



“Domestic or International?” The Impact of Cognitive Absorption of Short-Form Videos on Tourists’ Post-COVID Travel Intention: An Exploratory Study on Douyin

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Abstract. The extant studies have attested to the effects of media experiences in shaping destination image and influencing the behavioral intentions of potential tourists. However, limited works have focused on the impact of holistic experiences during the interaction with destination-related short-form videos on potential tourists’ negative emotional responses and post-COVID travel intention. This study aims to elucidate how cognitive absorption affects tourists’ travel anxiety and post-pandemic travel intention in different travel settings (domestic versus international). The comparative results show that users’ cognitive absorption when interacting with destination-related short-form videos can effectively influence the behavioral intentions of potential tourists. The result also identified that travel anxiety significantly contributes to higher post-COVID travel intention. This study expands cognitive absorption research in the contexts of tourism and short-form videos, offers an angle for future studies to positively interpret tourists’ travel anxiety, and provides tourism practitioners with suggestions on the tourism industry’s recovery in the post-COVID era.

Keywords: Cognitive absorption · Destination-related short-form videos · Travel anxiety · Travel desire · Post-COVID travel intention

1 Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, people worldwide are constantly in the grip of infection, quarantine, and the fear of death, which directly or indirectly contribute to their long-lasting anxiety about travel [1, 2]. As a future-oriented negative anticipatory emotion, anxiety not only can lead to the reduction of travel desire [3] but also can anticipate some protective behaviors such as cautious travel and travel avoidance [4]. To revitalize

the tourism industry from the impacts of COVID-19 as soon as possible, it is of great value to probe into the possible factors that can alleviate people’s travel anxiety and further trigger travel desire. This study aims to explore such factors in the context of short-form video services.

Short-form video services, led by TikTok (known as Douyin in mainland China), have developed rapidly around the world. It is influential enough to make an obscure destination become famous overnight [5]. As such, destination-related short-form videos on Douyin are becoming increasingly vital in building the destination image, mediating tourist experiences, and affecting potential tourists’ behavioral intentions [6]. During the pandemic, travel videos on Douyin have played a crucial role in influencing users’ future destination choices as an alternative to physical travel [7]. Despite the substantial promotional value of Douyin for destination marketing, tourism research related to Douyin is still in its infancy stage [7].

Furthermore, the perceptual accuracy and the perceptual serendipity of recommendations arise from the application design of Douyin (or TikTok) facilitate users’ deep involvement and optimal holistic experiences [8]. This kind of deep involvement experience, also known as cognitive absorption, is thought to result in positive outcomes, including increased enjoyment, satisfaction of travel experiences, and reduced negative emotions such as stress caused by the pandemic [9–11]. Although the induced effects of cognitive absorption may play an important role in influencing users’ subsequent travel behavior, for a long time, cognitive absorption research to date has mostly focused on its positive effects on individuals’ belief formation and information technology usage intention [9, 10]. Little attention has been paid to discuss how users’ interactions with tourism related short-form videos could influence their travel psychology and behavioral intention, particularly in the post-COVID context.

To bridge the aforementioned research gaps, variables such as cognitive absorption, travel desire, travel anxiety and post-COVID travel intention are integrated into a same theoretical landscape. This is significant as it not only embraces travel consumers’ real-time travel psychology (i.e., travel desire and travel anxiety) during the COVID-19 pandemic [3] but also attempts to interpret such psychology and subsequent behavioral intention by considering their social media experience (cognitive absorption) during the pandemic. The proposed research framework specifically aims to answer the following two research questions.

RQ1: How does cognitive absorption interact with tourists’ travel anxiety and travel desire during the pandemic and further affect post-COVID travel intention?

RQ2: Can the association in RQ1 be different in the contexts of domestic and international travel settings?

2 Literature Review

2.1 Hypothesis Development

Travel Anxiety, Desire, and Intention. As a state of tension and worry, anxiety is considered a negative psychological response to stress, risk, and unknown consequences, making it a key contributing factor to human behavior [1]. Because travel behavior is inherently risky and unfamiliar, people tend to make decisions after evaluating travel

risks [1]. Of which, health risks from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic have increased uncertainty of travel behavior and heightened people's negative emotions such as anxiety and fear about travel [4]. Travel anxiety is deemed to be an emotion leading to a reduction in individuals' travel desires [3]. Several researchers have experimentally revealed the suppressive effect of travel anxiety on travel desires in various pandemic-related travel contexts [3, 12].

