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Do you dare to travel to China? An examination of China's destination image amid the COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The impact of COVID-19 on destination image is critical for international tourism recovery. This study is conducted focusing on China, the first epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic, with mixed methods. Drawing on survey data collected from 500 US travelers, the study first examines China's destination image perceptions and travel intention. The results reveal that (1) US respondents have low travel intentions to China amid the pandemic; (2) Destination safety and security is the most influential image factor that leads to the low travel intentions to China. News media is proposed to have significant influence on China's image formation due to the COVID-19. A simple content analysis is conducted on CNN's news and China is found to be tied closely with COVID-19 and most news articles are emotionally negative. Those respondents who follow news outlet websites for COVID-19 view China more negatively and have lower travel intentions.

1. Introduction

The vulnerability of the tourism industry has been exhaustively demonstrated worldwide since the outbreak of COVID-19 took place in Wuhan, China in January 2020. As the World Tourism Organization (2020) data shows, the near-complete lockdown caused by the pandemic led to a 98% drop in international tourist arrivals in May, 2020 when compared to 2019 as well as a loss of US$320 billion tourism receipts. The amount of economic damage is more than three times when compared to that of during the Global Economic Crisis of 2009 (World Tourism Organization, 2020). Director of the Tourism Crisis Management Initiative at the University of Florida, Dr. Pennington-Gray, stated that no other global crisis had affected all facets of the tourism industry and every country around the world (Glusac, 2020). Among these countries, China is likely to be one of those that have been severely impacted. In the first half of 2020, China's inbound tourist arrival was estimated to drop by almost 80% (China Tourism Academy, 2020).

As the first epicenter of the pandemic, China's destination image might have been damaged and tourists might have a fear of visiting China, which could cost China a long time to rebound (Barnes, 2020). According to Wen, Aston, Liu, and Ying (2020), China's harmful image and reputation could be led by possible misleading news coverage associated with COVID-19. Previous studies show that news media play a salient part in shaping destination image perceptions among tourists (Stepchenkova & Eales, 2011; Wang, Chan, & Pan, 2015). When the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, such effects were worsened by the large amount of media attention given to the epicenter countries. Destination image recovery research in the post-pandemic period is very important for industry leaders and stakeholders. A study focusing on China can provide both theoretical and practical insights for other COVID-19 epicenter countries.

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While the aforementioned studies proved to be useful in destination image context, a more direct and a mixed method approach on destination image formation in the COVID-19 era is needed to enhance the theoretical understanding of this critical concept and to produce further implications to assist destinations in their recovery process. Thus, the present study aims to fill the gap through examining US travelers’ image perceptions toward China as a future destination and explore such image connection with the mainstream news media (e.g., CNN.com news website) right after China became the first epicenter of COVID-19. The specific research questions are stated as follows:

1. How do US travelers perceive China as an international destination amid the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How does the perceived destination image of China affect the future travel intention?
3. How does this perceived destination image differ based on the exposure to news media?

The reasons why the US travelers are chosen for study are twofold: First, although the US is the biggest outbound tourism market in the world, inbound tourists from the US only ranked sixth in China (Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China, 2020). Therefore, the development of the US tourist market should be a high priority due to its potential. Second, U.S. travelers might be reluctant to travel to China due to reasons such as unfamiliarity, cultural differences, visa requirements and long flight (Li, Luo, Bilgihan, & Okumus, 2021). Those are universal hinders for many western travelers not traveling to China. Therefore, an investigation of US potential travelers can present an opportunity to understand Westerners’ views on China as a travel destination (Becken, Jin, Zhang, & Gao, 2017). The findings from this study could be projected to major western tourist markets. The major theoretical contribution of this study lies in the proposal of a perceived destination image scale for a country during the COVID-19 pandemic. Practical significance of this study lies in implications for China and other COVID-19 epicenter countries with respect to destination image recovery and crisis management. The current investigation comprises two studies with a blended qualitative and quantitative approach. The first study examined China’s destination image perceived by the US travelers. The second study on media data identified the keywords and sentiments on China demonstrated by one mainstream news outlet in the US. The purpose of method triangulation is to provide more comprehensive data, enhance understanding of China’s destination image during the COVID-19, and increase the validity of the findings. In other words, it is expected that the second study on media data will provide an explanation for the findings of the first study on survey data. In the following sections, the theoretical background behind the destination image as well as media effects is first presented. Next, we present two studies and their main results and discuss their implications regarding destination image recovery in the post-COVID-19 era.

2. Literature review

2.1. Tourism crisis research on destination image

T&H industry is very sensitive toward crises generated by both natural (e.g., infectious disease, hurricane) and human-caused disasters (e.g., terrorism, economic recession). A mismanagement of such crises can damage the destination image and lead to a lengthy crisis for the regional tourism industry (Li, Wen, & Ying, 2018; Sommez, Apostolopoulos, & Tarlow, 1999). Unsurprisingly, previous T&H research investigated the destination image within the context of crises related to a varying type of tragic disasters such as the October 1 tragedy in Las Vegas (Erden, Hasanazadeh, & Bai, 2020), war in Timor-Leste (Currie, 2020), Economic recession in Greece (Gkritzali, Gritzalis, & Stavrou, 2018), Zika virus (Hugo & Miller, 2017), Nepal’s Gurkha Earthquake (Ketter, 2016) and Hurricane Katrina (Ryu et al., 2013). In the year of 2020, the outbreak of a novel coronavirus known as COVID-19 joined the list of tragic disasters significantly affecting the T&H industry, as well as, the destination images globally.

