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Inducing wellbeing through staycation programs in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic aftermath has aggravated its traumatic effect to engender a mental health crisis. With increasingly worsened psychological wellbeing, it is the responsibility of tourism scholars and operators alike to explore how contemporary tourism offerings can enable individuals to rebuild hope and optimism through relishing tourism’s restorative appeals amid rigid border lockdowns. However, it remains unclear whether tourists are able to restore themselves from staycation programs, since tourists have a tendency to favor a novel space, as opposed to a usual travel environment. To address this question, we relied upon a government-funded staycation campaign using a survey to assess a transformative process leading from travel motivation and restoration to fortifying psychological capital and wellbeing. Drawing on theories pertaining to attention restoration, psychological capital, and involvement, our findings unravel a travel transformative mechanism of staycation programs that build a linkage between travel motivation and favorable psychological outcomes amid adverse circumstances.

1. Introduction

Recent health reports have shown an overwhelming increase in psychological distress amid travel bans, social exclusions, and immobility as never before (Daly & Robinson, 2021). As an indication of one’s psychological discomfort, distress is thought to aggravate the traumatic effect of the COVID pandemic, leading to a severe mental health crisis (Wong, Lin, Lin, & Liao, 2021; Yang & Wong, 2020). Notwithstanding the effectiveness of the vaccine, as of this writing, it is certain that this adverse circumstance is expected to endure under waves of the outbreak (Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, 2020). Against this backdrop, a surge of academic interest has emerged, fostering a revitalized momentum in enriching our scant understanding of health and wellbeing in the tourism realm (e.g., Buckley & Westaway, 2020; Ou, Wong, & Huang, 2021; Pathak & Joshi, 2020; Wessler & Talarico, 2021; Yang & Wong, 2020; Zhang, Wong, Duan, & Chen, 2021).

Owing to the rising interest in wellbeing, across various academic disciplines (e.g., public health, psychology, economics, and tourism), dissimilar definitions have been proposed (Pyke, Hartwell, Blake, & Hemingway, 2016). A common view of wellbeing in tourism can be traced back to transformative service research (Anderson et al., 2013), whereby wellbeing pertains to therapy and healing; it is subjectively evaluated with a reflection on tourists’ life satisfaction and happiness (Pyke et al., 2016; Uysal, Berbekova, & Kim, 2020). Importantly, insights from the existing conceptualization of relationships between tourism and wellbeing suggest that traveling is able to promote wellbeing (Sirgy, 2010; Uysal et al., 2020). This phenomenon is not limited to tourism products/services catering to special interest tourists seeking wellness; it is believed that travel is essentially an antidote, enabling tourists to escape from an exhausting environment and to relish restorative qualities of a given trip (Lehto & Lehto, 2019).

Fritz and Sonnentag (2006) claim that vacationing during leisure time in particular has a potential to promote recuperation and recovery from daily exhaustion, so as to replenish new resources. In this vein, undertaking vacations offers tourists recovery experiences to help prevent them from developing severe health problems such as depression, stress, and heart disease (Strauss-Blasche, Reithofer, Schobersberger, Ekmekcioglu, & Marktl, 2005). This effect is particularly evident from longitudinal inquiries, suggesting that pleasure vacations potentiate recovery and wellbeing outcomes even if the effect fades out quickly (de

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Bloom, Geurts, & Kompier, 2012; Fritz & Sonnentag, 2006; Nawijn, 2011). Recovery is thus derived from temporary respite from daily stressors, as it echoes the DRMMA model (Newman, Tay, & Diener, 2014), whereby such detachment from work demands serves as the first step to foster relaxation and recovery associated with “low levels of activation, little physical or intellectual effort, few demands and high levels of positive affect” (de Bloom et al., 2012, p. 307).

Although the aforementioned assertions have offered premises for unpacking relationships between tourism and wellbeing, it is unclear whether tourists are able to restore themselves from staycation programs, hence fostering their wellbeing during such extenuating circumstances. Referring to vacationing in one’s usual environment (Vada, Prentice, Scott, & Hsiao, 2020), staycation has become a popular (and perhaps the only available) tourism activity amid mobility constraints with border lockdowns (Le & Phi, 2020). Showcasing core characteristics of local activities in the vicinity of one’s residence, with short-distance and more sustainable transportation (Jeuring & Diaz-Soria, 2017), staycations represent a form of domestic tourism with shorter length and proximity. In other words, the length of a staycation is often short, as it mostly pertains to excursions within driving distance from home. Staycations thus require tourists to detach from work to undertake touristic activities in surrounding spaces from home (Wong, Lin, & Kou, 2021). Accordingly, this study defines staycation as a short trip, often undertaken as a daytrip, to places close to home; it resonates with the idea of vacationing at home without cross-border or long-distance travel, where it is within driving distance from home and does not require overnight stays (Suau-Sanchez, Voltes-Dorta, & Cugueró-Escòfet, 2020). Hence, unlike vacationing options at other locales away from home (e.g., long-distance travel abroad), tourists undertaking staycations relish a shorter holiday experience (Vada et al., 2020). This limitation has led to debates that staycation programs “have less pronounced effects on wellbeing than do vacations spent outside the person’s usual living environment” (de Bloom, Nawijn, Geurts, & Korpela, 2017, p. 574). In essence, since tourists inherently wish to escape from their usual domiciles, it becomes foreseeable that a novel space may prevail in rendering tourists substantial restorative qualities (Lehto, 2013).

While these remarks hold true, the staycation has been endowed with a greater significance amid the pandemic as psychological distress has become particularly prevalent (Yang & Wong, 2020). A staycation provides individuals an avenue to replenish psychological resources that help them cope with increased psychological distress (Miao, Im, Fu, Kim, & Zhang, 2021). In other words, the current extenuating circumstances have rendered wellbeing as an urgent need that may compel individuals to rely on “leisure time to rebuild and accumulate health” (Yang, Zhang, & Chen, 2020, p. 2). As a result, individuals may seek low-risk travel alternatives currently available, such as staycations within home surroundings under circumstances when the place remains fairly safe from COVID (Wassler & Fan, 2021). The staycation program in Macau is relevant to this point, considering that the place not only maintains a status relatively safer than its adjacent regions while mandating stringent COVID protocols from local authorities to lower COVID-related travel risks, thereby allowing residents to enjoy safe tourism offerings when travel options to other destinations remain mostly unavailable (Macao Government Tourism Office, 2020a).

