Once upon a time in quarantine: Exploring the memorable quarantine hotel experiences of Chinese student returnees during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract
During the pandemic, many hotels convert into isolation centres for the purpose of quarantine. However, the memorable experience in the context of quarantine hotel (quarantel) remains unexplored. Thus, the purpose of this research was to explore the memorable quarantel experiences of Chinese student returnees during the COVID-19 outbreak. The research was qualitative in nature, involving 26 in-depth interviews conducted through snowballing. The data was then analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed six themes – (1) staff, (2) room, (3) hygiene and disinfection, (4) food, (5) healthcare and (6) location – with 20 underlying attributes pertaining their experiences. Some themes (e.g. hygiene and disinfection and healthcare) and attributes (e.g. ventilation and Chinese food therapy) were found to be unique experiences with significant functions that newly added in the context of quarantine hotels. Besides, differences existed between operational guidelines of quarantine hotels and actual guests’ quarantine experience. The research allows hotel operators to better understand guests’ concerns during the quarantine period and offers managerial implications to improve hotels’ performance during and after the pandemic.

Keywords
COVID-19, pandemic, quarantine hotel, memorable experiences, student, China

Introduction
Since late December 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has spread to over 200 countries and taken over 5.2 million lives till December 2021 (Worldmeter, 2021). In this scenario, tourism and international travel would bring great risks to the global health system (Deloitte, 2020). This was exemplified by the expedited transmission of the SARS virus through a single hotel and subsequent international air travel in 2003 (Hung et al., 2018). Thus, at the end of April 2020, a global travel restriction was fully enforced (UNWTO, 2020). This pandemic has been affecting the tourism and hospitality industry, leading to the forced suspension of many hospitality service businesses. It has required industry players to change their ways of doing business and follow the new normal, such as by limiting the number of diners at restaurants and bars, practising social distancing among staff and guests and utilising contactless delivery services. Expectedly, global hotel occupancy rates are also in free fall. Therefore, the hotel industry has had to urgently take measures to deal with the challenges caused by the crisis, change its hospitality service paradigm, and adapt to ‘Hospitality 2.0’ to encounter the unpredictable crisis (Jiang and Wen, 2020).
to creating memorable experiences (Ariffin and Maghzi, 2012), it is also important for quarantels to consider beyond technical functions and delve into experiential values. From the academic perspective, although previous studies have investigated memorable hotel experiences, the quarantel is a different context compared to ordinary hotels and is still an unexplored area of research in the hospitality literature. Recently, Wang et al. (2021) found that the quarantined guests viewed the quarantine period as an unforgettable experience, but such experience is ambiguous. Thus, this research is one of the first attempts to fill the gap in the literature by exploring guests’ memorable experiences in quarantels.

From the practical perspective, when the SARS outbreak jeopardised the Asian hotel industry in 2003, hoteliers did not have adequate knowledge on how to respond to an infectious disease crisis (Chien and Law, 2003). Since then, they were urged to be prepared to deal with such crisis (Lo et al., 2006). In dealing with the COVID-19 crisis, the Chinese hoteliers have learnt lessons from the outbreaks of SARS in 2003 and H1N1 in 2009, and have enforced a mandatory quarantine to control the spread of the infectious disease. Thus, it is rational to expect that the experience of COVID-19 will also help hotels to deal with future pandemics. Additionally, a quarantine guest with negative experiences will spread negative word-of-mouth and eventually damage the hotel’s reputation, vice-versa. Thus, the quarantels should provide a positive experience to the quarantined guests to expand their revisiting customer base (Wang et al., 2021). Furthermore, studies have found that the pandemic leads the guests to place a higher expectation on hotel safety measures and services than before (Bonfanti et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2021; Davras and Durgun, 2021). Therefore, understanding the quarantine guest’s memorable experience, both positive and negative experience, will further provide suggestions for quarantels to strengthen the direction of operational improvement, improve reputation, and expand customer base after the pandemic.

**Literature review**

**Quarantine hotel**

In this research, quarantine is defined as the restriction of movement or activity of individuals who are not necessarily ill but are potential disease carriers, while a quarantine hotel or ‘quarantel’ is defined as a hotel designated as a centre to quarantine or isolate individuals with the purpose of monitoring and detecting their early symptoms. A similar but different term is ‘hospital’ in Thailand, referring to the modification of
hotels into hospitals that provide temporary treatment for stable coronavirus patients (Bangprapa, 2020). Since the function of the quarantel is different from that of a traditional hotel, WHO (2020b) and respective local public health authorities have proposed standard operating procedures (SOPs) and guidelines for quarantels (e.g. Department of Information and Tourism Taipei, 2020; The Architectural Society of China, 2020; The Nation Thailand, 2020).