Previous studies on SARS in 2003, another similar infectious disease, could provide some insights on COVID-19. SARS, the severe acute respiratory syndrome, created a significant negative impact on tourism development in many parts of Asia (Mao, Ding, & Lee, 2010; Zeng, Carter, & Lacy, 2005). The studies of SARS’s impacts on T&H mainly focus on Chinese domestic tourist behaviors (Wen, Gu, & Kavanaugh, 2005), hotel management in Korea (Kim, Chun, & Lee, 2005), restaurant management in Hong Kong (Tse, So, & Sin, 2006), international tourism demand to Asia (Kuo, Chen, Tseng, Ju, & Huang, 2008), and post-SARS recovery patterns (Mao et al., 2010). The findings of these studies on SARS confirmed that the tourism industry shows a characteristic of sensitivity and fluctuation toward health crises and further indicated that more effective tourism promotion policies should be executed for crisis recovery. However, as SARS is categorized as a short-term crisis (Zeng et al., 2005), the incomparable longer-term, far-reaching influence of COVID-19 makes us believe that it is necessary to examine the consequences and impacts systematically, which can start from the first epicenter country, China, and focuses on the most fragile T&H sector, that is, international travel market.

Among the limited research focusing on the destination images within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Ahmad, Jamaludin, Zuraimi, and Valeri (2020) investigated the factors (i.e., physical, sociopsychological, financial) affecting the intention to visit and destination image in crisis recovery period after the pandemic of COVID-19. In their quantitative approach, the study respondents were Asian and European travelers visiting Malaysia. Authors concluded that destination image significantly influenced the intention to visit, as well as, significantly mediated the association between the previously mentioned factors and intention to visit. Whereas, Abbaspour, Soltani, and Tham (2020) focused on the medical tourism destination image and suggested that such an image can be a helpful instrument for COVID-19 post-crisis recovery. By interviewing medical tourists from an Iranian health center, authors concluded that medical tourists to Iran can be considered crisis-resistant travelers, and such travelers should be the target of the pandemic recovery strategies. More recently, Hassan and Soliman (2021) placed their attention on revisit intention in the era of COVID-19 by evaluating the destination social responsibility, destination reputation, travelers’ trust and fear arousal. In the performed quantitative approach, the sample was formed by domestic travelers in Egypt. One of the reported findings of this study was that the fear associated with the pandemic could lower excitement for traveling in general.

2.2. Destination image scale

Since destination image is a critical factor for predicting travel behavior, previous research has heavily studied its measurement and formation process. One seminal study conducted by Beerli and Martin (2004) proposed nine dimensions determining the perceived destination image, including Natural Resources, General Infrastructure, Tourist Infrastructure, Tourist Leisure and Recreation, Culture, History and Art, Political and Economic Factors, Natural Environment, Social Environment, and Atmosphere of the Place. This study represents a comprehensive attempt of building a destination image scale. However, the weights of these image dimensions may vary in different destinations. For instance, Chaulagain, Witala, and Fu (2019) found that perceived safety and security had the largest influence on the development of a country’s image. In particular, the international travelers were getting more and more concerned with the safety and security of a destination when making decisions. Similarly, when Atadil, Sirakaya-Turk, and Altintas (2017) examined the perceived destination image, the safe and secure environment at a destination was associated with the highest level of importance in their respective factor analysis.

From a different perspective, the significant role played by safety and
security in destination image scale reflects travelers' sensitivity to travel-related risk. Typical travel-related risks include natural disasters, hygiene, diseases, terrorism, political instability, crime and accidents, environmental quality, and so forth (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005; Wang, Liu-Lastres, Ritchie, & Mills, 2019; Wang, Liu-Lastres, Ritchie, & Pan, 2019). Becken et al. (2017) found that western travelers’ feeling toward the risk of air quality had a significant negative impact on China’s destination image. Liu-Lastres, Schroeder, and Pennington-Gray (2019) used norovirus infections as the context and provided practical implications on how to develop effective risk and crisis communication messages. Undoubtedly, the context of COVID-19 pandemic could exacerbate potential travelers' risk perceptions. Through integrating destination image and risk literature, this study aims to propose a destination image scale with highlights on destination safety and security attributes within the context of COVID-19.

Besides image dimensions of safety and security, the majority of travelers are highly interested in the cultural expressions of local people such as history, customs, arts, language and science. Moreover, the main product of tourism is the environment (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2012). Thus, it’s not surprising that the perceived destination image is affected by such cultural expressions and natural resources. Further dimensions such as smooth travel and affordability were also examined to enhance our understanding of the destination image formation by previous research (e.g., Atadil et al., 2017; Chaulagain et al., 2019). These image dimensions mentioned above were comprehensively included in the proposed destination image scale and their significance was tested in predicting travel intentions.

2.3. Media effect on destination image

Media effects have been generally accepted as that the media plays a central role in influencing public opinion. In the field of mass communication, the agenda setting theory explains the relationship between mass media and the public opinion. It refers to the correspondence between media agenda and public agenda. In other words, public opinion “responds not to the environment, but to the pseudo-environment constructed by the news media” (McCombs, 2004, p. 3). The basic idea is that the news media serves as the window to the world beyond direct experience, filters the information, and then determines our cognitive image of the world. As it says, perception is reality. Rich case studies have empirically confirmed the important role that news media plays in defining controversial issues and shaping people’s perceptions and evaluations consequently (Feezell, 2018; Guo & Vargo, 2020; Kiousis, 2004).

