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Marketing messages for post-pandemic destination recovery- A Delphi study

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ABSTRACT

What is the best way to communicate with American outbound visitors as the travel recommences after the COVID-19 pandemic? This timely study aimed to find answers to this question faced by many destinations. To this end, ideas were sought from industry and academic experts on what message features may positively influence American visitors international travel intentions following the COVID-19 pandemic. Three rounds of conventional Delphi research delivered fifteen message features, eight of which attained panel consensus. These included COVID-related features such as safety, accurate pandemic information, a show of open outdoor spaces, and building visitor confidence along with destination-related features including positive destination attributes, authentic local experience, locals support, and reminder of joys of travel. Each message feature is discussed in detail with implications to the prescribed context.

1. Introduction

The ongoing pandemic of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has gravely impacted the global tourism industry (Félix et al., 2020). Government-imposed mandates such as travel bans, quarantine requirements, border closures, and so forth negatively contributed to the challenges faced by the industry (Sigala, 2020). Compared to the previous year, international arrivals dropped by 74% in 2020, with one billion fewer international arrivals worldwide (UNWTO, 2021). This collapse caused an estimated loss of 1.3 trillion U.S. dollars (USD) in export revenues—more than eleven times the loss recorded during the 2009 global economic crisis (UNWTO, 2021).

The United States (U.S.) is among the leading international outbound travel markets. Americans took 93 million outbound trips in 2019 (Sampson, 2019). Unfortunately, the U.S. has also been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (CDC, 2020). As of September 2021, the U.S. had the highest number of COVID-19 confirmed cases globally (WHO, 2021). The number of international trips taken by Americans decreased by 66.4% in 2020, compared to the same twelve-month period in 2019 (Hepple, 2021). The uncertainty associated with the pandemic itself was exacerbated by the uncertainty in American government communications, resulting in financial consequences to tourism and hospitality (Aharon et al., 2021).

Pandemics disrupt the travel industry unlike any other disaster. Tourism has historically been resilient in bouncing back from various external disasters such as terrorism, earthquakes, tsunamis, etc. However, pandemics have a more dramatic effect on tourism with slower recovery (Novelli et al., 2018). The scale and scope of the destruction caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are much more profound (Félix et al., 2020). UNWTO’s extended scenarios for 2021–2024 indicate that international tourism could return to 2019 levels in two and a half to four years (UNWTO, 2021). Yet, uncertainty persists amid the scare of a new COVID-19 variant. Nevertheless, the distribution of vaccines may rebuild travelers’ confidence, ease travel restrictions, and gradually stabilize travel during the year ahead.

Recovery of tourism activities is crucial to support the overall economic revival of many destinations (Walters & Mair, 2012). An important step in destination recovery after a global pandemic is to reclaim the number of tourists. Destinations rely on marketing communications to recuperate from disasters (Armstrong & Ritchie, 2008; Beirman, 2006; Lehto et al., 2008; Seraphin et al., 2018). Emerging studies on COVID-19 have emphasized the importance of effective marketing communication for post-pandemic recovery (Sigala, 2020; Zhu & Deng, 2020). However, extant literature does not advise what messages to send out after a global pandemic (Walters & Mair, 2012; Wang & Lopez, 2020). The present study aims to contribute to this area of knowledge by addressing the
questions of what Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) should say in their post-pandemic destination marketing messages, and what key message features are likely to positively influence visit intentions of the American outbound visitors in the aftermath of a global pandemic. Post-pandemic is defined as when all countries have reopened for international tourist arrivals but are still monitoring the situation and may have mandatory testing or quarantine requirements. Please see Appendix A for definitions of key terms.

2. Literature review

Previous studies have examined the effect of health disease disasters through different perspectives. These include the economic impacts (e.g. Dube et al., 2020; ECLAC, 2020), visitors’ travel behaviors (e.g. Jamal & Budke, 2020; Kourgiantakis et al., 2020; Wachyuni & Kusumaningrum, 2020), and risk perceptions (e.g. Caber et al., 2020; Liu-Lastres et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2020; Zenke et al., 2021). A few notable studies conducted post-facto analyses of destinations’ response and recovery (e.g. Beirman, 2006; Henderson, 2004; Le & Phi, 2021; Novelli et al., 2018; Ou & Wong, 2020; Pan et al., 2021; Wallis & Nerlich, 2005), yet the topic of marketing communication for post-pandemic destination recovery remains understudied (Walters & Mair, 2012; Wang & Lopez, 2020).

Organizational crisis communication literature offers valuable theoretical guidance in designing a crisis response. Crisis response strategies are defined as a blend of words and actions employed in handling crises (Coombs, 2007). Image repair theory (IRT) and situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) are the leading theories for examining communication in times of crisis (Benoit, 2004; Coombs, 2007). These theories were developed as a form of apologia; thus, crisis responsibility is central to the strategies proposed. Crisis responsibility represents the amount of accountability for a crisis that stakeholders attribute to the organization (Coombs, 2015). IRT assumes that the goal of crisis communication is to influence stakeholders’ perceptions and protect reputation. SCCT expanded the scope of crisis communication to managing information, in addition to managing the perception of stakeholders, and recommended strategies that go beyond image repair.