The pandemic situational factor therefore induces motivations for staycations; and the rapid growth in staycation consumption provides a case in point (Wassler & Fan, 2021). Considering that scant tourism offerings are currently available to reconcile psychological distress during travel constraints, it is therefore vital to explore whether the staycation is able to foster tourist wellbeing in such a time with increasing psychological distress. To address this question, we anchor our attention to a compelling staycation initiative at one of the world’s busiest leisure destinations. With a vigorous participation from the resident side, this staycation program is thought to deliver residents a way to actively cope with the contemporary traumatic event through rediscovering local hidden socio-cultural treasures (Macao Government Tourism Office, 2020a). We further build upon travel motivation, attention restoration, and involvement theories to unravel an underexplored process leading from travel motivation and restoration to fortifying psychological capital and life satisfaction amid adversity. This research thus echoes recent calls (e.g., Fang, Prayag, Ozanne, & de Vries, 2020; Rosenbaum & Wong, 2015; Wolf, Ainsworth, & Crowley, 2017) to attend to a transformative perspective of travel experience, thereby building hope and optimism in times when they are most needed.

Specifically, travel motivation theory posits that motivation reveals unfulfilled human needs for a range of perceived benefits (e.g., relaxation and restoration) associated with traveling (Lehto & Lehto, 2019); accordingly, stronger travel motivation attributed to duress may impel tourists to actively seek restorative appeals in order to fortify hope and resilience amid stressful traumas. Likewise, the theory of goal setting also offers explanations of the linkage between motivations and restoration, considering that the motivational aspect of goals (e.g., seeking psychological resources) drives tourists to either consciously or unconsciously engage in goal-directed behaviors (Oh, Assaf, & Baloglu, 2016), thereby actively absorbing appeals for restorative goal attainment. Further, tourist wellbeing concerning the aftermath of a staycation is influenced by how well the staycation restores and reinforces a sense of hope, optimism, and resilience (Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman, 2007; Rosenbaum & Wong, 2015). In other words, with directed attention rejuvenated from the staycation, it is possible to prevent individuals from suffering a continuous spiral of fatigue and negative emotions, leaving a positive state of mind in dealing with the crisis. Moreover, according to involvement theory, involved tourists are inclined to embrace greater participation in travel packages (Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Prebensen, Woo, Chen, & Uysal, 2013); thereby relishing the en route experience for psychological restoration. This inquiry contributes to the scant tourism wellbeing literature by highlighting a transformative process centering on restorative functions of staycation initiatives during severe environmental plight.

2. Literature review

2.1. Travel motivation and restoration

Travel is thought to act as an antidote to tedious work and a regular environment, by satisfying human needs in various ways, with physiological, intellectual, and psychological facets (Jang, Bai, Hu, & Wu, 2009; Mitchell, 1998). Given that travel motivation is defined as one’s inner desire for tourism activities, it indicates unattained human needs that impel travel decisions and behaviors (Pereira, Gupta, & Hussain, 2019). Travel motivation is built upon push and pull motivation theory. The former is concerned with the need deficiency driving individuals to undertake a trip, whereas the latter pertains to the attractiveness of a given destination in response to the need deficiency (Kim, Lee, Uysal, Kim, & Ahn, 2015). Engaging in traveling thus provides individuals a means to cushion the need deficiency, as they vacation in a space for relaxation, escape, nostalgia, novelty, and the like (Kirilova, Peng, & Chen, 2019; Leong, Yeh, Hsiao, & Huan, 2015).

Restoration is deemed essential in sustaining one’s productivity and mental wellbeing (Mody, Suess, & Dogru, 2020). Grounded in attention restoration theory, it is assumed that individuals rely upon restorative qualities of a space and in particular, tourism attractions, in order to restore directed attentions exhausted by daily use (Lehto & Lehto, 2019). Such restorative qualities are concerned with being away, a feeling of escape; with fascination, a feeling of holding attention effortlessly by a site’s appeals; and with compatibility, a consonance between the self and the environment (Rosenbaum & Wong, 2015). Yet, one’s psychological resources are constrained to a certain capacity, leaving the individual unable to be energetic and focused when such resources are impoverished (Kirilova & Wang, 2016). As such, natural spaces and/or built settings may render individuals an environment to
(re)capture restorative qualities in order to better satisfy their desire for escape, fascination, and compatibility (Lehto, Fu, Li, & Zhou, 2017; Rosenbaum & Wong, 2015).

Moreover, since traveling is able to expedite relief from an exhausting environment, it is believed that individuals with higher travel motivation feel compelled to seek a place for wellness (Lehto & Lehto, 2019). This supposition is rationalized based on travel motivation theory, as it is posited that individuals with strong desires for travel benefits are inclined to obtain a satisfying travel experience catering to their needs (Jang et al., 2009). This dynamic implices a linkage between travel motivation and restorative travel experiences, as the intrinsic forces often compel individuals to engage in certain courses of action (Egger, Lei, & Wassler, 2020).