The media effect on destination image perception is echoed by the concept of organic destination image in the field of tourism research. According to Gunn (1997), organic destination image is derived from non-tourist sources, like media, popular culture and schooling and is considered as the most influential factor in travel decisions. It not only serves as a foundation of induced destination image (Fakaye & Crompton, 1991; Gartner, 1994), but also can be a powerful factor influencing the initial choice set of destinations (Selby & Morgan, 1996). Besides these traditional information sources, a recent research trend was observed with more attention given to different social media platforms when studying the formation of destination images, which include, but not limited to, Instagram (Areheva, Egger, & Yu, 2021), Twitter (Garay, 2019), TripAdvisor (Tamajon & Valiente, 2017; Zhang, Qi, & Qi, 2021), and Sina Weibo (Kim, Lee, Shin, & Yang, 2017). In contrast, very few studies empirically illustrated the relationship between mainstream news media and destination image formation. One exemption was made by Stepechenkova and Esles (2011). The scholars quantified news media about Russia and developed Dynamic Destination Image Index to represent the destination image in models of tourism demand. The Index was a time series of media materials about Russia published in three influential UK newspapers, reflecting the news volume, topics, and favorability of coverage. The findings demonstrated the predictive power of the news media in explaining tourism demand.

The significance of news media effects within the context of health crises have been long noticed by researchers. Downs (1972) proposed the concept of the “issue attention cycle” and stated that modern public attend to important certain issues in a cyclical manner which involved five stages: the pre-problem stage, alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm, realizing the cost of significant progress, gradual decline of intense public interest, and the post-problem stage. Hall (2002) applied the five-stage issue-attention cycle into the discussion of the events of September 11 and claimed that media had a major role on destination image and consequential travel decision-making. With the help of the advanced communication power of news media, a worldwide health crisis can revise the perceived images of international destinations. For instance, Toronto, which originally held a safe destination image, turned into a dangerous place to visit because of SARS (Mason, Grabowski, & Du, 2005). However, despite the recognition of the news media power on destination image within the context of health crises, there was fewer empirical analysis on an epicenter country’s destination image as well as its connection with the concurrent news media content. As the first epicenter of COVID-19, China’s destination image might have been severely distorted due to the pouring news coverage worldwide. Thus, it is emblematic to examine China’s destination image amid the pandemic and further reveal how the news media affects China’s destination image perceptions and travel intentions among potential travelers.

2.4. Study focus: China’s destination image

China had become a prominent destination worldwide before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. As of 2019, China was ranked fourth globally in terms of tourist arrivals and tenth in terms of tourist receipts (World Tourism Organization, 2019). However, the controversial international image of China has long been perceived among western travelers. Specifically, the positive side includes culture/history/art, recreation/leisure, tourist sites and attractions, and food/lifestyle; the negative image is dominant in the field of policies and politics, international relations, safety/environment/health, transit/transportation, business/economy (Xiao & Mair, 2006). China used various means to generate and sustain a favorable image (Zhang & Cameron, 2003). Most noticeably, the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games were widely regarded as an important marketing campaign for China to improve its standing (Meng & Li, 2011).

In spite of these marketing efforts, China's destination image is still identified as mixed and paradoxical in the eyes of western travelers (Li & Wang, 2011). For instance, through analyzing travel blogs, Tseng, Wu, Morrison, Zhang, and Chen (2015) found that the concepts of history, ancient, and cultural expression were pervasive among five English-speaking countries and negative impressions included the sanitary behaviors of Chinese people and their loudness. Another research effort was presented by Becken et al. (2017) who surveyed US and Australian residents on their views on China as a travel destination and found that potential travelers held negative views about travel risks in China in general. Notably, the risk perception of air quality had a significant negative impact on destination image as well as intention to visit China. As to the influential factors on China’s destination image perceived, transportation (Zhang et al., 2021) and country image (Zhang, Wu, Morrison, & Tseng, 2018) have been specifically identified. There is a general lack of study on how western newspaper articles shape Westerners’ evaluation of China as a travel destination. This study chose the perspective of an important inbound tourism market, i.e., the US travelers, to examine China’s destination image and its reflection through the news media amid the COVID-19.

In Study I, China’s destination image was collected and examined through online surveys and then, the predictive power of the image factors on travel intentions was analyzed. Study II was conducted as a supplement to explain the possible influence exerted by the news media on China's destination image perceptions. Specifically, the news articles
on China from one influential and representative news media outlet (i.e., CNN.com) were collected for the first half of the year 2020 and then a preliminary content analysis was conducted to explore the agenda and sentiment related to China. Furthermore, the present research is part of a larger research project focusing on the formation of travelers’ images on multiple concepts such as a full-service hotel and an international destination, particularly in the COVID-19 era. Accordingly, the present research concentrates on the international destination aspect.

3. Study I

Study I was conducted to explore China’s destination image perceived among US travelers amid the pandemic of COVID-19. It mainly took a quantitative approach, and a questionnaire survey was employed online to collect the data.

3.1. Survey design

The survey consisted of four sections. In section 1, the respondents’ knowledge of the COVID-19 was first recalled and their familiarity with this pandemic was measured. Section 2 contained 30 items measuring China’s destination image as perceived by the respondents within the context of COVID-19 pandemic. A 5-point Likert-type scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree was adopted to assess respondents’ ratings on the destination image attributes. These 30 attributes describing China as an international destination were developed based on previous related research, including Atadil et al. (2017), Chaulagai et al. (2019), Baloglu and McCleary (1999), Chen, Lai, Petrick, and Lin (2016), Beerli and Martin (2004), and executed pilot study, as well as, professional and academic experience of the authors of the present study. Section 3 contained three items to measure the future travel intention to China. For example, “China is a good choice for my next vacation planning after the COVID pandemic is over.” The last section asked for respondents’ demographic information.