According to The Architectural Society of China (2020), the quarantine hotels should have the independent exit and entrance and convenient transportation. The criteria of hotel selection should be near the designated hospitals for COVID-19, in order to get timely medical treatment; or near the airport and train stations to reduce the possibility of contact infection on the way (Liang et al., 2020). Since each guest has to be assigned an isolated room and practices zero contact, the hotel should have enough rooms to satisfy quarantine needs and minimise the chance of cross-contamination. Each room should also have an attached bathroom that is not shared with others. Room amenities are provided, but all other facilities (i.e. gym room, sauna room, swimming pool, lounge and cafes) and housekeeping services are temporarily closed or unavailable. All catering spaces and buffet services are suspended. Meals are placed outside rooms to avoid direct contact risk. Furthermore, the hotel should be equipped with proper facilities to respond to emergency prevention and control measures. For example, the entire hotel should be under CCTV surveillance and should have a strong Wi-fi network. Additionally, as a new phenomenon in the hospitality industry, hotels use robots as automated personnel to deliver room service and enhance the guest experience (Ivanov and Webster, 2019; Zeng et al., 2020). Quarantels could also be aided by the use of artificial intelligence and robotics technology. Some quarantels in China are digitalized using intelligent non-contact services (e.g. self-service kiosks) to finish the process of zero-contact check-in and -out. Notably, quarantel rates vary across countries and regions, with some charging a flat rate and others charging by hotels’ star ratings. This is subject to the respective hotels and government subsidies. When quarantines are self-financed, price might be an important consideration for guests. Ultimately, all quarantels must follow the operation guides, comply with anti-epidemic and disinfection standards, and implement standardised quarantine services.

Memorable hotel experience

Experience is perceived as a new form of economic value to delight the consumers. The experience economy forces the tourism and hospitality industry players to shift from product and service to memorable experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). Today, the concept of a memorable experience (positive or negative) is gaining attention in the accommodation context. Building a memorable hotel experience (MHE) is vital in improving guests’ satisfaction, revisit intention and willingness to pay high prices (Hwang and Seo, 2016; Pizam, 2010). The term experience has many different meanings, interpretations and perceptions, which creates the challenge of identifying specific characteristics of memorable guest experience (Walls, 2013). Similarly, research into the MHE has produced inconclusive findings (Herjanto and Gaur, 2014). For instance, the same authors have identified five MHE themes (i.e. ambience, multisensory, space, perception of experience and perceived hospitality), while in Khan and Rahman’s (2017) study, the construct includes hotel location, hotel stay and ambience, hotel staff competence, hotel Website and social media experience and guest-to-guest experience. Table 1 presents the experiential dimensions of different types of hotels from previous studies, and demonstrates that the experience of hotel guests generally derive from room quality, service quality, location, food, human interaction (both guest–staff interaction and guest-guest interaction) and some experiential elements like culture, technology, and sensory.

Although memorable tourism experiences denote the ‘tourism experiences that are positively remembered and recalled after the events have occurred’ (Kim et al., 2012: 13), it should be noticed that a memorable experience may not always be positive, since negative MHEs may be raised by guests (Sthapit et al., 2021). Significantly, hotel attributes representing a negative experience affect the overall evaluation of a hotel more severely than those representing a positive experience (Baek et al., 2020). The goal of studying memorable customer experience is to enable a greater understanding of hotel guest experience. Apart from the multi-faceted nature of MHE dimensions, different dimensions occupy various rankings of importance across hotel types. For example, the guestroom dimension is the most important hotel experience for lifestyle hotels, while the dimension of employee interaction is more prevalent in traditional hotels (Baek et al., 2020). At the same time, the individualised and personal nature of a memorable experience also makes it difficult to measure and manage (Knutson et al., 2009). Despite staying at the same place, guests’ experience is generally influenced by individual-level characteristics and varies across market segments (Kim and Perdue, 2013; Lin et al., 2018). For example, Baby Boomers prefer good interior room design,
cleanliness, and good staff attitude (Patterson et al., 2017). Recently, Wang et al. (2021) pointed out that a positive memorable experience will increase guests’ satisfaction, resulting in high revisit intention when quarantels have reverted to the normal hotel after the pandemic. Therefore, this research provides a good opportunity to explore the memorable experiences in a very specialised type of hotel – quarantel – from the student perspective.

**Methodology**

**Research design and sampling method**

Given the exploratory nature of the research, a qualitative approach, specifically in-depth interviews, was adopted. The goal of qualitative research focuses on delivering in-depth explanations and meanings rather than generalizing findings (Carminati, 2018). It is particularly suitable to explore uncertain or unknown aspects of a phenomenon and capture the essence of a phenomenon (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). Meanwhile, it allows the interviewers to ask follow-up questions on preliminary responses (Bell et al., 2018).

Data were collected from a sample of Chinese student returnees. According to Collins Dictionary, a returnee is ‘a person who returns to the country where they were born, usually after they have been away for a long time’. In this research, a returnee refers to a student who returns to the country where they were born (China), usually after being away for a long time for study. The returnees to participate in the research must have had completed 14 days of quarantine in a hotel upon arriving in China. As of 2019, approximately 700,000 Chinese students travelled abroad for education (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2020). They were among the first batch of returnees and showed an increasing trend of backflow during the pandemic (State Information Centre, 2021). Thus, they occupied a significant portion of the quarantined individuals. Particularly, since the midmonth of March 2020, Chinese student returnees have received considerable public attention, as they occupied over 40% of the imported cases in Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Beijing (CCTV4, 2020).