Egger et al. (2020) further remark that the decision to visit a restorative environment is shaped by intertwined forces including internalized unfulfilled needs for restoration and attraction attributes that supply restorative qualities. Since relaxation and restoration are the primary benefits offered by tourism activities, travel motivation thus not only reveals unattained psychological needs for such resources but also impels tourists to actively seek restorative cues embedded in a given trip (Han, 2019; Lehto, 2013). Considering that travel motivations for relax and escape, novelty seeking, and nostalgia signal a certain degree of exhaustion in the existing environment (Kim, Kim, & Petrick, 2019; Wong, Law, & Zhao, 2018), these intrinsically enticing factors are thought to induce tourist behaviors aiming to fulfill their need deficiency. This rationale also resonates with goal setting theory, suggesting that the motivational aspect of goals serves to impel tourists to either consciously or unconsciously engage in behaviors directed toward goal attainment (Oh et al., 2016). Zhang et al. (2021) provide an example showing that tourists crave health-related benefits as goals that drive them to rural-eco sites. These places in turn render an array of restorative values that could heal the body and soul. Although Zhang et al.’s (2021) work focuses on health-related goals, it also hints at motivational appeals that predispose tourists toward attractions that are unique and relaxing and that can conjure the past.

In this sense, tourists motivated by mental recuperation tend to seek conduits that can enrich their psychological resources (Lehto, 2013). Crompton’s (1979) classic work on motivations for pleasure vacations also provides support for travel motivation and restoration linkages. Crompton (1979) claims that when a tourist longs for a pleasure vacation as a means to replenish restorative resources for internal damage and depletion, they are encouraged to “return enriched, regenerated and recharged to [their] own environment” (p. 411). Given the aforementioned theoretical strands pertinent to goal setting and travel motivation, we argue that individuals with stronger travel motivation for restorative benefits with a higher level of needs for relaxation/escape, novelty seeking, and nostalgia tend to attain more restorative qualities from tourism activities—considering that push factors impel tourists to actively absorb restorative qualities, while restorative appeals embedded in a route have a role to attract tourists to undertake the route. Thus, we posit that:

**Hypothesis 1**. Travel motivations—(a) relax and escape, (b) novelty seeking, and (c) nostalgia—are positively related to attention restoration.

### 2.2. Restoration, psychological capital, and life satisfaction

Rooted in positive psychology, psychological capital (PsyCap) refers to “one’s positive appraisal of circumstances and probability for success based on motivated effort and perseverance” (Luthans et al., 2007, p. 550). Although it originally characterizes one’s attitudinal and psychological strengths in an organizational environment, PsyCap is thought to be a timely measure catering to this increasingly challenging and yet, wellbeing-concerned era (Fang et al., 2020; Pathak & Joshi, 2020). This construct is composed of four psychological components, embodying goal-oriented energy and pathways (hope); a sense of confidence in dealing with challenging tasks (self-efficacy); positive expectations of success (optimism); and ability to bounce back from adverse circumstances (resilience) (Luthans et al., 2007; Mathe, Scott-Halsell, Kim, & Krawczyk, 2017). With the use of this higher-order measure, the development of one’s psychological state amid devastating events can be therefore unfolded (Fang et al., 2020).

Wellbeing, reflected through life satisfaction, has emerged as an increasing pursuit of interest among tourists, tourism employees, and hosting communities (Lin, Chen, & Filieri, 2017). Defined as the extent to which individuals rate their overall quality of life favorably against their chosen criteria, life satisfaction results “after needs are met and goals are fulfilled” (Wang, 2017, p. 170). Traveling enables individuals to “permanently or temporarily relocate to a destination that represents their subjective ideal to enhance their overall satisfaction with life” (Simpson, Sigauw, & Sheng, 2016, p. 161). Such life satisfaction is induced and then persists only when tourists are delighted with such an experience (Kwon & Lee, 2020). In other words, satisfaction-enhancement attributes embedded in a given trip matter to one’s global assessment of life quality.

Attention restoration theory has laid the theoretical foundation for unpacking a transformative process leading from tourism environment and restoration from mental exhaustion to an enduring effect on psychological wellbeing (Gill, Packer, & Ballantyne, 2019; Lehto, 2013; Rosenbaum & Wong, 2015). Since individuals are compelled to exert directed attentions for routine use, it is inevitable they will suffer from mental fatigue, which diminishes psychological capacity and prevents the individuals from maintaining a healthy mind and body (Kirlilova & Wang, 2016). With a continuous spiral of mental fatigue lacking remediation through restorative appeals, severe emotional negativity is thought to occur, to the detriment of one’s psychological capital (Gill et al., 2019).

To counteract this downward spiral, tourism activities and environmental features (e.g., natural spaces and/or built attractions) can offer rich stimuli to individuals allowing them to gain relaxation and attention restoration (Rosenbaum & Wong, 2015; Wang, Tsai, & Tang, 2019), thus affording tourists a means to replenish and restore their directed attentions (Whiting, Larson, Green, & Kralowec, 2017). Immersing in a restorative environment where attention can be effortlessly relaxed and one can find pleasure, tourists are allowed to renew and regain energy for rebuilding a positive state of mind (Wong, Lin, & Kou, 2021). In a similar vein, the DRAMMA model proposed by Newman et al. (2014) also asserts that undertaking leisure trips impels detachment from mundane routines, as such detachment serves as “a precursor to the restoration of psychological and physical resources required for continued functioning and well-being” (p. 562). This notion echoes Sonnentag’s (2003) contention that mental recovery is needed following daily effort expenditure, considering that reactions germane to mood and performance-related strain may otherwise emerge. Taking leisure time for the restoration of internal resources thus remains “necessary to prevent an ongoing deterioration in mood and performance in the long run” (Sonnentag, 2003, p. 518). In this sense, since psychological resources are able to be reenergized from tourism activities, it is possible to develop a positive mental state of being hopeful, confident, optimistic, and resilient (Luthans et al., 2007). Moreover, given that psychological capital is deeply rooted in positive psychology, it has a profound effect on psychological wellbeing (Mathe et al., 2017); hence, with the development of psychological capital, the process leading from tourism’s restorative attributes to wellbeing is expedited. Therefore we proposed, in the following hypotheses, that restorative appeals extracted from tourism activities play a crucial role in fostering wellbeing, while this relationship can also be mediated by a positive state of mind, namely, psychological capital.

**Hypothesis 2**. Restoration is positively related to psychological capital.
Hypothesis 3. Restoration is positively related to life satisfaction.