The applicability of these organizational theories to the prescribed context, however, is questionable. These theories were proposed to manage short-term organization-level crises. However, disaster communication in tourism is multifaceted. While organizational crisis communication focuses on one organization, tourism disasters affect multiple organizations in the tourism system (Barbe & Pennington-Gray, 2020). Thus, the objective of post-pandemic communication encompasses more than perception management or destination image repair. As Oliveira and Huertas (2019) explained, the role of marketing communication expands to conveying the message of safety and security of visitors in the future, in addition to promoting tourism and discourse of renewal (Ulmer et al., 2007). Thus, organizational crisis communication theories are believed to be inadequate in handling persistent global pandemics (Ketter & Avraham, 2021). The same was confirmed by Kim and Liu (2012), who found that the response strategies recommended by SCCT did not apply in the context of the 2009 H1N1 influenza. Furthermore, destinations may not be directly accountable for the COVID-19 pandemic since it is beyond their control. Nevertheless, they may still be judged on their response to the pandemic (Faulkner, 2001; Remondino et al., 2019). An effective response can maintain the destination’s reputation, reduce the negative impact of the disaster (Coombs, 2014), and positively influence visitors’ travel intentions (Penco et al., 2019).

2.1. Post-disaster destination marketing messages

A review of extant literature identified several common themes among post-disaster marketing messages (see Table 1). Walters and Mair (2012) recognized nine message types: business as usual, community readiness, solidarity appeal (appeal to visitor empathy), celebrity endorsement, restoring confidence, spinning the unfavorable image into assets, curiosity enhancement, and post-disaster visit intentions (Liu-Lastres et al., 2018; Wang & Lopez, 2020).

| Table 1 | Typology of destination marketing messages. |
|-------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Message Type | Examples |
| Community readiness | ‘When you’re ready, we’ll be ready’ (Star, 2020); ‘Gigspoland, ready to inspire you’ (Walters & Mair, 2012). |
| Altruistic appeal | ‘By visiting the Maldives, you are helping us’ (Carlsen & Hughes, 2008); ‘Canberra needs your support’ (Armstrong & Ritchie, 2008). |
| Patriotic appeal | ‘Vive Mexico’ and ‘Vas por Mexico’ (Go Mexico) (Speakman & Sharpley, 2012); ‘Show them what we got Campbell River’ (Shriner, 2020). |
| Solidarity appeal | ‘Phoenix—Together, We Rise’ and ‘Stronger. Brighter. Together.’ (Star, 2020). |
| Reminder | ‘New Orleans, just as you remember it’; and ‘Come fall in love with New Orleans all over again’ (Chacko & Marcell, 2008); ‘We’ll be waiting for you’ (Ramer, 2020). |
| Confidence building | ‘Our heart’s still going strong’ (Armstrong & Ritchie, 2008); ‘UK OK’ (Ritchie et al., 2004); ‘New Orleans—never better’ (Pearlman & Melnik, 2008). |
| Message of hope | ‘Welcome back’; ‘We have missed you. Egypt warmly opens its arms to you’ (Avraham, 2021); ‘Welcome back—We missed you,’ and ‘Happy to again welcome tourists’ (Ketter & Avraham, 2021). |
| New reality | ‘We will not go back to normal. NORMAL never was’ (Shriner, 2020); ‘Make Way for the Rebirth’ (Pearlman & Melnik, 2008). |
| Rethink and reimagine | ‘We are being given an opportunity to stitch a new garment.’ One that fits all of humanity and nature (Shriner, 2020). |
| ‘Stay home’ and ‘travel later.’ | ‘Visit Estonia... later’ (Bott, 2020); ‘The perfect time not to visit anything’ (Shriner, 2020); ‘I’ll be waiting for you’ (Ramer, 2020). |
| COVID-19-safe destination | ‘Health First’ (Ketter & Avraham, 2021); ‘There’s something bigger... . That something is you and your safety’ (Star, 2020). |
| Restoration/Healing | ‘Explore Turkish colors to refresh yourself’ and ‘You need more than a holiday; you need Switzerland’ (Ketter & Avraham, 2021). |

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Yet, there is a lack of theoretical recommendations for designing post-pandemic destination marketing messages for recovery. Hence, a Delphi technique is used to identify the features of destination marketing messages that could positively influence American tourists’ international travel intentions in the specified context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Methodology

The purpose of the methodology used was to identify key features of post-pandemic destination marketing messages that may positively affect the international travel intentions of American visitors. This exploratory study used a conventional Delphi method that had both qualitative and quantitative elements. Delphi is a reiterative, multistage technique designed to achieve a convergence of opinions on a specific real-world issue (Hsu & Sandford, 2007, p. 1). The conventional Delphi process generated qualitative information in the first round, followed by scoring and rating in the second round, and concluded with consensus in the third and final round (Hall, 2009). A combination of both open-ended questions and rating scales was advantageous not only to identify message features, but also to determine their importance. This technique has been successfully applied in crisis communication (e.g., Manias-Munoz et al., 2019; McClelland, 2016; McGuire, 2011) and tourism disaster research (e.g., Cunliffe, 2002; Morakabati et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2021). Morakabati et al. (2017) used Delphi to identify stakeholders’ response to a natural disaster and recommended it for making informed predictions about the response to specific disaster-related situations, much like post-pandemic scenarios. A modified Delphi technique was applied to forecast tourism recovery amid the COVID-19 pandemic in Hong Kong (Zhang et al., 2021). Based on the research problem and the literature review results, a Delphi technique was deemed appropriate.