It is known that social media is heavily used by students (Balaji et al., 2015). Furthermore, hotel reviews shared on social media have the most influence on hotel demand (Philips et al., 2017). This is true that upon arrival at the quarantels, many Chinese student returnees have shared their quarantine experience through social media. Additionally, due to the younger respondents being more inclined to voice their dissatisfaction in different ways (Lam and Tang, 2003), the use of student sample in the service failure literature is common and are likely generalizable to the population at large (Kaltcheva et al., 2013). Based on the aforementioned justifications, the research targeted Chinese student returnees.

| Author[s]        | Type of hotels                  | Dimensions                                                                 |
|------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Walls et al. (2011) | Luxury hotel                  | Physical environment [ambience, multisensory, space/function, sign/symbol/artefact], human interaction [employees, fellow guest] |
| Walls (2013)     | Select-service, mid-scale & up-scale/luxury hotel | Physical characteristics [design, property upkeep, ambience], human interaction [attentiveness, professionalism, guest-to-guest, reliability] |
| Barreda and Bilgihan (2013) | Not mentioned | Service experience category, bedroom and bathroom interiors, location, cleanliness, sleep quality and value, hotel physical attribute and ambiance, amenities and complementary services |
| Ren et al. (2016) | Budget hotel                  | Tangible and sensorial experience, staff aspect, aesthetic perception, location |
| Sthapit (2018)   | Not mentioned                 | A comfortable bed, the friendly attitude of hotel staff, a delicious breakfast with plenty of choice and a good restaurant service |
| Sthapit and Jimenez-Barreto (2018) | Airbnb | Attitude and social interactions with the host, the location of the accommodation |
| Sthapit (2019)   | Not mentioned                 | Staff, room, location of the accommodation, breakfast |
| Buehring and O’Mahony (2019) | Luxury | Service, atmosphere, culture, technology, sensory |
| Baek et al. (2020) | Lifestyle & traditional hotels | Employee interaction, guestroom, lounge, free Wi-Fi, service, restaurant |
The interviewees were purposively selected through snowballing. Snowballing allows investigators to obtain new participants through referrals from initial participants (Bell et al., 2018; Boeri and Lamonica, 2015), which could also help the investigators to build a social network and reduce reluctance to participate (Streeton et al., 2004). This sampling method is especially powerful when the objective of the research is to explore rather than test hypotheses (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981), and when the participants are unknown and hard-to-reach groups (Ehlers et al., 2001; Johnston and Sabin, 2010). Due to the travel restrictions and social distancing requirements at the beginning of the pandemic, it is not easy to approach the quarantined student returnees. Thus, snowballing is a suitable method for this research.

Data collection and data analysis

An interview guide was used to ensure consistency in the interview content and cover all key aspects of the study. The guide contained a set of open-ended questions arranged in two sections. The first section covered the demographic profile of the interviewees and the characteristics of the quarantine hotels. The second section covered the questions in Sthapit and Jimenez-Barreto’s (2018) study pertaining the attributes that made the interviewees’ stay memorable. Interviewees were asked ‘What made your recent quarantine experience at a hotel memorable?’ Interviewees were also probed on the differences between their previous hotel experiences and their recent quarantel experience. They were encouraged to provide detailed narratives and not to give dichotomous responses (i.e. yes/no). The interviews were conducted by the authors between April and June 2020. All interviews were done via telephone and were recorded with the permission of the interviewees. Notes were taken by the authors during the interviews as well. Interviewees were first briefed on the interview process and were assured of the confidentiality of their personal information. They were also allowed to terminate the interview at any time and to skip questions they deemed too intrusive.

All interviews were done in Chinese and transcribed into English immediately after the interview. Each interview ran between 45 and 105 min. Interviews were stopped at the point of saturation when responses became repetitive and redundant (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). The authors followed the process of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) by transcribing each script personally and going through each transcript multiple times, line by line, to gain familiarity with the data. The authors analysed and compared their work on a regular basis to detect any discrepancies. Several online meetings were held by the authors to examine the accuracy of the coding findings and to finalise the themes. The initial codes were identified and grouped together and then consolidated into higher level themes (sub-themes) with similarities. Then, the sub-themes were collated into main themes. For instance, initial codes (i.e. politeness, patience, professionalism, good services and robot) were grouped under the three sub-themes of attitude, service, and robotic staff, which were subsequently grouped together under the main theme ‘staff’.

Qualitative study is deemed rigorous when the studies are replicable and transparent (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019). Trustworthiness is paramount to establish rigorousness of qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; McGinley et al., 2021). To improve the trustworthiness of this study, some validation procedures were used. First, to further enhance the credibility of the study findings, member checks were conducted by requesting interviewees to confirm the findings (Buchbinder, 2011). Second, secondary data was also referred to for triangulation as recommended by Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007). Third, the authors invited two lecturers in hotel management to check the clarity of the themes to improve content accuracy. Notably, this research maintained high ethical standards. Ethical permission was granted, and informed consent was obtained from the interviewees. To protect interviewees’ anonymity, no identifying information was disclosed in their quotes and their names were replaced with a respondent number (e.g. R1, R2...). Ultimately, the analysis revealed six themes related to student returnees’ MHE in quarantels.