A pilot study was conducted before collecting the data. The draft of the survey was distributed to 16 professionals and experienced travelers. Among them there were four lodging practitioners, five academicians in the field of T&H management, and seven tourists who had rich travel experiences. Based on the feedback from the pilot study, we revised some issues related to wording, question sequence, and vocabulary clarity for the purpose of making sure the survey design was suitable for the targeting population. By doing so, the content and face validity of the questionnaire was enhanced. The final version of the survey is presented in the Appendix.

3.2. Data collection

The data was gathered from respondents who are U.S. residents, at least 18 years old and have the experience of staying in a hotel within the last two years. The condition of recent hotel experience helped to identify active travelers. The questionnaire was administered online through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), and the process started on June 15th and ended on June 20th, 2020. A purposive sampling approach was used: the study respondents were selected from the population of MTurk workers based on certain qualification criteria. On one hand, to qualify for inclusion in this study, MTurk workers need to have a Human Intelligence Task (HIT), such as an online survey, approval rate of 90% or above. This HIT approval rate indicates the percentage of completed and approved tasks for a MTurk worker (Amazon Mechanical Turk, 2019). On the other hand, the sample data was continuously monitored to ensure the diverse socio-demographic characteristics among the respondents. A total of 550 surveys were completed. Before data analysis, data filtering was conducted in an attempt to guarantee the quality of the data. First, the qualifications of the respondents were checked, including nationality, age, and the hotel staying experience during the past 24 months. Second, the survey used two opposite items to filter out those invalid surveys which failed to give consistent answers. As a result, 50 surveys were identified as unusable. A total of 500 completed surveys were deemed as valid for further coding and data analysis.

3.3. Profile of the respondents

Of the 500 respondents, 101 respondents (20%) had traveled to China before and 222 respondents (44%) had traveled abroad previously. The majority of the respondents were male (62%), married (67%), full-time employed (82%), and had a Bachelor’s degree (61%). The largest age group was 25–34, which accounted for 42% of the sample. In terms of ethnic group, 69% were Caucasians, 11% were African Americans, and 8% were Hispanics. Relating to their individual income level, 221 respondents (44%) earned $45,000–$85,000 last year and 83 respondents (17%) earned more than $85,000. Compared with the United States Census data (2019), this sample is slightly skewed toward a younger, male-dominant, married, and high-educated group. Therefore, the interpretation and generalization of this study’s findings should be cautious. The specific limitation is addressed later.

The research attempted to examine China’s destination image perception under the influence of COVID-19 so the respondents’ familiarity toward the pandemic was measured first. More than a half (73%) believed they were very familiar with the pandemic and 68% worried about contracting the COVID-19. Further data confirmed such familiarity and sensitivity. For instance, the proportions for those who knew someone being tested positive and being under quarantine were 40% and 55%, respectively.

3.4. Data analysis and results

The gathered data was treated with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program. At the beginning, item level distributions were assessed through item analysis that allowed us to test multiple assumptions such as linearity. Then, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was carried out in order to develop a perceived destination image scale within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since such a scale was not well-established by the previous research and, accordingly, we had limited knowledge on the potential factor structure, the EFA was considered the most appropriate procedure to be executed (Sharma, 1996). Moreover, as Hancer, Ozturk, and Ayyildiz (2009) stated, a multiple regression analysis can be carried out with the purpose of prediction and illustration of the causal associations between a single dependent variable and multiple independent variables. Therefore, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to estimate the predictive power of the identified destination image dimensions developed from the EFA toward the respondents’ future travel intention.

3.5. EFA on China’s destination image

As indicated earlier, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was executed with the goal of building a perceived destination image scale within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since this 30-item scale was intended to provide critical insights regarding how US travelers perceive China as an international destination during COVID-19 pandemic, it was named as the Destination Image Scale of China. Initially, the appropriateness of the scale was checked through item analysis. There was no item with a higher absolute value than 1.19 regarding kurtosis, skewness and standard deviations. Furthermore, previous research suggested and had used 5 to 10 participants per scale item method when assessing the sample size (e.g., Atadil et al., 2017; Comrey & Lee, 2013). In addition, a high reliability was also observed for the scale (α = 0.94). Thus, the 30-item scale met the assumptions of large sample size, reliability, and linearity successfully, and was treated with an EFA.

Then, the EFA was performed with a principal component extraction
method and varimax rotation (Kaiser Meyer Olkin (KMO) value = 0.949). While improving the variance of factor loadings, the simplicity of the factors was also enhanced via the varimax orthogonal rotation approach (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Due to the low and cross factor loading issues, four items were eliminated from the scale. This process led to the formation of a five-factor structure explaining almost 61% of the variance in the data. Moreover, 0.916 and 0.734 were the highest and lowest observed Cronbach’s alpha values, respectively. The common method bias was also assessed through Harman’s single-factor test that resulted in only a 38% of explained variance. Based on the previous related literature (e.g., Atadil et al., 2017; Beerli & Martin, 2004; Chaulagain et al., 2019), as well as, our professional and academic experience, the obtained factors were named as: (1) Destination Safety and Security, (2) Cultural Richness, (3) Ecological Richness, (4) Travel Smoothness, and (5) Wallet Friendliness. In Table 1, the highest three mean scores were associated with the following items: China has places of historical or cultural interest (Mean value ≥ 4.14), China has unique ways of life and customs (4.03), and China has wealth and beauty of the landscape (4.00). On the other hand, the following items received the lowest three importance mean scores: China is a safe country in terms of infectious diseases (3.03), There is an unpolluted/unspoiled environment in China (3.14), and China has safe street food (3.26). Simply put, those highest-valued items are all associated with the factor “Cultural Richness” while those lowest-valued items are all associated with the factor “Destination Safety and Security”.

