In this research, we present a set of seemingly opposing behavioral tendencies in an attempt to capture the imprints of...
post-traumatic growth and restructured assumptions about travel on post-pandemic tourism behaviors. Namely, rebound and retreat, connectedness and estrangement, and self-transcendence and self-diminishment in post-pandemic and post-traumatic tourism behavior.

Rebound and retreat

Post-traumatic growth reflects coping with the lingering distress of the trauma and attempts at psychological survival (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). In the post-pandemic era, travel and tourism patterns are likely to mirror post-traumatic growth’s initial stage of return to baseline, recovery, and reset. As the pandemic abates and travel restrictions start to ease, a sudden surge in travel and tourism activities in the initial post-COVID period is expected. For example, on June 11, 2021, more than two million people screened through U.S. airport security checkpoints in a single day, which more than doubled the number in April 2020 and was close to 75% of the volume recorded on the same day in 2019 (Koenig, 2021 June). The predicted sudden and dramatic rebound in travel demand is vividly described as “revenge travel” in the media (Bologna, 2021 April). Such burning urge to travel also has psychological roots, signifying travelers’ need for retribution against COVID-19 and a regained sense of control to return to normalcy.

As tourism rebounds, retreat behavior in tourism is also likely to be salient. With a heightened sense of vulnerability induced by the pandemic, retreat behavior of the “6 foot-tourism world,” or the disconnection between tourism spaces and reframing tourism activities on a local scale (Lapointe, 2020, p. 636), manifests in behaviors such as maintaining social distancing from other travelers, avoiding overly popular tourism destinations, choosing less-known tourism destinations, and preferring regional travels. Solitary travel experiences such as camping in remote areas (Bhalla et al., 2021) and travel centered on retreat experience (Wang et al., 2021) are likely to continue to gain popularity after the pandemic. Solo travels that are unconstrained by interpersonal decision making and motivated by solitary experience are on the rise as well (Shin et al., 2022).

Connectedness and estrangement

One of the most noticeable domains of post-traumatic growth is developing closer relationships with others (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The relationship domain of post-traumatic growth will be particularly salient in the post-COVID era. The COVID-related movement restriction measures, such as suspension of social gatherings and travel bans, have resulted in a sense of social disconnectedness (Kato et al., 2020). Visiting immediate family and friends is likely to be a strong travel motivation that drives the first wave of travel in the immediate wake of the pandemic. Increasing demand in multi-generational travel may also be expected.

While the tourism industry will benefit from post-traumatic growth in building stronger interpersonal relationships, of particular significance is the simultaneous social estrangement induced by the pandemic at interpersonal, community, national, and international levels. At the interpersonal level, moments of subtle hostility and belligerence are found in various leisure situations. For example, a visitor without a mask assaulted a native elderly person in Hawaii (Bourlin, 2021 March). At the destination level, residents’ “us versus them” mentality has been reignited. Many countries have banned cruise ship arrivals at their ports (Fox, 2021 February). At the national and international levels, deglobalization, isolationism, and the regionalism of tourism (Brouder et al., 2020) will have opposing effects on tourism development. Tourists may also display xenophobia that leads to reduced international travel, hesitation to try foreign food, and greater preference for using a travel agency and group travel (Kock et al., 2021 February). At the national and international levels, deglobalization, isolationism, and the regionalism of tourism (Brouder et al., 2020) will have opposing effects on tourism development. Tourists may also display xenophobia that leads to reduced international travel, hesitation to try foreign food, and greater preference for using a travel agency and group travel (Kock et al., 2019). The localized and regionalized travel trends due to nationalist thoughts, distrust, anxiety, and even hostility have intensified during the pandemic (Brouder et al., 2020) and may have a long-term adverse effect on post-pandemic travel and tourism.

Self-transcendence and self-diminishment

Catastrophic events drastically alter people’s outlooks in life as people make sense of events, search for meaning and purpose, and seek spiritual growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Given its severity, the COVID-19 pandemic could be considered as existential hapax, a crucial moment of life and an intense experience that led to significant physical, emotional, and spiritual transformation (Matteucci, 2021). In the post-pandemic era, travel for purpose and morality may become more prevalent as people engage in a deeper introspective reflection in searching for purpose and constructing a revised life narrative. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many social issues such as unequal access to health care, poverty, food insecurity, racial injustice, and more. A notable phenomenon during the pandemic is the occurrence of large-scale protests despite the risk of spreading the virus (Berger, 2020 October). New forms of activism-based tourism are emerging, such as justice tourism and protest tourism (Guia, 2021). For example, in August 2020, Portland, Oregon in the United States saw an increase in the number of tourists who came to visit the sites of the Black Lives Matter protests (Gallivan, 2020 August). The focus of alternative tourism is social eudaimonia that highlights compassion, ethics, and collective well-being (Matteucci et al., 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic induces direct health threats as well as secondary stressful events stemming from pandemic-related circumstances such as financial distress, separation from one’s social support system, and a prolonged pandemic without an end in sight (Williamson et al., 2021). Such wide-spread stressors can lead to negative psychological responses such as depersonalization (a sense of detachment from self, others, and the world) and a sense of self worthlessness (Williamson et al., 2021). Such self-diminishment tendencies may manifest in tourism behaviors such as lack of interest in travel and reduced enjoyment when they do.
Conclusion

This research offers a post-traumatic growth theoretical perspective of post-pandemic tourism behavior (Fig. 1). While the post-pandemic and post-traumatic tourism behaviors are presented as outcomes of both pandemic induced and post-traumatic induced changes, it is important to recognize that the two forces are often intertwined. For example, pandemic-induced risk reduction (retreat) behaviors are conceptually related to post-traumatic growth. While current literature predominately approaches post-traumatic growth as a general measure (e.g., the post-traumatic growth inventory, Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; the traumatic life events questionnaire, Kubany, 2004), this research demonstrates that trauma-specific restructured assumptions might interact with the generic domains of post-traumatic growth to bear on domain-specific (i.e., travel and tourism) post-traumatic growth.

This research may offer implications for other crises that threaten tourism such as natural disasters, terrorism, and military conflicts. Miao et al. (2021) provided a terror management perspective of COVID-19 travel and tourism behavior. The post-traumatic growth perspective offered by this research extends the literature by portraying post-pandemic travel and tourism behavior as conscious efforts against mortality. Different degrees of such traumatic events experienced by individuals may manifest in different tourism behaviors. For example, people with a lower degree of risk perception toward COVID-19 intend to travel longer and more frequently (Kim et al., 2021).

Future research can build on the theoretical foundations laid out by this study to test the relationships between post-pandemic tourism behavior and post-traumatic growth. Another fruitful inquiry is to what extent post-pandemic travels trigger feelings of traumatic growth and which forms of travel are most effective in inducing such effects. In addition, future researchers can take a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews and personal narratives to explore the connections between post-pandemic tourism activities and post-traumatic growth.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2022.103410.
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