Findings

As shown in Table 2, of the 26 interviewees, 17 were females and nine were males. They were full-time bachelor’s and master’s students, aged from 20–30 years old. They were students of universities in the Asian region and western countries, with most studied in Malaysia (8 interviewees), the United Kingdom (5 interviewees) and the United States (4 interviewees). They were quarantined in 11 cities in China, with most quarantined in Guangzhou (8 interviewees), Shanghai (4 interviewees), and Zibo (3 interviewees). Most of them stayed in 3-star hotels (14 interviewees) and 4-star hotels (8 interviewees), and the rest stayed in 5-star hotels (1 interviewee) and economy hotels (3 interviewees). Notably, the 26 interviewees stayed in 26 different hotels respectively.

Staff

Interviewees’ memorable experience with hotel staff involved the staff’s attitude (i.e. warm, polite,
encouraging and patient). These qualities were considered important to calm the students’ anxiety and help them stay comfortable. Furthermore, staff service was deemed professional, efficient, and caring. The welcoming ‘health pack’ and encouraging words were particularly highlighted by some interviewees (Figure 1). Examples of their comments were as follows:

“The hotel staffs greeted me and said welcome back to China. It was so warm and I got tears in my eyes. When I finished my quarantine, they reminded me to keep well and stay safe.” (RS4)

“When I arrived at the hotel, the staff gave me a ‘health pack’ which contained masks, hand sanitiser, and medicine. I was reminded that you were home, you were safe. This meant a lot to me.” (RS10)

“The staff were considerate. They asked me whether I had to attend online classes in the morning so that they could prepare an early breakfast for me.” (RS14)

A few interviewees also mentioned that the robotic service was impressive. Two interviewees had an exceptional experience in this regard, stating that: “It was very unique that in the hotel, the food was delivered by a robot. You received a call to inform you that your food was at your doorstep. This was interesting!” (RS6) and “the robot reduced human interaction.” (RS15).

Interviewees also expressed their sincere gratitude, appreciation, and respect for the hotel staff, although they were not sure whether the staff were hotel employees or volunteers. For example:

“They had to wear an entire suit of personal protection equipment from head to toe, which was burdensome. They had to clean and disinfect all the public areas regularly. It was not easy.” (R12)

“They were brave enough to work in such a terrible time. They risked their own lives to serve us. It was a devotion to the society.” (R23)

Room

The interviewees had both positive and negative experiences with the room attributes. Since most of the quarantine hotels in this research were three- or
four-star, the interviewees were generally satisfied with the spacious space and room setup. Room facilities included sofa, bed, table, smart in-room technology, Wi-Fi and ventilation. The interviewees had an overall positive experience with the rooms’ layout and facilities. For example, two interviewees (RS11 and RS26) shared positive experiences:

“My room was extremely good. There was a button to control the curtain and the entire room was connected to a speaker. There was a dock for you to connect and play your favourite music via your mobile device or laptop, even when you were showering. Listening to the music was my entertaining time.”

“It was a duplex room, which was beyond my expectation. There was a French window. I could enjoy the warm sunshine and the city lights, and hear the traffic in the street and the jollification of the city. I felt like vacation.”

The interviewees frequently mentioned that Wi-Fi and ventilation were particularly important facilities during the 14-day quarantine period. However, the experiences with Wi-Fi and ventilation were mixed. Wi-Fi was essential for them to attend online classes, entertain themselves when bored, and connect with their friends and family. Some interviewees enjoyed strong and high-speed Wi-Fi, while some suffered from unstable and slow Wi-Fi, which greatly affected their online learning experience and forced them to purchase additional internet data on their mobile phones. For example, two interviewees (RS2 and RS19) expressed dissatisfaction with the Wi-Fi, stating that:

“The Wi-Fi suddenly disconnected. It took a few hours to fix the problem and my class was over by then! It affected my studies!”

“I did not expect such a poor and unstable WiFi connection nowadays, which I have to rely on my own data to kill my time.”

Meanwhile, ventilation was considered a critical factor in their health and wellbeing. Due to the slightly open windows and the use of centralised air conditioning systems, some interviewees expressed negative experiences with ventilation. The slightly open windows resulted in a lack of fresh air, low quality indoor air, and depressive moods. Similarly, there was no consistent information on whether the air conditioning would be switched on, which confused the interviewees. One interviewee (RS14) explained that: “They suggested to open the windows for ventilation at least 30 minutes twice a day. But the windows were too small and could only be opened 30 to 40 degrees. It was hot and uncomfortable, and there was no fan.”

The interviewees also had mixed experiences related to toiletries and other daily amenities, such as drinking water. Some interviewees were not satisfied with the quality and amount of the toiletries provided. For instance, one interviewee (RS3) said:

“The toiletries provided in the room were not good and not enough for 14 days. There were no rubber slippers in the room either, which was dangerous due to the slippery wet floor!”