Hypothesis 4. Psychological capital mediates the relationship between restoration and life satisfaction.

2.3. Travel involvement and its moderating effects

As a central tenet underlying the prediction of tourist behaviors, travel involvement reveals one’s interest toward tourism activities (Dimanche, Havitz, & Howard, 1993). Prayag and Ryan (2012) further elaborate that involvement is a psychological state of attachment of personal relevance to traveling. Given its explanatory power regarding tourist behaviors, travel involvement has maintained a growing marketing focus concerned with tourist segmentation (Dimanche et al., 1993; Hwang, Lee, & Chen, 2005). Strong involvement in traveling predicts that tourists may devote greater effort toward searching and planning trips, thereby exerting interest with engrossed efforts in seeking better travel experience (Wong & Tang, 2016). In this sense, travel involvement is argued to influence tourists’ decision-making process, satisfaction of the travel experience, and destination loyalty (Kim et al., 2019; Lee, Bruwer, & Song, 2017).

Travel involvement is a crucial moderator governing tourism studies (Hwang et al., 2005). Since involved tourists tend to attach great personal importance to tourism activities, it is believed that they are more interested in the travel experience and thereby actively seek satisfaction-enhancement functions embedded in the experience (Prayag & Ryan, 2012). Extending this logic to the present research context, we argue that travel involvement impels tourists to actively seek and absorb restorative qualities as essential experience from trips (Lehto, 2012). Such qualities thus render as a cushion that could mitigate the escalating psychological duress of a prolonged crisis (Yang & Wong, 2020). In other words, we argue that travel involvement works as a boundary condition that bridges the direct relationship between travel motivation and experience quality (e.g., restoration); because highly involved tourists would crave an even higher level of restorative experience, ceteris paribus, given that they are motivated to travel in the first place. Hence, we posited that:

Hypothesis 5. Travel involvement moderates the relationship between travel motivation and attention restoration in that tourists with high involvement would find a higher level of restoration.

2.4. Psychological distress and its moderating effects

Psychological distress is often seen as a depressive symptom resulting from confronting adverse situations (Yang & Wong, 2020). Specifically, psychological distress reveals one’s psychological discomfort when he/she experiences fatigue, stress, anxiety, fear, loneliness, and/or other psychological symptoms (Hwang & Yun, 2015). Scholars have cautioned that distress diminishes quality of life (Jordan, Spencer, & Prayag, 2019), and have suggested various buffers, including social support, to attenuate stress during various predicaments (Zhu, Gao, Zhang, & Jin, 2020). Yet, another stream of work acknowledges that distress could be viewed as a positive idiosyncrasy which provokes escape and a quest for meaning in life (Buckley & Westaway, 2020), resulting in resilience and coping behaviors (Zheng, Luo, & Ritchie, 2021). Distress thus compels individuals to seek means to alleviate negative encounters and feelings resulting from extenuating circumstances (Daly & Robinson, 2021). In this sense, psychological resources are deemed more meaningful to those who suffer from distressful events (Wong, Lin, Lin, & Liao, 2021; Yang & Wong, 2020). Accordingly, we argue that the effect of restoration on psychological capital is more salient for distressed individuals as they try to acquire psychological resources for rebuilding hope and optimism. We illustrate our research model in Fig. 1.

Hypothesis 6. Psychological distress moderates the relationship between restoration and psychological capital in that the relationship is stronger for highly distressed tourists.

3. Methods

3.1. Data collection and sample

We based the research upon staycation programs in Macau, one of the world’s most popular leisure and tourism territories (Yang, Wong, Tan, & Wu, 2020), to unravel whether the staycation could promote tourist wellbeing in adverse circumstances. In addition to its fame as an international travel destination welcoming a massive number of inbound tourists, Macau has also contributed largely to outbound markets. In 2019, there were 30,429,177 departures of residents on record; of this number, over 1.6 million were traveling in package tours and/or under individual arrangements with the assistance of travel agencies (Macao Government Tourism Office, 2020b), corresponding to three trips per capita annually.

Adversely, the harshest pandemic prevention measures such as city lockdowns and cancellations of flights have forbidden residents to travel outside the city. Although the travel bubble scheme between Macau and Mainland China was launched to enable limited travel since mid-2020, requirements such as weekly COVID-19 nucleic acid tests, health code tracking systems, and location exposure indicating risk levels in other regions continued to affect outbound travel (Macao Health Bureau, 2020). It was evident that the number of resident outbound departures plunged 86.6% in the first 10 months of 2020, based on year-on-year figures (Macao Government Tourism Office, 2020b).

In order to create travel opportunities for locals as a means to cushion the increasing travel needs amid constrained outbound travel mobility, a partially sponsored local tourism campaign – Macau Ready Go! – was initiated during June and September by the local tourism authority. A total of 25 itineraries were categorized into either community routes or leisure routes, comprising tours to local heritage attractions, gastronomic exploration within the city, and all-ages leisure experiences within various integrated resorts (Macao Government Tourism Office, 2020a).

Community routes included trips to heritage sites and traditional landmarks with itineraries that aim to engage locals with compelling educational and scenic spots and to rediscover the natural and heritage treasures. Leisure routes were hosted inside modern resorts that furnish an array of recreational activities. These included family activities such as traversing a palace-like atmosphere in a luxury environment, indulging in a wave pool and an adventure river ride, a behind-the-scenes tour at a show, or becoming immersed in a three-dimensional, state-of-the-art, interactive space with light-art. Each route was a day-trip tour, while en route experiences were accommodated with tour guides, meals, and shuttles. A typical route usually started at 9 o’clock in the morning and ended in late afternoon at around 5 to 6 o’clock. Each tour group attracted around 20 to 30 attendees from different households, while a typical household size was around three to four members. Overall, this initiative has lured more than 140,000 attendees (Macao Daily, 2020). From the astonishing outcome travel to its “cliff-like” drop during prolonged city lockdowns, it was thus rational to believe that Macau was an appropriate context for the examination of the restoration qualities and wellbeing enhancement of the local tourism program.