Before identifying panelists, their desired background was determined (Avella, 2016). Individuals with a background in destination marketing, crisis communication, marketing communication, post-disaster destination recovery, and marketing for outbound American visitors were appropriate for the representation of critical opinions. A representative and balanced panel is important for reliability (Singh et al., 2021). Linstone and Turoff (1975) suggested three roles of Delphi panelists: stakeholders who are directly involved in the problem, facilitators who support the work of the participants, or experts who are invested in the problem. Hence, participants were selected from national tourism offices (NTOs), tour operators, travel agents and consortiums, wholesalers, tourism/destination marketing research agencies, hotels, cruise companies, and academia.

A comprehensive list of experts was then created by using various resources. ‘Expert’ here indicates an individual who meets the inclusion criteria (Table 2). To identify academic experts, a review of academic journals was conducted. Public sector experts were identified from NTOs of top international destinations for American tourists, based on the National Travel & Tourism Office’s (NTO’s) data for the last ten years (NTTO, 2019). Experts from the private sector were detected from a review of the United States Tour Operators Association (USTOA) directory, the U.S. News & World Report’s list of the world’s best cruises for 2020 (U.S. News, 2020), a list of leading hotel companies in the Americas (Lock, 2020), and the directory of Destinations International. Additionally, calls for participation were circulated via mailing lists and LinkedIn, an online professional networking service. Thus, purposive sampling was used in recruiting participants.

This study aimed to recruit at least forty participants. Even though fifty to twenty is a typical number to achieve reasonable accuracy, minimize error rates, and improve reliability (Daikey & Helmer, 1965), some researchers suggest a panel of forty as a general rule (Müller, 1998). To satisfy the criteria of a balanced panel, forty-five qualifying experts who agreed to partake in the study were sent the survey via personalized email. Eighteen of these experts were academicians, three were public sector officials, and fourteen were employed in the tourism, hospitality, and cruise industry. Ten panelists were destination marketing and research consultancy professionals. Thereby, a balance of both applied and theoretical ideas and expertise was maintained. The experts came from across the world, including the U.S., Australia, Russia, Turkey, India, Mexico, the Middle East, the Caribbean Islands, and the U.K. However, no specific geographical criterion was intended.

This conventional Delphi study comprised three rounds. The survey for round 1 (R1) included one open-ended question asking participants to note their opinions on what should be included in post-pandemic (COVID-19) destination marketing messages to positively influence American visitors’ international travel intentions, along with a few demographic questions. Thematic content analysis was conducted on the qualitative data gathered in R1. Frequency analysis was used to determine the most frequently mentioned themes in R1, noted as message features. These message features facilitated the instrument design for round 2 (R2). The purpose of the R2 survey was to confirm R1 findings, determine the level of importance of each message feature, and determine the level of agreement among the panelists. The R2 questionnaire included a single closed-end question. The panelists were asked to review a list of message features and indicate the extent to which they believed each message feature to be important on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = extremely unimportant; 5 = extremely important). Participants were also given a choice to note any information or comment they felt was necessary or helpful for the study in an open-ended format. On the round 3 (R3) instrument, participants were presented with the results of the analysis of R2, along with their rating of each message feature. Participants were then given an option to adjust their previous ratings if they chose to do so. The goal of R3 was to confirm the list of important message features and ascertain panel consensus. The R3 survey also included an open-ended segment for participants to make any comments, suggestions, or closing remarks. Fig. 1 illustrates the procedure of data collection and analysis of all three rounds.

Table 2

| Panelist type | Qualification |
|---------------|---------------|
| Industry Experts | Currently employed in the tourism and hospitality industry (including cruises) in a leading position, such as |
| Sector | President |
| | Vice President |
| | Chief Marketing Officer |
| | Director/Executive Director of Marketing, and |
| | Head of Marketing |
| | 10+ years of experience in current position. |
| | Membership of relevant tourism associations. |
| | Awards and recognitions. |
| Public Sector | Examples of a decision-making role include |
| | Director/Senior. Director of Marketing |
| | Regional Director of Marketing |
| | Head of Marketing, or |
| | The country equivalent |
| Academic Experts | 10+ years of teaching and research experience at a university. |
| | Areas of interest: marketing, crisis communication, marketing communication, and/or destination marketing. |
| | Relevant publications (preference to top-tier journals in the field). |
| | Membership in relevant research or industry associations. |
| | Involvement in marketing and crisis communication projects. |

Fig. 1 illustrates the procedure of data collection and analysis of all three rounds.

Measures were taken to minimize the effect of situational factors. To this end, the recruitment procedure, the panel size, panelists’ background, inclusion criteria, the number of rounds, and the contents of the
first-round questionnaire were standardized before beginning the study (Singh et al., 2021). Individuals from researchers’ personal networks were disqualified from recruitment to minimize researcher bias (Avella, 2016). The content and face validity of each instrument were confirmed via expert reviews and pilot tests. To minimize panelists’ fatigue, checks were made to ensure that the R1 survey took under 20 min, while the R2 and R3 surveys took under 5 min each (Singh et al., 2021).