Hygiene and disinfection

The hygiene and disinfection theme was an unprecedented experience for the interviewees. They consistently mentioned daily sterilisation activities, warnings on hygiene, and hotel room cleaning. For the humans (i.e. hotel workers that the interviewees met when check-in and saw in the corridor outside of their rooms), daily sterilisation activities included fully equipping with surgical masks and protection suits as well as frequently washing hands. For the hotel facilities, it involved regularly disinfecting commonly touched areas in public spaces. This was illustrated by the interviewees:

“The waterless hand sanitizer and the medical alcohol was just at the hotel staffs’ hand. They used it frequently, when I handed over my passport and my visa card and after I got my room card.” (RS18)
“When I just arrived the hotel, everybody was dressed like Baymax. Hygiene and disinfection became the daily SOPs. I had never experienced this before the pandemic.” (RS22)

“The lift buttons were covered in plastic film. Tissues were provided for us to press the buttons. And there was a working list for the cleaners to sign after they cleaned and disinfected the lift every two hours.” (RS24)

“The aisles smelled strongly of disinfectant. I could hear them regular spraying disinfectant from my room.” (RS3)

Warnings on hygiene habits were displayed in hotel lobbies, on the way to hotel rooms, inside the rooms, and also on handouts given to the guests. As one interviewee (RS22) mentioned, “There was a reminder in the restroom to put a sterilization pill in the toilet flush after using it.”

Most of the interviewees were staying in 3- or 4-star hotels, and even one was staying in 5-star hotels. Those economic hotels were also branded chain hotels like Jinjiang hotels. These hotels have already had relatively high standard on cleanliness, thus the interviewees were generally satisfied with the clean and sanitised environment at first glance. However, the room cleaning service seemed to be a problem during the 2 weeks, because “There was no housekeeping and no cleaning equipment in the room. No broom, no mop. I had many hairs falling on the floor.” (RS2)

Food

When the interviewees recalled their memorable experiences in terms of food, they had much to share. They mostly discussed food variety, food preference, food quality, food delivery, and interestingly, Chinese food therapy. While a few interviewees highlighted the variety of food, most of them complained about limited and repetitive food choices. For example:

“Eating was the only thing I looked forward during the 14 days. The food tasted good with generous portion size and varieties. Lunch and dinner boxes consisted of two types of vegetables, two types of meat, and rice. It helped me to gain weight!” (RS26)

“Eating the same thing every day or repeating meals was boring. Could I have fried chicken or barbecues?” (RS9)

“The food was also totally horrible and lack of healthy options. It wasn’t only me, so many people I met there had the same experience. I was even served cold soup and cold steamed bun!” (RS14)

The hotels also had different degrees of concern about quarantined guests’ dietary requirements, such as food allergies, home food cultures, and religious food restrictions. The interviewees’ comments were as follows:

“There was a form given to indicate whether you are vegetarian or Muslim or have food sensitivities.” (RS10)

“I am from Sichuan province, so I love spicy food. But I was forced to pay for and eat Cantonese food. There was a guest who cancelled his meal order as he doesn’t eat pork; he ate instant noodles for 14 days!” (RS11)

Food quality relates to the taste, hygiene and freshness of the meals. Some interviewees complained that the food was neither tasty nor hygienic, and that the fruits were not fresh. Food delivery policies, meanwhile, depended on the respective hotel’s rules. Some hotels did not allow food delivery while some required a complicated process. For example, one interviewee (RS13) expressed that, “Food needed to be sanitised before delivery to my room. By the time I received my food, it had become cold.”

Surprisingly, some interviewees (RS1, RS2, RS10 and RS17) revealed that Chinese food therapy was a part of their meals via the provision of food known to be nutritious in Chinese cultures, such as Chinese herbal tea and herbal jelly that made with Chinese traditional medicine. Food therapy, a part of traditional Chinese medicine and therapeutic method, has long been regarded as a popular type of complementary and alternative medicine to keep healthy and prevent illness (Fang et al., 2017; Wu and Liang, 2018). As two interviewees noted:

“Chinese herbal tea was given because the weather in Guangzhou was hot and humid. This was unique.” (RS10)

“Traditional Chinese medicine was provided to enhance our immunity, and to me, it was like protection and had psychological benefit.” (RS16)

Healthcare

A memorable experience unique to quarantels was healthcare, which comprised mandatory health checks, compulsory health reports, 24/7 standby medical consultations, and psychosocial support services. Similar to the hygiene and disinfection dimension, the healthcare dimension was the most frequently mentioned theme by the interviewees and was believed to have formed a lasting long-term memory. The interviewees were required to undergo body temperature screening twice a day and daily health reporting, either
by filling up a form in a mini programme or simply reporting it on the social media platform. Surveillance and medical teams were on standby 24/7 to administer these health checks and to deal with emergencies such as aiding sick guests and sending guests with COVID-19 symptoms to hospitals. The medical team also provided psychological health consultations to those with mental or emotional issues like anxiety, panic and loneliness. The interviewees’ positive experiences were portrayed in their comments below:

“I had mild flu, so I contacted the front desk. The hotel staff and medical staff were professional, patient, and comforting. After ruling out the possibility of COVID-19, they checked me frequently and reminded me to rest and drink more water. I felt warmly treated.” (RS9)

“They asked us to fill up a questionnaire on our psychological status, such as how was your sleep, did you feel anxious, how was your mood…” (RS23)

**Location**

The interviewees evaluated quarantel locations by convenience. Quarantels deemed convenient would either be located in the city centre or near transportation hubs in the interviewees’ mind, and would therefore create a positive experience for them. However, most of the quarantels were located in non-strategic locations and lacked accessibility to transportation hubs. This problem was particularly obvious when the interviewees checked out after quarantine. Before check-in, they were sent to the quarantels by pre-arranged vehicles when they arrived at the airport. After check-out, they were left to arrange their own transportation. Some comments from the interviewees were as follows:

“The location of the hotel was a bit far from the city and transportation hubs. It cost more than 200 RMB for me to go to the train station.” (RS20)

“The hotel was about an hour’s driving distance from the airport.” (RS21)

**Discussion**

The role of a hotel is no longer limited to providing overnight stays for travellers, as many hotels have been converted to quarantine facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. To respond to the fact that guests’ quarantine experience is unforgettable but ambiguous (Wang et al., 2021), this research has identified and categorised the memorable quarantel experiences of Chinese student returnees into six themes (i.e. staff, room, hygiene and disinfection, food, healthcare and location) encompassing 20 underlying attributes (see Table 3), which include both positive and negative experience. The themes of staff, room and location have frequently been discussed in the literature on guests’ hotel experience, and have been proven to influence guests’ perceived value, satisfaction and loyalty (Bravo et al., 2019; Khan and Rahman, 2017; Walls, 2013). In this case, care from the staff and a comfortable living environment is especially beneficial for quarantined people’s emotions when facing COVID-19 (Chen et al., 2020b). In contrast, the themes of hygiene and disinfection and healthcare are unique experiences with significant functions that newly added in quarantels, similar to some attributes like ventilation underlying room facilities. Some commonly reported hotel experience themes, such as food, have been given new meanings and explained from different angles.

The research further compares the results with The Guidelines for Emergency Management and Operation of Hotels Used as Temporary Quarantine Centres for COVID-19 of China. Firstly, in this research, some hotels did not fully comply with the guidelines. For instance, the ventilation system and the hotel’s location failed to meet the standards required in the guidelines. Thus, consistent and strict procedures for selecting quarantels should be governed in the future. Secondly, the official guidelines mention neither the detailed aspects of ‘staff’ and ‘food’ (except for food delivery to the room) nor most of the ‘room’ attributes (except for WiFi and ventilation under ‘facilities’). The results reflect that guests’ memorable experiences in quarantels are beyond certain operational or functional attributes in the context of a pandemic. As such, this research is a supplement to existing technical instructions for quarantels that emphasize functional values and calls for more concern towards experiential value for quarantined guests.

Previous studies have proven that cleanliness is essential in a hotel, for without it guests cannot fully enjoy other experiences (Xiang et al., 2015). Cleanliness is a common determinant of hotel guests’ experience, often in the form of words like ‘clean, dirty, smelly, disgusting, and housekeeping’, such that negative comments always appear when there is deficiency in cleanliness (Barreda and Bilgihan, 2013; Sthapit, 2018). As a higher and stricter level of cleanliness, hygiene and disinfection should always be prioritised and is certainly more important during the COVID-19 pandemic, as it has been repeatedly emphasised in global and local health guidelines (Department of Health Hong Kong, 2020; WHO, 2020b). For example, it is compulsory for hotels to provide 70%–80% alcohol-based hand sanitiser to guests in public areas and to clean commonly touched surfaces (e.g.
doorknobs, lift buttons, stair railings and floors) with disinfectant several times a day. In this research, given that hotel waiters/cleaners were not allowed to enter the guestrooms, the problem faced by the interviewees were the lack of room cleaning services. In fact, there is an explicit stipulation in hotel guidelines that no room cleaning service should be provided to avoid cross-infection. Guests are instead needed to clean and disinfect their own rooms. Thus, to facilitate guests’ room cleaning, hotels should provide cleaning tools to quarantined guests upon check-in.

Additionally, healthcare was found to be a memorable and unique quarantel experience that brought a sense of safety to the Chinese student returnees. All quarantels had a medical team on standby 24/7. This was a great improvement from the SARS epidemic period. At the time, only a few hotels in Korea had a designated SARS emergency watch, which was only on duty during specific hours (Kim et al., 2005). This research further found that psychosocial support services were considered highly special and thoughtful by quarantined guests. The Chinese student returnees in this research went through a harrowing journey from their universities to their arrival cities. Coupled with the quarantine experience, it was natural for them to suffer negative emotions such as anxiety and depression (Chen et al., 2020b). Such states of mind generally come from the fear of being infected with COVID-19, the unwillingness to be separated from loved ones, the feeling of boredom and loneliness during isolation, and the influence of fake news on social media (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2020). Thus, psychosocial support services greatly help in preventing or treating quarantine-related mental disturbances and ensuring the psychosocial well-being of quarantined guests, which has never been mentioned by previous literature on a normal hotel experience.

The competence of hotel staff is manifested in their efficiency, friendliness and professionalism (Khan and Rahman, 2017). These qualities include being polite, providing prompt service, understanding guest needs and granting personal attention to guests. In this research, the interviewees spoke highly of the hotel staffs. It is argued that, first, quarantined guests are generally worried about the risk of infection, their own health condition and homesickness (Wong and Yang, 2020), particularly since the interviewees in this research were young student returnees. Coming back to their motherland and being cared for by their compatriots made them feel safer and less nervous. Specifically,