Drawing on a survey-based quantitative research design, respondents were approached through their community groups of popular social media platforms using convenience sampling. Notably, respondents in our study were referred to Macau residents who have taken part in staycation programs. They were invited to fill in an online questionnaire, as we wished to minimize physical contact to keep the virus at bay. The questionnaire contained items adopted from the existing literature; the items were presented in Chinese following an iterative translation process performed by two bilingual tourism...
A pilot test of 12 responses was conducted to detect translation and statement clarity issues, in order to finalize the questionnaire design.

A total of 409 valid responses were received from late August to early October 2020, resonating closely with the program’s time span. Of our sample, over 70% enrolled in leisure tracks, as leisure appeals were reported to attract more interest (Macau Daily, 2020); 68% were female attendees; 46.1% were between the age of 25 and 44; and 32.3% embarked on 3–5 outbound travels on an annual basis. Our sample demographic distributions (e.g., community-based and leisure track attendance) resonated with the participant profile reported on Macau Daily (2020). We summarize sample details in Table 1.

### 3.2. Measures

#### 3.2.1. Travel motivation

Travel motivations were assessed based on three sub-scales: relaxation and escape, novelty seeking, and nostalgia. Each sub-scale was evaluated using two items, with each item measured using a 9-point Likert scale anchoring from 1 (totally disagree) to 9 (totally agree). Measurement items of the first two motivations were adopted from Wong et al. (2018), while items for nostalgia travel motivation were based on Pearce and Lee’s (2005) work. Reliability was confirmed as both Cronbach’s alpha (α) and composite reliability (CR) exceeded 0.75. We present details of measurement scales with their corresponding reliability scores in Tables 2 and 3.

#### 3.2.2. Restoration

An 8-item second-order scale was adopted from Han (2007) to elevate the escapism, fascination, and compatibility functions of restoration. Each item was rated on a 7-point Likert scale anchoring from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Both α and CR exceeded 0.80.

#### 3.2.3. Psychological capital

We adopted an 11-item scale from Jung and Yoon (2015) to measure PsyCap. Following their instructions, we operationalized the measure as a second-order scale, embodying hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism. Each item was evaluated using a 7-point Likert scale measuring from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Reliability was evident as α and composite reliability for each sub-scale surpassed 0.75.

#### 3.2.4. Life satisfaction

This construct was measured using a three-item scale borrowed from Lin et al. (2017). We adopted a 7-point Likert scale anchoring from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree) to rate the items. Reliability indicators (α > 0.90 and CR > 0.90) suggested that this scale was reliable.

#### 3.2.5. Travel involvement

We acquired a four-item measure pertaining to travel involvement from Prayag and Ryan (2012). A 9-point Likert scale anchoring from 1 (totally disagree) to 9 (totally agree) was recruited. This scale was reliable as α and CR scores were greater than 0.90.

#### 3.2.6. Psychological distress

Three items relating to psychological distress were adopted from Lin (2014). Using a 7-point Likert scale, respondents were allowed to anchor their perceptions of psychological distress from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Reliability was established as both α and CR exceeded 0.85.

### 4. Results

Fig. 1. Proposed model of local tourism programs and psychological wellbeing.
Table 2
Factor analysis and reliability test.

| Scale items | Factor loadings | Composite reliability | Cronbach’s alpha |
|-------------|-----------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| Travel motivation (relax and escape) | This staycation program could allow me to rest and relax. 0.77 | 0.90 | 0.83 |
| Travel motivation (novelty seeking) | This staycation program could allow me to discover new things. 0.78 | 0.86 | 0.78 |
| Travel motivation (nostalgia) | This staycation program could allow me to travel back to old days. 0.92 | 0.95 | 0.93 |
| Restoration (being away) | This tour was an escape experience. 0.86 | 0.92 | 0.87 |
| Restoration (fascination) | My attention was drawn to many interesting things. 0.89 | 0.95 | 0.91 |
| Restoration (compatibility) | There was much to explore and discover. I spent more time looking at the surroundings. 0.92 | 0.94 | 0.90 |
| Psychological capital (hope) | I will think ways to get out if I am in a difficult situation during the COVID-19 pandemic. 0.73 | 0.94 | 0.88 |
| Psychological capital (self-efficacy) | I feel confident that I can get through the COVID-19 pandemic. I feel confident that I can contribute during the COVID-19 pandemic. 0.78 | 0.87 | 0.79 |
| Psychological capital (resilience) | I can get over and recover from being startled by the COVID-19 pandemic. I can get through difficult times from the COVID-19 pandemic because I’ve experienced difficulty before. When I have a setback during the COVID-19 pandemic, I can recover from it and moving on. 0.91 | 0.96 | 0.93 |
| Psychological capital (optimism) | I look on the bright side of things after the COVID-19 pandemic. I am optimistic about my future after the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, I expect more good things to happen to me than bad after the COVID-19 pandemic. 0.87 | 0.94 | 0.89 |

Note: All factor loadings were standardized and were significant at the 0.001 level.

Table 3
Factor analysis and reliability test.

| Scale items | Factor loadings | Composite reliability | Cronbach’s alpha |
|-------------|-----------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| Psychological distress (caused by the pandemic) | I often fell downhearted for not able to freely travel around. | 0.94 | 0.89 |
| Psychological distress | I seldom felt calm and peaceful for not able to freely travel around. | 0.77 | 0.89 |
| Psychological distress | I often felt unhappy for not able to freely travel around. | 0.85 | 0.93 |
| Psychological distress | I obtained pleasure from being on the tour. | 0.91 | 0.97 |
| Psychological distress | I attached great importance to being on the tour. | 0.91 | 0.94 |
| Psychological distress | I had a lot of interest toward local tours. | 0.88 | 0.91 |
| Psychological distress | I gave myself pleasure by getting involved in the various things to do here during the tour. | 0.91 | 0.82 |
| Psychological distress | I feel closer to have my ideal life. | 0.84 | 0.89 |
| Psychological distress | I am more satisfied with my life now. | 0.92 | 0.95 |
| Psychological distress | I feel the quality of my life has improved. | 0.88 | 0.91 |

Note: All factor loadings were standardized and were significant at the 0.001 level.

factor analysis, measurement model fit was evident; as normed fit index (NFI) = 0.91, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.95, standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.05, and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.06.