4. Results

4.1. Sample characteristics

Overall, 34 experts responded in the first round, out of which 32 participated in R2 and 30 in R3, resulting in an 88.23% (30/34) response rate and an 11.76% (4/34) attrition rate from R1 to R3. A response rate of over 70% was achieved for each round (Table 3), a crucial condition for data validity in Delphi research (Hasson et al., 2000). The panel for the first round comprised 18 (53%) industry experts and 16 (47%) academic experts. Most participants were 36–45 (15, 44.12%) and 46–55 (11, 32.35%) years old. There were 21 (61.76%) females and 13 males (38.24%). A total of 47% of panelists worked in their respective fields for ten to twenty years. However, approximately 44% had more than twenty years of experience in their field of expertise. Nearly 47% (n = 16) of panelists had previously dealt with a health disease disaster in their career. These disasters included SARS, Ebola virus, Zika virus, the 2009 swine flu (H1N1), Avian flu, Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV), and Norovirus. See Appendix B for a detailed description of each panelist.

4.2. Round 1

Thematic content analysis of qualitative responses produced a list of themes, all labeled by using quotes from the original text (Singh et al., 2021). The top fifteen most frequently mentioned themes were noted as message features and grouped as COVID-related features and destination-related features (see Table 4). Definitions and examples from the original text for each message feature are tendered in Appendix C.

The intra-coder reliability was measured for consistency in coding-recoding, and a satisfactory level of 98% was achieved. A minimum of 75% is deemed good (Stephanie, 2016). Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software, was used to diagram the themes (see Fig. 2).
5. Discussion and conclusion

The objective of this study was to identify features of destination marketing messages that could positively influence the international travel intentions of American visitors after the COVID-19 pandemic. For this purpose, a three-round conventional Delphi study was conducted. The Delphi panel consisted of practitioners and academicians with expertise in destination marketing, crisis communication, and marketing communication. The Delphi study identified fifteen message features, out of which eight achieved notable panel consensus (Fig. 3).

Safety was the most frequently mentioned message feature. Safety messages were defined as messages stating that the destination is safe and prepared to receive visitors post-pandemic. The panel agreed that post-pandemic messages to promote international travel among American visitors should communicate ‘safety’ or that the destination is a “safe place to visit,” and that “safety is a priority” at the destination. As one panelist elaborated, marketing messages should depict “how destinations and businesses within the destinations are ready...”

Fig. 2. Word cloud of themes generated in R1.
### Table 5
Findings of Three Rounds of Delphi results using 75% agreement rate.

| Features                        | Round 1 Findings | Round 2 Findings | Round 3 Findings | Kappa Value | Final Conclusions |
|---------------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------|-------------------|
| Safety                          |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Agreement Rating (Important)    | 93.75%           | 0.00%            |                  | 93.3%       | 0.00%             | 0.853* Confirmed |
| Minimum Score                   | 3                | 5                | 5                |             |                   |
| Maximum Score                   |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Mean                            | 4.63             | 0.60             | 5                |             |                   |
| Standard Deviation              | 5                | 5                |                  |             |                   |
| Median                          | 5                | 5                |                  |             |                   |
| Mode                            |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Choice                           |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Agreement Rating (Important)    | 87.51%           | 6.25%            |                  | 90%         | 0.00%             | 0.771* Confirmed |
| Minimum Score                   | 2                | 5                | 5                |             |                   |
| Maximum Score                   |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Mean                            | 4.41             | 0.87             | 5                |             |                   |
| Standard Deviation              | 5                | 5                |                  |             |                   |
| Median                          | 5                | 5                |                  |             |                   |
| Mode                            |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Visitor confidence              |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Agreement Rating (Important)    | 100.00%          | 0.00%            |                  | 100%        | 0.00%             | 0.78* Confirmed |
| Minimum Score                   | 4                | 5                | 5                |             |                   |
| Maximum Score                   |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Mean                            | 4.63             | 0.49             | 5                |             |                   |
| Standard Deviation              | 5                | 5                |                  |             |                   |
| Median                          | 5                | 5                |                  |             |                   |
| Mode                            |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Readiness                       |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Agreement Rating (Important)    | 90.63%           | 0.00%            |                  | 90%         | 0.00%             | 0.705* Confirmed |
| Minimum Score                   | 3                | 5                | 5                |             |                   |
| Maximum Score                   |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Mean                            | 4.47             | 0.67             | 5                |             |                   |
| Standard Deviation              | 5                | 5                |                  |             |                   |
| Median                          | 5                | 5                |                  |             |                   |
| Mode                            |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Open outdoor                    |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Agreement Rating (Important)    | 59.38%           | 9.38%            |                  | 63.4%       | 6.7%              | 0.479* Confirmed |
| Minimum Score                   | 2                | 5                | 4                |             |                   |
| Maximum Score                   |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Mean                            | 3.78             | 0.97             | 4                |             |                   |
| Standard Deviation              | 4                | 4                |                  |             |                   |
| Median                          | 5                | 5                |                  |             |                   |
| Mode                            |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| New reality                     |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Agreement Rating (Important)    | 87.50%           | 3.13%            |                  | 86.7%       | 3.3%              | 0.725* Confirmed |
| Minimum Score                   | 1                | 5                | 5                |             |                   |
| Maximum Score                   |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Mean                            | 4.31             | 0.89             | 4.5              |             |                   |
| Standard Deviation              | 5                | 5                |                  |             |                   |
| Median                          | 5                | 5                |                  |             |                   |
| Mode                            |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Intimate and personalized experience |            |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Agreement Rating (Important)    | 75.01%           | 3.13%            |                  | 86.7%       | 0.00%             | 0.639* Confirmed |
| Minimum Score                   | 2                | 5                | 4                |             |                   |
| Maximum Score                   |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Mean                            | 4.06             | 0.84             | 4                |             |                   |
| Standard Deviation              | 4                | 4                |                  |             |                   |
| Median                          | 5                | 5                |                  |             |                   |
| Mode                            |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Local sentiments               |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Agreement Rating (Important)    | 68.76%           | 15.63%           |                  | 73.4%       | 10%               | 0.639* Confirmed |
| Minimum Score                   | 1                | 5                | 4                |             |                   |
| Maximum Score                   |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Mean                            | 3.91             | 1.17             | 4                |             |                   |
| Standard Deviation              | 5                | 5                |                  |             |                   |
| Median                          | 5                | 5                |                  |             |                   |
| Mode                            |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Authentic local experience      |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Agreement Rating (Important)    | 71.88%           | 6.25%            |                  | 73.3%       | 3.3%              | 0.71* Confirmed |
| Minimum Score                   | 2                | 5                | 4                |             |                   |
| Maximum Score                   |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Mean                            | 4.03             | 0.93             | 4                |             |                   |
| Standard Deviation              | 5                | 5                |                  |             |                   |
| Median                          | 5                | 5                |                  |             |                   |
| Mode                            |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Local sentiments               |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Agreement Rating (Important)    | 65.63%           | 3.13%            |                  | 63.4%       | 6.7%              | 0.742* Confirmed |
| Minimum Score                   | 2                | 5                | 4                |             |                   |
| Maximum Score                   |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Mean                            | 3.81             | 0.78             | 4                |             |                   |
| Standard Deviation              | 4                | 4                |                  |             |                   |
| Median                          | 5                | 5                |                  |             |                   |
| Mode                            |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Escapism                        |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Agreement Rating (Important)    | 65.63%           | 12.50%           |                  | 76.7%       | 6.7%              | 0.656* Confirmed |
| Minimum Score                   | 2                | 5                | 4                |             |                   |
| Maximum Score                   |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Mean                            | 3.81             | 0.99             | 4                |             |                   |
| Standard Deviation              | 4                | 4                |                  |             |                   |
| Median                          | 5                | 5                |                  |             |                   |
| Mode                            |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Alternative travel              |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Agreement Rating (Important)    | 77.42%           | 3.23%            |                  | 80%         | 3.3%              | 0.844* Confirmed |
| Minimum Score                   | 1                | 5                | 4                |             |                   |
| Maximum Score                   |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Mean                            | 4.13             | 0.95             | 5                |             |                   |
| Standard Deviation              | 5                | 5                |                  |             |                   |
| Median                          | 5                | 5                |                  |             |                   |
| Mode                            |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Altruistic appeal               |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Agreement Rating (Important)    | 50.01%           | 18.75%           |                  | 43.3%       | 16.7%             | 0.727* Confirmed |
| Minimum Score                   | 1                | 2                | 3                |             |                   |
| Maximum Score                   |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Mean                            | 3.41             | 1.10             | 3.5              |             |                   |
| Standard Deviation              | 4                | 4                |                  |             |                   |
| Median                          | 5                | 5                |                  |             |                   |
| Mode                            |                  |                  |                  |             |                   |
| Final Conclusions               |                   |                   |                   |             |                   |