### 3.6. Regression analysis on future travel intention to China

A multiple linear regression analysis was carried out to examine the predictive power of previously obtained destination image dimensions toward travelers’ future travel intention to China. Considering the substantial impact of COVID-19 on international travel, the influence of self-perceived familiarity of COVID-19 on future travel intention to China was controlled in the regression analysis. In Table 2, the results showed that 47.6% of the variance of the travel intention to China was explained in the model (F (6, 493) = 76.503, p < 0.001). Three out of five image factors had statistically significant correlations with the dependent variable. Specifically, Destination Safety and Security was found to be the most influential predictor for travel intention to China. The next two important predictors were Travel Smoothness and Wallet Friendliness. Neither Cultural Richness nor Ecological Richness played a significant role in predicting travel intentions to China. Notably, travel intention to China was negatively influenced by the self-perceived familiarity toward COVID-19.

### 4. Study II

The purpose of Study II was to explore the influence of news media on China’s destination image perception amid the pandemic of COVID-19. First, a preliminary content analysis of the news media articles on China was conducted. Second, the differences of China’s destination image perceptions were checked considering the respondents’ media use—different levels of exposure to the online news media outlets.

#### 4.1. Media data collection

As one of the most visited news websites, CNN.com was chosen for media data collection in Study II. More specifically, as part of the selection process of the media outlet, we reached out to multiple academicians from the Communication discipline conducting content analysis studies on media outlets. Considering their valuable feedback and its global popularity, CNN.com was selected. There were two justifications for the choice of online news media in this study. First, research in the field of communication found that nowadays the online news media plays a leading role in defining the media agenda, compared with traditional elite newspapers like New York Times and The Washington (continued on next page)
Multiple regression model for travel intention to China.

| Independent Variable          | Standardized Coefficient | t-Value | p       |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------|---------|---------|
| Destination Safety and Security | 0.582                     | 16.949  | 0.000   |
| Cultural Richness             | -0.056                    | -1.642  | 0.101   |
| Ecological Richness           | 0.032                     | 0.990   | 0.323   |
| Travel Smoothness             | 0.257                     | 7.916   | 0.000   |
| Wallet Friendliness           | 0.075                     | 2.313   | 0.021   |
| Familiarity toward COVID       | -0.130                    | -3.555  | 0.000   |

Dependent variable = Travel intention to China. Overall model: F (6, 493) = 76.503, P < 0.001, R² = 0.482, Adjusted R² = 0.476.

Post (Vargo & Guo, 2017). Second, considering the special circumstances brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, i.e., stay-at-home order, social distance, etc., it is reasonable to say that the online news outlets have become the major information source worldwide. In determining the time frame of analysis, we chose a period from January, 2020 to June, 2020. This is because, according to Stone and McCombs (1981), it takes two to six months for multiple topics to move from the media to the public. It was January, 2020 when the COVID-19 outbreak was first reported in Wuhan, China, and since then, a large amount of news coverage has been developed on the issue.

As a result, news articles published between January 1st, 2020 and June 15th, 2020, on CNN.com were extracted through the Nexis Uni database. In this extraction process, news articles with words of “China” “Chinese” or “Wuhan” appearing on their headlines and lead sections were gathered. Since our research focuses on the destination image of China, we extracted the news articles with these particular words. Multiple rounds of examinations were conducted in order to make sure that each extracted article was relevant. Since the headlines and leading paragraphs were the focus during the extraction process, only the text data coming from these two particular sections were used for the following text analyses. This process led to the collection of 841 news articles. The headlines and the leading paragraph were combined as the content analysis unit.

4.2. Content analysis

4.2.1. Word frequency analysis

Word frequency analysis was executed via NVivo 12 to identify the most mentioned words, as well as, to illustrate them within a word cloud map. NVivo is widely accepted for content analysis and the word cloud map can visualize the data in a more straightforward, reader-friendly manner. The specific word frequency statistics was shown in Table 3. “Coronavirus” (n = 939) was identified as the word with the highest frequency. The following four most mentioned words were, respectively, “Donald Trump” (n = 231), “Outbreak” (n = 227), “Hong Kong” (n = 222), and “People” (n = 193). Moreover, the word “travel” (n = 95) ranked eighteenth. Fig. 1 illustrates the visual representation of the most mentioned words for the text data. The higher the frequency of a word, the larger its font size on this word cloud map.