To cushion the effect of common method variances (CMB), different scale anchoring approaches (e.g., 7- and 9-point Likert scales) were deployed for construct rating (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Furthermore, Harman’s single-factor indicator (χ²/df = 4.84) revealed that CMB was not an issue in this research. Multicollinearity tests were followed to detect collinearity issues pertaining to our study variables; results suggested that each variance inflation factor (VIF < 5) met the required threshold.

4. Findings

The means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations among variables of interest of this study are illustrated in Table 4. We further employed covariance-based structural equation modeling to assess our research model. Since travel frequency signified travel demand, we controlled this variable to avoid obfuscation of dependent variables. Model fit is presented in Table 5, indicating that CFI = 0.94, NFI = 0.91, and RMSEA = 0.07. Table 5 also presents four models germane to our hypothesis testing, as an additional dependent variable was incorpored for each model. Accordingly, the final model – Model 4 – presented in Table 5 was the structural model of the study; thus results of the hypothesis testing within the structural model of interest were reported in Model 4 of Table 5.

Results of the path estimates are presented in Model 4 of Table 5. Hypothesis 1 postulates that travel motivation is positively related to restoration. Results (βrelax and escape = 0.60; βnovelty seeking = 0.46; and βnostalgia = 0.31, p < 0.001) indicate that the proposed relationships are positively significant, as tourists with higher motivations would attain a higher level of attention restoration from their trips. Yet, results also suggest that among other motives, relaxation and escapism exercise a
particular profound effect on restoration. Hypothesis 2 suggests that restoration is positively related to psychological capital. This relationship is supported as $\beta = 0.74$ ($p < 0.001$), implying the importance of restorative appeals on building hope, confidence, optimism, and resilience. Hypothesis 3 posits that restoration is positively related to life satisfaction. We find that restoration enhances life satisfaction ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$) based on Sobel test results; hence, the hypothesis is supported. Hypothesis 5 posits that travel involvement moderates the relationship between travel motivation and restoration. Results from Table 5 reveal that involvement is a significant moderator in conditioning the relationship between travel motivation and restoration. We followed the simple slope procedure from Aiken and West (1991) to partition the moderator and the independent variables into $+/-$ one standard deviation from the mean. As Figs. 2–4 illustrate, highly involved tourists were better able to reap an elevated level of restorative experience form staycation trips, especially when they also possess a high level of travel motivations. Hypothesis 6 proposes that psychological distress moderates the relationship between restoration and psychological capital. This moderating effect is supported as $\beta_{\text{psychological distress} \times \text{restoration}} = 0.11$ ($p < 0.01$). In other words, the effect of restoration on psychological capital is more salient for highly distressed tourists. This moderation is further illustrated in Fig. 5.

5. Discussion

Reflected in life satisfaction, psychological wellbeing has become a major concern amid this increasingly stressful crisis. Prolonged devastations brought by the pandemic have impelled psychological affliction and anxiety over people’s health conditions. Extended periods of social isolation along with immobility could also trigger depletion of socio-emotional resources resulting in an aftermath of emotional crisis (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). The tourism industry has suffered particularly from this massive hit; it is therefore the responsibility of tourism scholars and operators alike to explore how tourism offerings in the midst of the harshest border lockdowns can enable individuals to rebuild hope and optimism through relishing tourism’s restorative qualities.

Yet, although the staycation has become a viable alternative to

Table 4

| Mean | S.D. | AVE | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
|------|------|-----|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Relax and escape | 6.21 | 1.47 | 0.72 | – | | | | | | |
| 2. Novelty seeking | 6.36 | 1.46 | 0.64 | 0.84** | | | | | | |
| 3. Nostalgia | 6.60 | 1.59 | 0.87 | 0.71** | 0.80** | | | | | |
| 4. Restoration | 5.03 | 1.08 | 0.77 | 0.64** | 0.60** | 0.56** | | | | |
| 5. Psychological capital | 5.26 | 0.99 | 0.74 | 0.58** | 0.59** | 0.57** | 0.69** | | | |
| 6. Psychological distress | 4.12 | 1.43 | 0.73 | 0.34** | 0.05** | 0.02** | 0.22** | 0.11* | | |
| 7. Travel involvement | 6.54 | 1.46 | 0.81 | 0.63** | 0.62** | 0.57** | 0.79** | 0.76** | 0.15** | |
| 8. Life satisfaction | 4.91 | 1.15 | 0.77 | 0.57** | 0.53** | 0.46** | 0.71** | 0.69** | 0.17** | 0.77** | – |

Note: ** = $p < 0.01$, * = $p < 0.05$, n.s. denotes not significant. S.D. = standard deviation; AVE = average variance extracted.