| Dimensions          | Attributes                        | Frequency of positive experience | Frequency of negative experience | Total frequency |
|---------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Staff            | Attitude                         | 14                               | 0                                | 14              |
|                     | Service                          | 16                               | 0                                | 16              |
|                     | Robotic staff                    | 2                                | 0                                | 2               |
| 2. Room             | Layout*                          | 12                               | 0                                | 12              |
|                     | Facilities                       | 6                                | 4                                | 10              |
|                     | Toiletries*                      | 4                                | 2                                | 6               |
|                     | Daily amenities*                 | 4                                | 3                                | 7               |
| 3. Hygiene and disinfection | Daily sterilization activities | 26                               | 0                                | 26              |
|                     | Warnings on hygiene habits       | 16                               | 0                                | 16              |
|                     | Hotel-room cleaning              | 3                                | 4                                | 7               |
| 4. Food             | Food variety*                    | 12                               | 8                                | 20              |
|                     | Food preference*                 | 3                                | 5                                | 8               |
|                     | Food quality*                    | 10                               | 8                                | 18              |
|                     | Food delivery                    | 4                                | 8                                | 12              |
|                     | Chinese food therapy*            | 4                                | 0                                | 4               |
| 5. Healthcare       | Health check                     | 26                               | 0                                | 26              |
|                     | Health report                    | 26                               | 0                                | 26              |
|                     | Medical consultation             | 10                               | 0                                | 10              |
|                     | Psychosocial support services    | 8                                | 0                                | 8               |
| 6. Location         | Convenience                      | 8                                | 4                                | 12              |

Notes: The findings summarized from this research. The attributes with * denotes the attribute that is not mentioned in The Guidelines for Emergency Management and Operation of Hotels Used as Temporary Quarantine Centres for COVID-19 of China.
staff’s display of empathy and understanding towards the guests (Jiang, 2020), via encouraging words and psychosocial support, is essential to relieve guests’ anxiety and boredom. Second, the workload in quarantels is not only increasing but is far more complicated and meticulous than under normal circumstances. Thus, hotel staff are also suffering from high psychological stress and risk exposure (Teng et al., 2020), especially in China where the situation was extremely serious when the interviewees were quarantined. The interviewees understood the staff’s tough time and devotion, which they reciprocated with thankfulness and respect. In addition, this research also found that the delivery robot, as a digitalised staff member, was impressive and useful. This is different from previous findings that although hotels attempt to use technology to enhance guest experience, human touch/interaction still has unique value in creating guests’ memorable experience (Sthapit and Jimenez-Barreto, 2018). In this case, besides providing a trendy, intellectual, and novel experience, the delivery robot aids non-contact delivery and satisfies the requirement of minimising human contact during COVID-19.

Traditionally, amenities and complementary services like the lounge, bar and café are important in creating hotel guest experience (Barreda and Bilgihan, 2013). However, since mass gatherings and social activities were suspended and guests were prohibited from leaving their rooms during quarantine, hotel facilities like parking, restaurants, swimming pools or gyms became irrelevant when the research was done. The room was the core product of a hotel stay, assessed by its size, layout, bed, bathroom, up-to-date amenities and in-room high-speed internet access. The quality of the room influences guests’ satisfaction (Nunkoo et al., 2019; Subramanian et al., 2016; Xiang et al., 2015); hence, room facilities should suit the type of service sought by guests (Bravo et al., 2019). In this regard, this research revealed that ventilation was particularly important in the quarantine experience. There is a need for hotels to ensure rooms are well-ventilated by maximising fresh air flow during quarantine (WHO, 2020a). If a room’s door and windows are closed at the same time, it prevents proper ventilation and affects air quality (Chan et al., 2009). Thus, hotel rooms without windows or with windows that open less than 0.2 square metres should not be used as quarantine rooms (Liang et al., 2020). Meanwhile, hotel rooms equipped with split-type air conditioners should be prioritised for quarantine use. Each room should additionally have an independent exhaust or filter system to minimise the risk of contracting and spreading COVID-19 (Liang et al., 2020).

When staying in hotels, food consumption is no longer just a daily practice; it becomes a way of seeking cultural experience and change in routine (Sthapit, 2018). However, under quarantine, guests have no freedom to choose their food. In this case, some attributes of food experience were viewed somewhat negatively by the Chinese student returnees, indicating an area for improvement in the future. The lack of concern for quarantined individuals’ religious dietary rules, home food culture and food-related personality traits, along with the ignorance of food diversity and variety, produced an inconvenient and unsatisfactory food experience. Additionally, food delivery remained a controversial issue between quarantined guests and authoritative bodies. Leaving hotel rooms to pick up meals from hotel restaurants or reception areas are strictly forbidden. Delivered food has to be sanitised and sent to guests’ rooms by specialised hotel staff without any contact with quarantined guests. Thus, quarantels should maintain a consistent rule on food delivery and inform quarantined guests about the complicated delivery procedure. Meanwhile, guests should consider hotel staff’s heavy workload in this difficult time and try to reduce the need for delivered food. In addition, WHO (2020b) has provided guidelines to hotels in response to COVID-19 and suggested that these guidelines be reviewed and adapted to local contexts. In this research, the attribute of Chinese food therapy, that is, herbal tea, Chinese herbal jelly in the food dimension represented a unique cultural experience that adopted by Chinese hotels.