Pandemic-related contents on social media during the outbreak are thought to alter travelers' perceptions of risk, attitudes, and behaviors [13]. Negative media information may trigger travelers' fear and anxiety, while positive social media engagement may buffer the psychological distress to temper travelers' anxiety [14]. Travel anxiety is considered to predict for some protective behaviors, such as cautionary travel and the avoidance of travel [4]. An increase in anxiety can result in individuals to adopt cautious or avoidant behavior to reduce travel risk [3, 4]. In general, travel intention and perceived safety decrease when travel anxiety increases [15].

Desire and intention are similar but different. Desire is the motivation and goals of actions, while the intention is the initial commitment to perform actions [16]. Thus, intention has a clearer timeframe and stronger relevance to specific behaviors than the desire [17]. People will not make the commitment to take action if they lack desire [18]. In tourism literature, aroused travel desire was found to have a strong impact on people's travel intention [16, 19]. Hence, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1. Travel Anxiety inhibits Travel Desire.

H2. Travel Anxiety negatively influences Post-COVID Travel Intention.

H3. Travel Desire positively influences Post-COVID Travel Intention.

Cognitive Absorption and Travel Anxiety. Cognitive absorption first appeared in information-system related literature. Defined as a kind of deep involvement state while using information systems, cognitive absorption was extended by Agarwal and Karahanna [9] from three concepts: the state of flow, the trait of absorption, and cognitive engagement. In recent years, cognitive absorption has also been used in the tourism literature. Recent research ascertained that deep involvement in virtual tours creates enjoyment, engagement, and satisfaction, which also reduces users' perceived stress towards the pandemic [11]. Travelers who are planning to visit unknown locations are thought to experience anxiety [20]. Especially during the pandemic, the crowdedness, sanitation, and the uncertainty about the destination may accentuate individuals' feelings of anxiety and concern about the bad consequences of the trip [21]. In the state of cognitive absorption, as individuals' self-efficacy increases and their cognitive load decreases, which in turn enables individuals to get more information about the destination and help to generate a real and clear destination image [20, 22]. Such process is generally considered helpful in alleviating travel anxiety about the unknown risks [20]. Thus, the following was proposed.

H4. Cognitive Absorption has an anxiety-relieving effect.

Cognitive Absorption, Travel Desire, and Intention. Previous studies have confirmed that media content can increase people's knowledge of the destination and familiarity with the destination; it can also escalate satisfaction with the destination-related media experiences, increase the desire to visit the place, as well as heighten people's

travel intention [16]. Meanwhile, the deeply involved immersive state while interacting with the destination-related media content can further promote users’ enjoyment, engagement, and satisfaction [11]. Similarly, entertainment also plays a vital role in predicting users’ satisfaction with media experiences [16]. In other words, in the state of cognitive absorption, heightened enjoyment is more likely to lead to positive attitudes toward the overall media experiences. Therefore, this study hypothesizes that the cognitive absorption while interacting with destination-related short-form videos can positively affect the desire and intention to visit a said destination.

H5. Cognitive Absorption has a Travel Desire-arousing effect.

H6. Cognitive Absorption positively affects Post-COVID Travel Intention.

Based on the above hypotheses, the research model of this study was developed, as shown in Fig. 1.

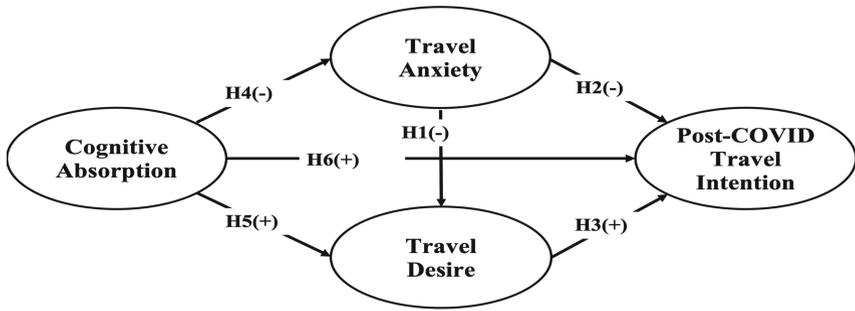


Fig. 1. Research model.