Table 5

| Control Variable | Model 1 | Model 2 | Psychological capital | Model 3 | Model 4 | Psychological capital | Life satisfaction |
|------------------|---------|---------|-----------------------|---------|---------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| Travel frequency | 0.03** | 0.04** | 0.05** | 0.03** | 0.01** | 0.03** | 0.07** | -0.02** |
| Main Effects | | | | | | | | |
| Relax and escape | 0.58*** | 0.59*** | | 0.61*** | | 0.60*** | | |
| Novelty seeking | 0.43*** | 0.45*** | | 0.45*** | | 0.46*** | | |
| Nostalgia | 0.30*** | 0.32*** | | 0.29*** | | 0.31*** | | |
| Restoration | | | 0.74*** | 0.76*** | 0.74*** | 0.47*** | | 0.36*** |
| Psychological capital | | | | | | | | |
| Moderating Effects | | | | | | | | |
| Travel involvement | | | | | 0.65*** | | |
| Relax/escape × travel involvement | | | | | | 0.05† | |
| Novelty seeking × travel involvement | | | | | | 0.06† | |
| Nostalgia × travel involvement | | | | | | 0.06† | |
| Psychological distress | | | | | | -0.07† | |
| Restoration × psychological distress | | | | | | 0.11** | |
| $R^2$ (restoration) | 0.61 | 0.66 | 0.66 | 0.68 | | | | 0.60 |
| $R^2$ (psychological capital) | | | 0.55 | | | | | |
| $R^2$ (life satisfaction) | | | | 0.58 | 0.55 | | | |

Note: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.1$, n.s. denotes not significant. Parameters are standardized. Fit statistics for Model 4: CFI = 0.94, NFI = 0.91, and RMSEA = 0.07.
cushion the effect of travel immobility, it is often of short duration and takes place in one’s usual living environment. Since tourists inherently crave to escape from their usual domiciles in order to replenish and restore themselves (Wong, Lin, & Kou, 2021), it becomes unclear whether staycation programs are able to fortify wellbeing in times of most need. To address this question, we anchored our attention to a staycation campaign during the summer vacation period. Relying on travel motivation theory, attention restoration theory, and involvement theory, we unfolded an underexplored path leading from travel motivation and restoration to fortifying psychological outcomes amid the climate of adversity. Our study hence heeds recent calls (e.g., Fang et al., 2020; Rosenbaum & Wong, 2015; Wolf et al., 2017) to advance our understanding of the transformative function of travel experience.

5.1. Theoretical implications

Although the current health crisis has aroused a surge of academic interest in wellbeing, tourism research on crisis-related wellbeing remains in its infancy (e.g., Uysal et al., 2020; Wang, 2017). It is argued that travel is able to expedite relief from an exhausting environment, resulting in improved quality of life (Lehto & Lehto, 2019). This assertion, however, has been challenged, since not only it is based mostly upon conceptualizations (e.g., Lehto & Lehto, 2019; Pyke et al., 2016), empirical examination of how tourism activities promote wellbeing development also remains scant. Our findings provide timely evidence to uncover how psychological wellbeing can be fortified as tourists replenish restorative resources embedded in such a trip. Such rejuvenative resources enable tourists to restore themselves through being away, being fascinated with tourism appeals, and being immersed in the travel experience without distractions (Rosenbaum & Wong, 2015).
Accordingly, we respond to recent calls (e.g., Fang et al., 2020; Wolf et al., 2017) to advance our understanding of the transformative function of travel experience.

Moreover, as of this writing, research on the relationship between the staycation and psychological wellbeing remains unclear; this gap is partially attributed to the fact that tourists are inherently inclined to escape from their ordinary/everyday environment, as novel spaces are able to provide substantial psychological values (Wong, Lin, & Kou, 2021). Traveling to a new environment requires a great engagement in seeking tourism appeals (Zhao, Wong, Tong, Li, & Xiong, 2021), thereby allowing tourists to restore their psychological capacity within an extended time. Thus scholars question the effectiveness of staycation initiatives since “well-being cannot be captured in a small amount of time” (Pyke et al., 2016, p. 102). In other words, staycations are often theorized to “have less pronounced effects on well-being than do vacations spent outside the person’s usual living environment” (de Bloom et al., 2017, p. 574). This research, however, takes the restorative nature of the staycation into account, since attention restoration is concerned with rebranding capacities to prevent a continuous spiral of negative emotions (Gill et al., 2019). As one of the early studies in the examination of relationships between the staycation and psychological outcomes, our goal is not to disseminate the psychological significance of other tourism activities; rather, this study enriches the existing conceptually based staycation-wellbeing research by unpacking a path of how the staycation can transform into a desirable travel mode catering to one’s psychological wellbeing development in the midst of acute environmental plight.

Taking travel involvement into consideration, this study also adds new nuances to the direct relationship between travel motivation and experience quality (e.g., restoration). Although travel motivation theory (Crompton, 1979; Pearce & Lee, 2005) has laid the theoretical foundation pertaining to how motivated tourists are compelled to obtain satisfaction of their psychological needs, we argue that involvement is a boundary condition to this relationship, as low involvement prohibits motivated tourists to capitalize their strong travel desires into an intended experience. Considering also our empirical evidence, it is thus rational to assert that motivated and involved tourists attach great importance to traveling, whereby they actively seek and absorb appealing qualities embedded in a trip in order to cushion the need deficiency. Taken together, our findings enrich the current dominant viewpoint that the staycation has less pronounced effects on wellbeing (e.g., de Bloom et al., 2017). The findings present a glimpse into how staycations offer tourists mental recovery experiences, considering that tourists are able to detach from routine stress (e.g., away from home/workplace) so as to obtain restorative benefits and maintain a sense of control over their travel experiences (Newman et al., 2014). Such experiences furnish an oasis for coping with post-trip daily stress, thereby promoting future betterment (de Bloom et al., 2012). This study thus presents an avenue to explain how tourists can still maintain rich psychological resources from short excursions, as such wellbeing enhancement can be driven by travel motivations and involvement.

In addition, this study contributes to the positive psychology research stream of work that adheres to Luthans and colleagues (Luthans, Luthans, & Luthans, 2004; Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017) seminal initiatives. In particular, we build upon the psychological capital (PsyCap) theory that Luthans and colleagues developed in the organizational context and extend it into the travel setting. This theoretical focus on how natural capital could go beyond the premise of economic capital, human capital, and social capital to embark on a journey to find life’s meaning – one that is more about who you are, instead of what you have and who you know. In other words, PsyCap with respect to confidence, hope, optimism, and resilience renders as a quintessential metaphor for people – tourists, in the present inquiry – to continue searching for conduits that could make their life meaningful and satisfying. This study thus goes beyond the organizational study literature to improvise an integrated nomological network that capitalizes on travel as means to attain better wellbeing through an elevated level of PsyCap. Such positive forces not only could help residents to perpetuate hope and optimism, it could also ameliorate psychological affliction and anxiety by building stoicism and fortitude with confidence and resilience. Although staycation programs are not an antidote for devastations caused by the pandemic, they nevertheless cast a glimpse of hope that may be necessary in overcoming the socio-emotional crisis aftermath (Yang & Wong, 2020).