*Significant at p < .001.
that attained complete (100%) agreement from panel members. One of the key objectives of destination marketing is to capture visitors’ confidence. Pizam & Mansfeld, 1996; Rittichainuwat & Chakraborty, 2009. Lehto et al. (2008) suggested that restoring visitors’ confidence should be a primary objective of marketing messages following a disaster. Ketter and Avraham (2021, p. 19) learned that post-COVID-19 messages “aimed to rebuild consumers’ confidence.” The World Travel & Tourism Council WTTC (2020, p. 7) also recommended rebuilding visitors’ confidence through clear, consistent, and up-to-date information about the protocols and policies available to keep them safe. The PATA Crisis Resource Center (2020) proposed that messages should ensure that visitors (1) know about the measures being taken, (2) think the destination has COVID-19 under control, and (3) feel confident and trust the information. Destination readiness communicates that the destination has successfully managed the impact of the pandemic and is open to receiving visitors. This feature characterizes the elements of readiness, recovery, normalcy, and open-for-business. In the words of panel experts, the post-pandemic destination marketing message should showcase “how the local economy is reopening,” “how cities are recovering and moving forward,” and whether destinations are “open for business.” Walters and Mair (2012) found post-disaster messages that communicate readiness to be the most effective in evoking favorable visitor responses. With the ease of COVID-19 travel restrictions, destinations have been noted to announce their readiness to welcome visitors again (Ketter & Avraham, 2021). The PATA Crisis Resource Center (2020) remarked readiness to welcome visitors as the central message that should be supported by messages of being COVID-free, evidence of lower infection rates, and transparency of technology used to ensure safety with citations of specific actions taken.