2.2 The Measurement of Cognitive Absorption

It is still inconclusive in current studies on establishing a measurement scale for cognitive absorption [9, 23]. Cognitive absorption was originally devised as a multi-dimensional concept, including five subdimensions: Temporal Dissociation (TD), Focused Immersion (FI), Heightened Enjoyment (HE), Control (CL), and Curiosity (CU) [9]. However, some researchers take a different view, such as Burton-Jones and Straub [23]. They argued that although cognitive absorption is regarded as a second-order reflex structure, focused immersion is the only substructure of cognitive absorption “measured with items that referred to being absorbed” [23, p.237]. To “balance completeness with parsimony”, it is justified and appropriate to use five measurement items of FI instead of using all 17 measurement items of cognitive absorption [23, p.234, 237]. This study opts to follow Burton-Jones and Straub’s [23] suggestion and measure cognitive absorption based on FI.

3 Methodology

3.1 Data Collection and Analysis

A web-based survey was conducted in August 2022 with the assistance of a market research firm in Mainland China. The survey only recruited informants who reported having watched destination-related short-form videos in the previous 12 months. Two sets of questionnaires were prepared, with scenarios distinguishing between different contexts of domestic and international travel desire and post-COVID travel intention (see Table 2). Respondents were further asked to recall the most impressive destination they watched recently, and the type of destination (domestic or international). A questionnaire was then automatically assigned based on the destination information answered by the respondent. Measurements were all adapted from existing studies (cognitive absorption [9, 23], travel anxiety [3, 15], travel desire [24], post-COVID travel intention [24]). A semantic differential scale was used to measure the items of travel anxiety (see Table 2). The remaining items were all evaluated on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

The measurement model and structural model were assessed through the partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) with the PLS algorithm and bootstrapping (5000 subsamples) techniques. PLS-SEM was chosen because it has fewer requirements for data normality and residual distribution, and it is more appropriate for predictive research such as the current study [25].

4 Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

A total of 477 and 392 valid samples were yielded from the domestic and international destination-based surveys, respectively. As shown in Table 1, approximately 70% of the respondents in both groups were in their 20s and 30s, which is in accordance with the proportion of Douyin's major users [26], makes the data even more relevant.

Table 1. Demographics of respondents.

Characteristics		Dom. (<i>n</i> = 477)		Int. (<i>n</i> = 392)	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	176	37%	134	34.2%
	Female	301	63%	258	65.8%
Age	17–23	62	13%	76	19.4%
	24–30	271	56.8%	223	56.9%
	31–40	119	24.9%	76	19.4%
	Above 41	25	5.2%	17	4.3%

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Characteristics		Dom. (n = 477)		Int. (n = 392)	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Occupation	Students	124	26%	131	33%
	Enterprises	279	58.5%	191	49%
	Administrative institutions	49	10.3%	43	11%
	Self-employed / Freelance	16	3.4%	17	4%
	Others	9	1.9%	10	2%

4.2 Measurement Model

The reliability and validity of the measurement model were tested by factor loadings, Cronbach’s alpha, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE). As presented in Table 2, except for one item in Model Dom. (*I was immersed in the task I was performing*), all indicator loadings were higher than the recommended threshold of 0.70 [25]. The values of Cronbach’s alpha and CR all exceeded 0.70 (Model Dom.: 0.719–0.926; Model Int.: 0.860–0.921), indicating acceptable construct reliability [25]. The values of AVE also turned out to be greater than the threshold of 0.50 suggested by Hair et al. [25] (Model Dom.: 0.542–0.818; Model Int.: 0.703–0.809). Given that both internal consistency reliability and convergent validity were achieved, the item with relatively lower loading (0.644) was thus retained [25]. The heterotrait–monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) was further employed to gauge the discriminant validity. The highest value of the HTMT across the two groups is lower than the stipulated value of 0.85 recommended by Henseler et al. [27] (Model Dom.: 0.479; Model Int.: 0.427), indicating satisfied discriminant validity.

Table 2. Measurement model for constructs.