4.2.2. Sentiment analysis

Following the word frequency analysis, a sentiment analysis on the “travel” word was performed. The purpose of this particular analysis was to identify the news outlet website’s (i.e., CNN.com) attitudes toward traveling to China: Whether these attitudes are positive or negative. We first extracted 95 statements that included the “travel” word from the text data. Then NVivo 12 was used for sentiment analysis of these statements. The software feature of auto-coding for sentiment has built-in lexicons for positive and negative sentiments, which can specifically tag the statements into four categories: moderately positive, very positive, moderately negative and very negative (Woolf & Silver, 2018). NVivo maintains separate lexicons for each of these categories and word modifiers like very, more or somewhat can change the class of that emotion (Pudaruth, Mohesup, Permessur, & Chamroo, 2018). As a result, out of the 95 travel-related statements, 34 statements were tagged as very negative and 32 as moderately negative, while only 9 statements were tagged as very positive and 19 as moderately positive. Table 4 illustrates some examples of the emotionally negative news articles statements. Literally, those negative words, like “unprotected” “killed” “sickened” “died” “against” “warning” “bans” “ugly” “restriction” “death toll”, determined the emotional tone of the articles.

Fig. 1. Word cloud of the most frequently mentioned words.

Table 1 (continued)

| Country 109 |  |  |
|-----------|---|---|

Table 3

| Rank | Word | Frequency | Word | Frequency |
|------|------|-----------|------|-----------|
| 1    | Coronavirus | 939 | Spread | 106 |
| 2    | Donald Trump | 231 | Novel | 105 |
| 3    | Outbreak | 227 | Year | 100 |
| 4    | Hong Kong | 222 | State | 96 |
| 5    | People | 193 | Travel | 95 |
| 6    | Cases | 148 | Beijing | 95 |
| 7    | World | 138 | Government | 88 |
| 8    | Health | 133 | Officials | 81 |
| 9    | City | 129 | United | 77 |
| 10   | Pandemic | 121 | Number | 75 |
| 11   | President | 120 | National | 73 |
| 12   | First | 117 | States | 72 |

Table 2

Multiple regression model for travel intention to China.

| Factor |  |  |  |  |
|--------|---|---|---|---|

N = 500. KMO value = 0.949. Cut-off value: 0.40.

a Scale points from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

b Cronbach’s Alpha value.
The number of confirmed cases of the Wuhan coronavirus is nearing 12,000, as the epidemic continues to spread worldwide, sparking travel bans and outbreaks of ugly anti-Chinese xenophobia. The virus is already affecting pockets of business, travel and life in unexpected ways in China, where it is originated, and beyond. Chinese nationals bear the brunt of the coronavirus’s impact – most of the people it’s sickened or killed are Chinese. Facebook, Microsoft and other high-profile companies have told their employees not to travel to China as the deadly coronavirus continues to spread. Will travel insurance cover flights canceled due to the coronavirus outbreak? The outbreak and spread of the coronavirus is causing widespread disruption, with airlines worldwide suspending all flights to China. Cases of Wuhan coronavirus continue to rise rapidly as US bans travel from China US enforces coronavirus travel restrictions. China says it’s an overreaction. The United States has begun implementing new rules around travel from China as the coronavirus death toll creeps higher – rules that include re-routing Americans flying into the country to specific airports for screening.

4.3. T-tests regarding exposure to media

A series of t-tests were conducted to examine the mean differences of destination image scale and travel intention to China with regard to the respondents’ different exposure levels to online news media, i.e., whether or not relying on news outlet websites for COVID-19 information. Results are shown in Table 5. For those US respondents who considered news outlet websites as their major information source related to COVID-19, significant lower scores were assigned to most items of Destination Safety and Security and, consequently, travel intention to China. In contrast, for those who had fewer access to news outlet websites related to COVID-19, more endorsements were given to the most of the people it’s sickened or killed are Chinese. Facebook, Microsoft and other high-profile companies have told their employees not to travel to China as the deadly coronavirus continues to spread. Will travel insurance cover flights canceled due to the coronavirus outbreak? The outbreak and spread of the coronavirus is causing widespread disruption, with airlines worldwide suspending all flights to China. Cases of Wuhan coronavirus continue to rise rapidly as US bans travel from China US enforces coronavirus travel restrictions. China says it’s an overreaction. The United States has begun implementing new rules around travel from China as the coronavirus death toll creeps higher – rules that include re-routing Americans flying into the country to specific airports for screening.

Cases of Wuhan coronavirus continue to rise rapidly as US bans travel from China

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5. Discussion

The study revealed that US travelers’ perception of China as an international destination during COVID-19 pandemic was generally negative and their travel intention was relatively low. The major contribution of the study lies in the proposal of a perceived destination image scale of a COVID-19 epicenter country and the unearthed correlation between Destination Safety and Security, and the future travel behavior of international travelers. Notably, Destination Safety and Security captured the highest variance in the data highlighting the importance of this particular dimension in the formation of the perceived destination image of China. While previous research found that risk perceptions of air quality (Becken et al., 2017) and beggars (Qiao, Chen, & Prideaux, 2017) are associated with China's destination image, the present study identified the safety issue of hygiene and sanitation within the context of COVID-19 in China. The seriousness of this issue is even overshadowing the cultural and natural heritage of the country as the relation of the perceived Cultural and Ecological Richness dimensions on future travel intention to China was found nonsignificant. As a result, potential international travelers might refrain from taking the cultural and natural heritage into account when considering traveling to China. This finding is in alignment with previous research. Likewise, Jiao, Zhang, and Meng (2020) stressed that even though the historical and cultural heritage of Xinjiang, China is well-known locally, its international reputation is shadowed by factors such as security considering the terrorism threat.