In the post-pandemic era, experts agreed that marketing messages should send a “reminder of what the destination is good for” or “best known for” and that “all the highlights of the destinations are still here!” The latter is especially important for post–COVID-19 travel since American visitors have reported apprehension regarding not receiving a full range of experiences and activities due to COVID-19 restrictions (Brand USA, 2020). Along the same lines, experts agreed that marketing messages should highlight the authentic local experiences of the destination, including “locals’ life and activities,” “unique locally authentic culinary experiences,” “locally authentic arts and entertainment,” and “culture.”

| Pandemic-related message features | Destination-related message features |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| *State that the destination is safe and prepared. | *Feature positive destination attributes, such as, attractions, nature, culture, food, etc. |
| *Include factual pandemic information. For example, safety protocols, new international travel procedures, available resources etc. | Remind visitors of the joy of travel. |
| *Build visitor confidence in travel after the pandemic. | Feature small-scale, more intimate, and personalized experiences. |
| *State that the destination is ready and open to receive visitors. | Highlight what is new at the destination. For example, new activities, experiences, new ways to enjoy the destination. |
| Feature various options of contactless activities and amenities available at the destination, such as dining, accommodation, spa etc. | *Feature authentic local experiences and activities, for example, art, music, cuisine, etc. |
| *Feature open outdoor spaces, activities, and amenities. | *Feature locals’ support in welcoming visitors after the pandemic. |
| | Feature alternative/sustainable ways of travelling the destination. |
| | Feature ‘escape’ from the life during the pandemic. |
| | Make altruistic appeal for visitors’ support in destination’s recover after the pandemic. |

*Message features with panel agreement on a 75% cutoff.

Fig. 3. Post-pandemic destination marketing message features.
Experts also concurred that marketing messages should incorporate “locals’ sentiment toward American tourists, “include invitations from local people,” highlight “community support,” and “appeal to repeat visitors with locals asking them to come back.” Previous studies have found that visitors’ apprehension regarding obstructing the local recovery process prevents them from visiting a destination after a disaster (Lehto et al., 2008; Walters & Clulow, 2010). Knowing that the local community has recovered and supports tourism may invoke positive responses from visitors (Walters & Mair, 2012).

The panel also recommended open outdoor spaces. As one expert stated, “promote vast open spaces with no crowding.” One panelist even proposed a catchphrase: “Why go inside when you can live life outside?” This feature was not previously discussed in the literature. After an extended period of social isolation, many visitors may be wary of large gatherings. Additionally, outdoor spaces may be appealing to some visitors after months of indoor quarantine (Xie et al., 2021). In particular, western visitors from individualistic cultures, such as North America, are generally believed to have a lower tolerance for crowding due to low population densities in their countries and high preferences for privacy (Sayan et al., 2015; San & Budruk, 2017).

Key articles of discussion emerged from panel experts’ comments on message features in R2. Experts advised that the U.S. travel market is segmented into two groups in the context of COVID-19. As one panelist articulated, some travelers may want “to feel safe, while others want to feel free.” Another panelist, a full professor at a large public university, recommended a division along the political lines: “I think the U.S. market may segment itself along political lines. Conscientious mask wearers will be looking for a conscientious destination; the MAGA—to hell with masks—segment will be looking for destinations with similar attitudes.”

The extant research noted a significant partisan split in COVID-19 risk perceptions, preferences for policy, and protective behaviors among Americans. Liberals were more likely than conservatives to report using masks and avoiding public spaces or crowds (Bruine de Bruin et al., 2020). Such a divide may pose a potential challenge for targeting American outbound visitors and must be a key consideration in designing marketing messages. One of the experts from a leading destination marketing research agency shared their findings: “We are finding there are two travelers: those who do not believe in the pandemic and want to feel free and those who want to feel safe and are afraid to travel. Marketing needs to appeal to both.”

A leading researcher noted that “government travel warnings will play a key role as people are trusting their governments to lead the way through this pandemic more than ever before. It will not matter what a destination does to market itself; if the government warning states that this destination is not safe, people will not go.” They further recommended including “U.S. governmental endorsement of [whether it is] safe to travel.” Another expert suggested highlighting the “government’s role” and “governmental response” at the destination. Based on a survey of forty-six countries, Villacé-Moliner et al. (2021) concluded that in the context of a pandemic, the trust in the local government’s messages about personal safety was the principal consideration for visitors in making travel decisions. However, communication from the U.S. government is also found to be a source of uncertainty and mistrust throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (Aharon et al., 2021). Thus, Americans’ confidence in governmental advisory and their international travel intentions is a valuable topic that must be explored in follow-up studies.

In summary, safety is a key aspect of travel in the post-pandemic era, and panel experts strongly recommended communicating safety in marketing messages. However, experts believed that a balance between safety and an enjoyable experience is required. The key feature of post-pandemic marketing messages is, as one expert stated, “getting the balance right between safe travel and a great experience.” Another panelist concluded that “the top two ideas to communicate are reminding people why they travel and letting them know it is safe to do so.”

This study makes the following distinct contributions to the literature and tourism practice. First, this study presents advice from an expert panel regarding critical features of destination marketing messages that could positively influence American tourists’ international travel intentions after a pandemic. Rich discussion emerged from panelists’ responses that provided tourism practitioners with a clearer understanding of what their post-pandemic marketing messages should include to engage the American outbound market. Second, the findings of this study reinforce the importance of safety in post-pandemic destination marketing communication. None of the studies reviewed for developing message typology proposed safety. Tourism organizations tend to avoid communicating about negative events since they believe talking about such events may increase visitors’ perception of risk about the destination (Barbe & Pennington-Gray, 2018; Wachinger et al., 2013). However, research has recommended that destination organizations instruct visitors on safety (Barbe & Pennington-Gray, 2020; Wang & Lopez, 2020). Failing to do so may make visitors’ lose trust (Seeger, 2006). Nevertheless, the practicality of including safety in destination marketing messages is underexplored (Wang & Lopez, 2020).