5.2. Managerial implications

Although the tourism industry has taken a massive hit by this devastating event of COVID-19, it is nonetheless redirecting our attention to rediscover local socio-cultural treasures hidden within one’s neighboring environment through the staycation. For tourists, the staycation is perhaps the only travel mode available under surges of the outbreak, as no one is sure when international travel can return to what it used to be in the heyday. A staycation lasts shorter and is mostly excursions around one’s usual domicile. This limitation raises challenges to the effectiveness of staycation programs for tourist wellbeing, because traveling to a novel space not only extends vacation schedules but it is also prone to generate substantial appealing qualities as opposed to staying in an isolated mundane environment. In this regard, what matters to tourism operators is how they can craft staycation offerings that cater to the increasing strain on psychological resources.

The marketing of staycation offerings is recommended to emphasize tourist motivations for relaxation/escape, novelty seeking, and nostalgia, with the aim to allow individuals with such a need to detach from routine tasks, considering that being away remains a precursor to further wellbeing enhancement. This can be achieved by offering discounts, while seeking sponsorship from and partnership with local authorities. Another strategy is to emphasize the creation of restorative appeals embedded within a trip. Particularly since touristic areas have become less crowded amid broader lockdowns, it renders tourists a peaceful moment to enjoy and stay closer to local built/natural treasures, thereby building consonance with such appeals. Maintaining clean tourism sites, renewing obsolete facilities, and if possible, launching an array of thematic routes may ultimately create an analogy to a novel space.

Moreover, insights derived from this study offer a glimpse at the role of staycation programs in future destination planning. Such a role remains especially relevant to destinations (e.g., Macau, Hawaii, Fiji, Bangkok, Bahamas, and more) that heavily rely upon inbound tourists, where the number of visitors tanks when a health crisis emerges (e.g., SARS, MERS, COVID-19, and future pandemics). Operators from these destinations are in urgent need to craft staycation offerings as an avenue for residents to replenish psychological resources exhausted by daily stress (e.g., stress from work, school assignments, and routine home tasks) on one hand, while on the other hand, building resilience and sustaining the tourism industry when the next health crisis strikes. More importantly, the aftermath of COVID-19 has led to severe under-tourism, which casts tremendous pressure on the economy. The loss of jobs and closure of businesses threatens the sustainability of a place, while continuous restrictions based on resurgence of cases have thrust into the heart of international travel and hence, continue to pose challenges to tourism planning. We thus encourage destinations and operators to develop COVID resurgence tourism planning through staycation intervention programs.

Experience from Macau serves to illustrate how local tourism programs could offset curtailed international tourism demand. In essence, tourism planners need to go beyond the existing knowledge confined within the conventional tourism area lifecycle (TALC) model, which has dominated the literature for decades (McKercher & Wong, 2021), to develop alternative lifecycle methodologies (e.g., “COVID resurgence lifecycle” or “crisis lifecycle”) that capture the rapidly changing extenuating circumstances. These various initiatives could further assist
operators to better plan ahead for future environmental crises that could lead to devastations in the travel industry. Staycation programs discussed in the present inquiry could help destinations and operations to better prepare tourism offerings that promote local discovery of travel appeals.

5.3. Limitations and future directions

Although our study is among the first to examine relationships between the staycation and psychological outcomes in adversity, its limitations must be acknowledged, as follows. First, we center our attention on how tourism’s restorative qualities promote wellbeing. Future research is encouraged to extend the concept of restorative appeals and consider social elements, as current social distancing practices may prohibit social interactions and hence, it is unclear whether social interactions can foster wellbeing amid the practice of physical distancing. Second, although staycation campaigns may have achieved some success partially, residents of other countries and territories are still likely to suffer severe psychological distress under surges of the pandemic. Therefore, it is important to investigate whether staycation programs remain comparatively effective in these regions. Third, we encourage future research to conduct longitudinal studies to validate our findings, such as a design, especially cross-lag analysis, may entail causal inference. Fourth, the moderating effect of travel involvement on the relationship between travel motivation and restoration was found to be marginally significant. We suggest future research to revalidate the proposed travel motivation–restoration linkage in other contexts. We also believe that incorporating other moderators, such as socio-cultural factors, to the model could offer new insights to the literature. Fifth, although we were able to justify the proposed relationship between travel motivations and restoration, it is plausible that other factors, such as travel experience, could mediate the relationship. Likewise, we have adopted operational definitions for travel motivation and attention restoration from the literature. Given that there are many existing travel motivation scales available in the literature, it is plausible that results may deviate slightly based on the difference in measurement scales. However, we believe that the present inquiry maintains strong internal validity, given that all the instruments were adopted from leading journals, while reliability and validity measures of all the adopted scales were all intact. Finally, mediation analysis conducted in the present inquiry is relationship-based, without causal influence. Future research is encouraged to assess the meditational proposition presented in this research through an experimental design.

6. Conclusion

While psychological wellbeing has emerged as a major concern during this devastation, it remains unanswered whether staycation programs can enable individuals to (re)capture psychological resources that help alleviate mental health crises. We rely on staycation initiatives to unfold a transformative mechanism with linkage between travel motivation and positive psychological outcomes amid devastating circumstances. Our research responds to recent calls by providing timely validation, given that all the instruments were adopted from leading journals, while reliability and validity measures of all the adopted scales were all intact. Finally, mediation analysis conducted in the present inquiry is relationship-based, without causal influence. Future research is encouraged to assess the meditational proposition presented in this research through an experimental design.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2021.100907.

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