Research concerning the media effect on destination image has been conducted for years. Most researchers believe that various forms of social media, one of the most explored areas, play significant roles nowadays in affecting destination image perceptions (Garay, 2019; Li et al., 2021; Li & Wang, 2011; Tseng et al., 2015). However, previous studies supporting such claims overlooked the influence of news media on social media. According to the Intermedia Agenda-Setting Theory, news media journalists, referred to as the “gatekeeper of information”, have significant influence on most topics and the sentiment expressed on other news sources (Stern, Livan, & Smith, 2020). Moreover, communication studies empirically confirmed that online media outlets, like CNN.com, strongly affect other media, including social media (Harder, Sevenans, & Aelst, 2017). The present study found that as the first

Table 4

Examples of the emotionally negative news articles statements.

Table 5

Mean differences regarding exposure to news outlet websites.

| Factor 1 Destination Safety and Security | Exposure to news outlet websites | Mean difference |
|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------|
| 1. China has a high level of hygiene and sanitation | High | 3.07 |
| 2. China is a safe country in terms of infectious diseases | Low | 2.72 |
| 3. Hotel safety and security regarding infection control and prevention in China makes me feel safe | Low | 3.05 |
| 4. There is an unpolluted/unspoiled environment in China | High | 2.93 |
| 5. China has safe water supply | Low | 3.26 |
| 6. There is a safe and secure environment in China | Low | 3.23 |
| 7. China is a peaceful country | Low | 3.14 |
| 8. China has safe street food | Low | 3.06 |
| 9. China has policies/regulations favorable to tourists | Low | 3.27 |
| 10. China has a restful and relaxing atmosphere | Low | 3.28 |
| 11. China has good weather | Low | 3.6 |
| Factor 2 Cultural Richness | | |
| 12. China has wealth and beauty of the landscape | Low | 4.21 |
| 13. China has places of historical or cultural interest | Low | 4.41 |
| 14. China has unique ways of life and customs | Low | 4.29 |
| 15. China has good quality hotels | Low | 3.74 |
| 16. It’s easy to find helpful travel information about China | Low | 3.28 |
| 17. China has good nightlife and entertainment | Low | 3.65 |
| Factor 3 Ecological Richness | | |
| 18. China has a good variety of fauna (animals) | Low | 3.89 |
| 19. China has a good variety of flora (plants) | Low | 4.02 |
| 20. China has a wide variety of outdoor activities | Low | 3.92 |
| Factor 4 Travel Smoothness | | |
| 21. There is smooth travel to and from China | Low | 3.33 |
| 22. China offers good value for my holiday | Low | 3.42 |
| 23. Overall, vacation in China is affordable | Low | 3.48 |
| 24. China has appealing local food (cuisine) | Low | 3.9 |
| Factor 5 Wallet Friendliness | | |
| 25. There are inexpensive restaurants in China | Low | 3.83 |
| 26. There are inexpensive hotels in China | Low | 3.79 |
| Travel intention to China | | |
| 1. I intend to travel to China in the future after the COVID pandemic is over | Low | 2.43 |
| 2. China is a good choice for my next vacation planning after the COVID pandemic is over | Low | 2.37 |
| 3. I am open to visiting China in the future after the COVID pandemic is over | Low | 2.89 |

*The star mark (*) indicates the mean difference is statistically significant at 0.05 level.
epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic, China's news coverage was mainly focused on “coronavirus” “outbreak” and “health”. Further sentiment analysis indicates that the majority of the news articles on traveling to China adopted a negative approach. In other words, COVID-19 has been featured in Chinese news coverage (Chen, Huang, & Li, 2020). The possible influence of constant exposure to negative news on China was examined through t-tests in regard to respondents' destination image perceptions and travel intentions. The findings align well with the communication literature, which suggests that within the context of health crises, mainstream news media exerts powerful influence on international destination image. Further effort should be devoted to unveiling this influence mechanism.

Taking a more detailed perspective, the online news users rated a majority of Destination Safety and Security attributes significantly lower. Previous studies showed that the onset of health crises is likely to affect the public's perceptions of health risks and then lead to decisional and behavioral changes (Bowen, Fidgeon, & Page, 2014). According to Kasper, Kasper, Pidgeon, and Slovic (2005), this kind of health risk perception may be partly due to sensationalism of the health crises and how they are reported by the media. In light of the health concerns inspired by the news coverage on COVID-19, it is understandable that US travelers have a substantial low intention for international travel to China. More interestingly, the online news users rated most other destination attributes significantly higher, including Cultural Richness, Ecological Richness, and Wallet Friendliness. Such positive evaluation could be a result of the raised awareness through more news coverage on China as a destination located on the other half of the planet in the mind of US travelers. This finding was in consistency with the previous research. For instance, Li and Kaplanidou (2013) found that US travelers who spent more time following the Olympic Games through the media tended to have a more positive impression of China as a tourism destination. Simply put, these findings imply that US travelers' negative perception of China is more likely a perception of the pandemic itself as China was considered the first epicenter of the COVID-19. This illustrates the critical role in understanding these perceptions and the corresponding communication message for market recovery (Liu-Lastres et al., 2019).

5.1. Theoretical implication

Zenker and Kock (2020) claimed that previous knowledge in the T&H research field could be at the mercy of a paradigm shift caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Correspondingly, this study is one of the first research attempts proposing a perceived destination image scale for a country strongly associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The reexamination of the destination image does not only improve our theoretical understanding of the construct itself but also help explain the future travel behavior in the COVID-19 era. Furthermore, the name of Destination Safety and Security (e.g., a safe country in terms of infectious diseases) was given to the most influential destination image dimension both on the scale formation and predicting future travel intention to China. Thus, the present study also helps improve the conceptualization of the destination image scale amid the COVID-19. The critical roles of safety and security for the perceived destination image was also reported by the previous research (Atadil et al., 2017; Chaulagain et al., 2019; Moreno-González, Leon, & Fernández-Hernández, 2020), and the current research confirms their roles and growing importance within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, we claim that Destination Safety and Security will be the most critical factor in determining the future travel behavior of international travelers in the post-COVID era.