Furthermore, this research contributes to a significant gap in the post-disaster destination marketing literature by adding the post-pandemic context. Additionally, this study is exploratory, and the list of message features identified require further examination via follow-up studies, thus creating avenues for furthering the knowledge in the field. Methodologically, this study demonstrates the use of consensus research for generating new ideas on post-pandemic destination marketing communication. Currently, case studies and secondary data analysis techniques dominate the body of research (Mair et al., 2016).

5.1. Limitations

Given the explorative nature of this research and methodological approach, there may be limitations concerning the generalization of the results. The results of this Delphi reflect the expert opinion of one panel. It is possible that another panel would reach a different consensus, and further research is warranted. Limitations may be observed with respect to the sample size, the selection process, and the specific Delphi process. Using a 75% cutoff as the decision point for consensus also means that some fraction of the panel is not in agreement. Therefore, the percentage of agreement and the mean and standard deviation of the panel rating for each message feature are included in the results section in an effort to be as transparent as possible.

5.2. Future research

As with any exploratory study, this Delphi study offers preliminary insights and ideas. The study may be considered a first step in addressing the research question under investigation. The findings of this study should inspire new questions that lead to further research.

Authorship statement

Shweta Singh: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Visualization, Writing – original draft. Annamarie Nicely: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Validation. Jonathon Day: Conceptualization, Project administration, Validation, Writing – review. Liping A. Cai: Project administration, Validation, Writing – review.

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Appendix A

Glossary.

Table A.1
Definition of Key Terms

| Terminology          | Definition                                                                                                                                 |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Pandemic             | A pandemic is defined as an epidemic occurring worldwide or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people (Porta, 2016). |
| COVID-19             | Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is defined as an illness caused by a novel coronavirus now called severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) (Cennimo, 2020). |
| Disaster             | Disaster refers to “a situation where a destination is confronted with sudden, unpredictable catastrophic changes over which it has little control” (Faulkner, 2001, p. 136). The use of the term disaster is more suited to this study as it focuses on a global pandemic, over which a destination has little control (Walters & Mair, 2012); however, it is used interchangeably with the term crisis. |
| Health disease disaster | A health disease disaster is a disaster caused by a large-scale outbreak of a disease and includes pandemics, endemics, epidemics, and so forth. Also termed as marketing message or destination marketing message throughout the text, it refers to how a destination talks about itself and its value to its target audience. |
| Destination marketing communication | Post-pandemic is defined as when all countries have reopened for international tourist arrivals but are still monitoring the situation and may have mandatory testing or quarantine requirements. |

Appendix B

Description of Delphi panelists.

Table B.1
Gender, Age, Profession, Years of Experience, and Experience of Disease Disasters of Experts

| Participant | Gender | Age | Professional Profile | Years of Experience | Health Disease Disaster Experience |
|-------------|--------|-----|----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Participant 1 | Male   | 46–55 years | Full Professor | >20 years | None |
| Participant 2 | Female | 36–45 years | Marketing Consultant | 10–20 years | None |
| Participant 3 | Female | 36–45 years | MD, Marketing agency | >20 years | SARS |
| Participant 4 | Male   | 46–55 years | Travel Consultant | >20 years | Avian Flu |
| Participant 5 | Female | 26–35 years | Asst. Professor | 10–20 years | SARS, Ebola, Zika, H1N1 |
| Participant 6 | Female | 56–65 years | Full Professor | >20 years | None |
| Participant 7 | Male   | 46–55 years | Professor | >20 years | SARS |
| Participant 8 | Female | 46–55 years | Director, Resort | >20 years | None |
| Participant 9 | Male   | 46–55 years | President, Hospitality service | >20 years | H1N1 |
| Participant 10 | Male | 36–45 years | Tourism Consultant | 10–20 years | None |
| Participant 11 | Female | 46–55 years | Travel Agent | 10–20 years | None |
| Participant 12 | Female | 46–55 years | Associate Professor | 10–20 years | None |
| Participant 13 | Female | 36–45 years | Hotel owner | >20 years | None |
| Participant 14 | Female | 36–45 years | Research Assistant Professor | 10–20 years | SARS |
| Participant 15 | Male   | 36–45 years | Principle, Professor | >20 years | None |
| Participant 16 | Female | 36–45 years | Director, Events | >20 years | None |
| Participant 17 | Female | 36–45 years | Marketing & PR, NTO | 10–20 years | None |
| Participant 18 | Female | 46–55 years | Associate Dean (Research) | 10–20 years | None |
| Participant 19 | Female | 36–45 years | MD, Travel marketing | >20 years | Zika, H1N1 |
| Participant 20 | Male   | 56–65 years | VP Marketing, Cruise | >20 years | SARS |
| Participant 21 | Female | 36–45 years | Marketing Manager, Cruise | 10–20 years | Norovirus |
| Participant 22 | Male   | 36–45 years | Destination Development | 10–20 years | SARS |
| Participant 23 | Female | 56–65 years | Associate Professor | 10–20 years | None |
| Participant 24 | Female | 36–45 years | Tourism Marketing Executive | 10–20 years | None |
| Participant 25 | Female | 46–55 years | Associate Professor | 10–20 years | None |
| Participant 26 | Male   | 46–55 years | Professor | 10–20 years | SARS, Ebola |
| Participant 27 | Female | 46–55 years | Senior Lecturer | >20 years | None |
| Participant 28 | Female | 26–35 years | Asst. Professor | 10–20 years | Ebola, Zika, MERS-CoV |
| Participant 29 | Male   | 26–35 years | Director Marketing, Hotels | 10–20 years | Zika |
| Participant 30 | Male   | 36–45 years | VP, Catering Company | >20 years | None |
| Participant 31 | Male   | 36–45 years | Director, Hospitality Advisory | >20 years | Ebola |
| Participant 32 | Female | 26–35 years | Senior Lecturer | 10–20 years | None |
| Participant 33 | Female | 56–65 years | Media Professor | 10–20 years | None |
| Participant 34 | Female | 36–45 years | Director, Marketing Research | 10–20 years | H1N1 |
Table C.1
COVID-Related Message Features with Description, Examples, Frequency, and Percentage