Previous studies highlighted strategic hotel location positively influences guests’ decisions, satisfaction and experiences (Barreda and Bilgihan, 2013; Järvi, 2019; Luo et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2018). In terms of travel experience, tourists have more satisfying experiences if hotels are closer to city centres or near the proximity of tourist attractions (Song and Ko, 2017; Sthapit, 2018; Yang et al., 2014). However, quarantel locations are selected based on different criteria. Specifically, quarantel should be near designated hospitals for COVID-19, in case there is any infected person among the quarantined people needing timely treatment. Otherwise, they should be near airports and train stations to quickly isolate passengers and thus reduce the risk of contact infection on the way to quarantels (Liang et al., 2020).

In a nutshell, the findings add to our knowledge on the attributes that influence the development of MHE as well as our understanding of guest experience during a crisis in a completely isolated space. As reported in Table 1, the experience in a traditional hotel and a quarantel differs in several ways. For example,
traditional hotels focus on service quality and human interaction while in a quarantel, these two dimensions become less important as most services and human interaction (i.e. host–guest and guest–guest interaction) are kept at a minimal level. Unlike a normal hotel experience, which includes many hedonic and experiential aspects (e.g. ambience, multisensory and aesthetic aspects), MHE in a quarantel is greatly dependent on hygiene and disinfection and healthcare, as well as different perspectives on staff, room, food and location.

Implications

To the authors’ knowledge, this is possibly one of the first qualitative studies to explore the memorable quarantel experiences (positive and negative) of quarantined guests (specifically, student returnees) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Compared to suspending hotels’ businesses, turning hotels into quarantels is a more active and profitable response to pandemics. Quarantine should now be regarded as an alternative form of business for hotels. Therefore, it is a new and lucrative area for hoteliers to leverage. However, without the findings of this research, academicians and practitioners would have to rely on general MHEs, which are neither accurate nor applicable to quarantel experiences in the context of a pandemic. This research thus fills the gap between the conceptual idea of memorable quarantine hotel experiences and the lack of empirical evidence in this regard, thereby helping scholars and industry players gain a better understanding of this emerging concept.

This research draws significant managerial implications. The functional usage of hotels has changed due to the pandemic. When the pandemic becomes the new normal, hoteliers should be well-prepared for a crisis before it happens. Accordingly, the hotel industry should gain experience and learn lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic on how to deal with similar situations in the future. First, hoteliers should carefully adhere to the guidelines provided by official organisations. Following these guidelines ensures the right actions are taken from a technical perspective, at the very least. For example, the rules on hygiene and disinfection must be strictly followed. Hotels should also update and reserve hygiene and disinfection equipment, including surgical masks, protection suits, chemical sterilisers and air filters. All potential contaminated public areas, such as elevators, reception desks and door handles, need to be disinfected on-time and regularly. It is also suggested that cleaning tools for self-room-service should be prepared for guests, and the way to handle room garbage should be carefully considered. Second, hotels should arrange training programmes for employees to enhance their awareness and skills related to pandemics and quarantine safety. They need to know how to report guests’ information and health conditions to the department or authority in charge of epidemic prevention and control, in addition, to learn to solve emergency cases and aid quarantel guests in managing their anxiety and loneliness during their stay.

Third, it should be noted in some cases, that guests are not staying for free. Hoteliers should thus understand guests’ needs and complaints from guest experiences and attempt to rectify the negative aspects highlighted by their clientele. Based on the findings of this research, hoteliers should address and improve quarantined guests’ negative hotel experiences pertaining Wi-Fi, ventilation and food. Furthermore, the interviewees reported that they had no freedom to choose their hotel and food. In view of this, governments and hoteliers may consider catering to different market segments based on guests’ purchasing power and preferences for hotels and food. Quarantels should give more concern on quarantined individuals’ religious dietary rules, home food culture and food-related personality traits, along with enhancing food diversity and variety, when booking meals for their guests. Fourth, on the premise of safety and health, hotels should consider enriching the quarantine life of guests. This could be done by providing yoga mats in rooms and encouraging them to do indoor exercise.

At the same time, quarantels, as contributors to society during pandemics, should receive fair treatment as well. Professional institutes could assist with cleaning and disinfection after guests leave and certify that a quarantel is safe to stay. Governments could also award hotels certificates for social responsibility during pandemics and encourage travel agents to collaborate with certified quarantels. Finally, guests have high expectations about the hotel cleanliness and safety after going through the pandemic. Therefore, hoteliers must strictly follow the hygiene protocols and educate staffs and guests to follow the protocols in the post–COVID-19 pandemic.

Limitations and suggestions

The main drawback of this research was its generalisability, since the sample was confined to students in China. The behaviours of students may differ substantially from those of other age or occupational groups. The themes and attributes of a memorable quarantel experience may vary across geographical and cultural contexts as well. Furthermore, each country has different restriction guidelines and quarantine
rules, which may generate difference memorable experiences under quarantine. Thus, future research with samples from other market segments and geographical regions would allow the findings to be validated and generalised for future comparison. Furthermore, the data was collected after the students’ quarantine stays, raising the concern of recall bias. Therefore, future researchers should consider utilising a diary/journal method or interviewing quarantined guests instantly after check-in. Additionally, future studies should validate the results by employing quantitative or mixed methodologies. As a memorable experience may be mixed, future study may consider focussing on either positive or negative experiences. Finally, upcoming research should highlight the perspectives of other quarantel stakeholders, such as the hotel management, staff and medical teams, to understand their perceptions and experiences with quarantels.

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