In addition to directing research efforts to the examination of China’s destination image, this study attempted to contribute to media effect and tourism crisis literature. The overall negative image perceived among US travelers could be reasonably explained by the large amounts of online negative news coverage on China and the COVID-19. Su and Li (2020) stated that US audiences' perception of China was shaped by media coverage of China-related topics while direct experience with China has no effect. In light of this and the findings of this study, we can claim that the news media coverage on COVID-19 significantly and negatively affects China's destination image and, in particular, the destination's safety and security attributes. Furthermore, this study goes beyond the traditional survey analysis and digs into specific news articles related to traveling to China through content analysis. The negatively-dominant news coverage indicates that the influence of news media on destination images perceived by potential travelers and their travel intentions were more substantial within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, in the following tourism crisis management research, the construct of media force cannot be excluded anymore.

5.2. Practical implication

The present study allows the generation of practical implications both for the T&H industry practitioners and researchers. First, the developed 26-item destination image scale can be utilized by field researchers interested in examining travelers' perceptions and future decision-making behaviors. Second, considering the heavy weight of Destination Safety and Security in the formation of the destination image and future travel behavior, this factor should be the focus of attention in any marketing campaign by the Chinese DMOs (Destination Marketing Organizations). In these marketing campaigns, high levels of hygiene and sanitation, being a safe country, as well as hotel safety and security within the context of infectious diseases should be explicitly communicated with the targeted travelers. Third, a majority of the respondents indicated high levels of agreement with the cultural and ecological richness of China. Thus, even though cultural and natural heritage were found to be ignored when considering traveling to China, potential travelers should still be reminded of the unique cultural and natural attractions available in China.

Last but not least, the media effect study could generate further meaningful practical implications for the policy-makers, tourism planners, and DMOs. Since news media outlets are found to be powerful in reshaping destination images, appropriate media strategies should be developed by DMOs for the purpose of crisis management and image recovery. As Liu-Lastres et al. (2019) argued, onset of the health crises, messaging is important in shaping tourists' perceptions and reactions. Similarly, Lu, Mihalik, Heere, Meng, and Fairchild (2019) proposed to effectively employ public relation strategy in the context of certain tourism issues. Within this crisis context, for China, and other COVID-19 epicenter countries, like Italy, Spain, the US, etc., the DMOs could take more active actions approaching news media and take advantage of online communication channels to enhance the information transparency and avoid the influence of misleading coverage. Before doing this, DMOs should have a better knowledge about the agenda of mainstream news media outlets and respond quickly to the changing media ecology (Su & Li, 2020). Thus, more systematic content analysis can essentially help to achieve this goal.

6. Conclusion

This study mainly investigated US travelers' perceptions of China as an international destination after China became the first epicenter of the COVID-19. Five underlying dimensions were identified, namely, Destination Safety and Security, Cultural Richness, Ecological Richness, Travel Smoothness and Wallet Friendliness. Further regression analysis indicated that Destination Safety and Security had the most influential dimension in determining US travelers' intention to visit China. Moreover, the content analysis showed that CNN's online news articles presented China in a generally negative manner, and more notably, closely associated with COVID-19. As a result, those US travelers who relied on online news viewed China more negatively in terms of travel safety and security.
6.1. Limitations and future research

This study has certain limitations in generalizing the findings. First, the chosen destination, China, represents the first epicenter country of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the proposed destination image scale would only stay robust when examining other epicenter countries whose destination image might be severely affected by health crises. Second, in this study only one source market was investigated, that is, the US travelers. Presumably, should the present study be replicated in other international markets, such as Japan and Korea, different findings might have emerged. The sample representativeness limits the generalization of the findings too. As in most studies using MTurk for administering the survey, the sample is more male and younger (Jilke, Ryzin, & Walle, 2016), excluding most elderly people who constitute the large proportion of the international travel market and those without internet access. To get a comprehensive destination image of China, future research may replicate the current study design in various source markets and diversified demographic groups.

Because only online news outlets were analyzed, this study has another limitation. Given the fact of diverse communication methods nowadays, research on other information sources, for instance, social media, YouTube channels, and so forth, may provide complementary information for researchers and DMOs to gain a better understanding of destination images as well as the formation process. More specifically, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, as very influential information sources worldwide, are also likely to impact the perceived destination images of travelers. In addition, recent issues on influential information sources worldwide, are also likely to impact the perceived destination images of travelers. In other words, the influence of news media on destination image perceptions should also be investigated. Furthermore, COVID-19 era should be investigated by the future research. Moreover, perceived destination images of travelers. In addition, recent issues on influential information sources worldwide, are also likely to impact the perceived destination images of travelers. In other words, the influence of news media on destination image perceptions should also be investigated. Furthermore, COVID-19 era should be investigated by the future research. Moreover, perceived destination images of travelers. In addition, recent issues on influential information sources worldwide, are also likely to impact the perceived destination images of travelers. In other words, the influence of news media on destination image perceptions should also be investigated. Furthermore, COVID-19 era should be investigated by the future research.

To get a comprehensive destination image of China, future research may consider these aspects as well.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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