| Message feature category | Description                                                                 | Example responses                                                                 | Frequency (%) |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| Safety                   | The destination is safe to travel to, and measures are put in place to ensure visitor safety. | “Safety measures on both the local and national level to restore trust in the American traveler.”  “Health and safety is destination’s number one priority.”  “How destinations and tourism businesses are trying to protect consumers.”  “Cleanliness, social distancing, hygiene, access to high-quality medical care for visitors.” | 56 (28.30%)   |
| Factual information      | Factual information about the pandemic.                                      | “Full info on COVID theme (as relevant, short, and useful).”  “Health & safety information.”  “Statistics on COVID-safe venues.”  “Universal regulations for entry, i.e., mandatory Covid testing.”  “Highlight measures and policies travelers may expect to encounter.”  “What happens if I do get sick?”  “Contact information on site for any concerns.”  “Disease and fatality data of destination.” | 23 (11.62%)   |
| Building visitor confidence | Build visitors’ confidence in travel and the destination’s ability to offer a complete travel experience while ensuring safety. | “Reassurance of safety.”  “Lessen uncertainty.”  “Show proof.”  “A promise of a relaxing getaway.”  “Assurance that all attractions destination is famous for are open.”  | 10 (5.05%)    |
| Destination readiness    | The destination has successfully managed the impact of the pandemic and is ready to receive visitors safely. | “Quick figures highlighting that covid has been curbed in the destination.”  “How cities are recovering and moving forward.”  “Showing how the local economy is reopening.”  “Low Covid rates and show of managing the pandemic.”  “Open for business.” | 9 (4.55%)     |
| Contactless choices      | Plenty of options of contactless activities and amenities at the destination—indoor and outdoor | “Options of activities at destinations - indoor and outdoor.”  “Contactless options, but without removing the cultural element.”  | 7 (3.54%)     |
| Open outdoor             | Open outdoor spaces, activities, and amenities | “Promote vast open spaces with no crowding—e.g. beaches.”  “Unique outdoor experiences.”  “Why go inside when you can live outside?”  | 5 (2.53%)     |

Table C.2
Destination-Related Features with Description, Examples, Frequency, and Percentage

| Message feature category | Description                                                                 | Example responses                                                                 | Frequency (%) |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| Destination attractiveness | Positive aspects of a destination and unique memorable experiences destination have to offer. | “Unique, memorable experience that destination has to offer.”  “Reminder of why the destination is good for best known for.”  “All the highlights of the destinations are still here!” | 19 (9.60%)    |
| Reminder                 | Remind visitors of the excitement and fun that travel brings.                | “Reminder of the joys of travel.”  “Highlight the element of fun and enjoyment travel brings.”  | 9 (4.55%)     |
| Intimate, personalized experiences | Smaller, more intimate, and personalized experiences—away from the crowd | “Return to what you love (travel).”  “Smaller, more intimate group experiences- not big crowds.”  “Secluded environment”  “Individualist Approach.”  “De-emphasize mass recreation and events.” | 6 (3.03%)     |
| New experiences          | Emphasize what is new at the destination in the post-pandemic era.          | “Any new features/experiences.”  “How has the experience changed, and how will it stay the same?”  “Share stories of activities and new things in your destination area.”  “Emphasize what has changed and why and how travel is safer.” | 6 (3.03%)     |
| Authentic experiences    | Local authentic experiences, activities, cuisine, art, etc.                  | “Locals life/activities”  “Unique locally authentic culinary experiences.”  “The locally authentic arts and entertainment.” | 5 (2.53%)     |
| Local Sentiments         | Local support in welcoming visitors after the pandemic                      | “Locals’ sentiment toward American tourists.”  “Messages which include an invitation from local people.” | 5 (2.53%)     |
| Sustainable              | Alternative/sustainable ways of traveling at the destination                | “Sustainability.”  “Give them the opportunity of visiting in another way. A more sustainable way.” | 4 (2.02%)     |
| Escape                   | Escape from the mundane of pandemic life.                                   | “Escape 2020: focus on escaping—people have been locked down.”  “Freedom”; “Carefree”; “Change of scene.”  | 4 (2.02%)     |
| Altruism                 | Appeal for visitors’ support in the recovery of destination and the local community. | “Altruism theme—help the industry recover.”  “Involve them in the recovery of the normal life that includes traveling;”  “The importance of traveling now to preserve future travel to the area.” | 4 (2.02%)     |
Dr. Jonathon Day, Associate Professor, Purdue University. Dr. Jonathon Day, an Associate Professor in Purdue’s White Lodging-J.W. Marriott, Jr. School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, has over 25 years of experience in tourism management. An award-winning marketer, Dr. Day is committed to ensuring tourism is a force for good in the world. His primary area of research is sustainable tourism and social entrepreneurship. He currently chairs the Travel Care Code (travelcarecode.org), a network of academic and marketing organizations promoting responsible travel.

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