Construct and item	Loading		Mean		SD	
	Dom.	Int.	Dom.	Int.	Dom.	Int.
<i>Cognitive Absorption (CA)</i>						
I was able to block out most other distractions	0.796	0.779	5.461	5.339	0.775	0.866
I was absorbed in what I was doing	0.792	0.828	6.006	5.827	0.815	0.892
I was immersed in the task I was performing	0.644	0.746	5.950	5.724	0.815	0.884
I got distracted by other attention very easily	0.828	0.837	5.688	5.477	0.893	0.947
My attention did not get diverted very easily	0.780	0.802	5.532	5.383	0.872	0.972
<i>Travel Anxiety (TA)</i>						

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Construct and item	Loading		Mean		SD	
	Dom.	Int.	Dom.	Int.	Dom.	Int.
Calm – Worried	0.876	0.883	3.650	5.240	1.633	1.423
Relaxed – Tense	0.924	0.892	3.713	5.509	1.749	1.434
Peaceful – Panicked	0.951	0.917	3.216	5.212	1.531	1.482
Comfortable – Frustrated	0.903	0.880	3.252	4.620	1.582	1.411
<i>Travel Desire (TDS)</i>						
I would like to do domestic/international travel in the near future	0.884	0.891	5.551	5.592	1.166	0.972
I am enthusiastic about domestic/international traveling in the near future	0.875	0.909	5.671	4.620	1.218	1.339
I hope to do domestic/international travel in the near future	0.866	0.917	5.964	5.176	1.159	1.234
I am eager to do domestic/international travel in the near future	0.817	0.880	5.901	5.240	1.103	1.261
<i>Post-Covid Travel Intention (PCTI)</i>						
I plan to do domestic/international travel after COVID-19	0.798	0.871	6.101	5.578	0.836	1.079
I will make an effort to do domestic/international travel after COVID-19	0.718	0.841	6.132	5.829	0.830	1.039
I have an intention to do domestic/international travel after COVID-19	0.715	0.864	6.314	5.995	0.737	1.010
I am willing to do domestic/international travel after COVID-19	0.710	0.833	6.363	6.031	0.750	0.939

4.3 Structural Model Evaluation and Hypothesis Testing

Built upon the sufficient reliability and validity of constructs, the structural model was further evaluated. The values of standardized root mean residual (SRMR) of the two models were lower than the recommended criterion of 0.08 (Model_{Dom.}: 0.058; Model_{Int.}: 0.052) [27]. The inner and outer values of variance inflation factor (VIF) across two groups were less than 5, eliminating issues of multicollinearity [25]. Blindfolding test was also applied to calculate the values of Stone-Gaiser's Q^2 for endogenous constructs. Results showed that the Q^2 values in both groups exceeded the requirement of zero (Model_{Dom.}: 0.023–0.051; Model_{Int.}: 0.002–0.164), indicating good predictive relevance [25]. As for the effect sizes (f^2), the cut-off points at 0.01, 0.06, and 0.14 are regarded as small, medium, and large, respectively [28]. As shown in Table 3, the domestic group received relatively acceptable effect size values (from small to large), whereas, in the international group, three out of six paths' effect sizes were detected as unacceptable. Yet it is still reasonable considering the influences of insignificant paths

[29]. R^2 values ranging from 0.02 to 0.12, 0.13 to 0.25, 0.26 and greater are described as weak, moderate, and substantial [30]. Across two groups, travel desire and post-COVID travel intention demonstrated moderate explanation power, whereas R^2 values of travel anxiety were relatively weak (see Table 3).

Table 3. Results of hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis	Model _{Dom.}				Model _{Int.}			
	β	<i>t</i> -Value	f^2	Result	β	<i>t</i> -Value	f^2	Result
H1. TA → TDS	-0.419	11.563***	0.216	Yes	-0.396	11.429***	0.187	Yes
H2. TA → PCTI	0.2000	4.835***	0.037	No	0.085	2.22*	0.009	No
H3. TDS → PCTI	0.355	7.440***	0.118	Yes	0.465	10.702***	0.246	Yes
H4. CA → TA	-0.168	3.801***	0.030	Yes	-0.058	1.103 ^{ns}	0.006	No
H5. CA → TDS	0.315	3.108**	0.024	Yes	0.057	0.995 ^{ns}	0.001	No
H6. CA → PCTI	0.202	3.995***	0.038	Yes	0.179	3.155**	0.041	Yes
	R^2				R^2			
TA	2.9%				0.6%			
TDS	21.4%				16.0%			
PCTI	15.4%				23.5%			

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, ns = non-significant. β = Standardised regression weight. f^2 = Effect sizes. TA = Travel anxiety, TDS = Travel desire, PCTI = post-COVID travel intention, CA = Cognitive absorption. Yes = Supported, No = Unsupported.

The results of hypothesis testing are presented in Table 3. In the domestic group, most of the hypotheses were accepted except H2. However, three out of six hypotheses in the international group were rejected. To uncover whether the results of the two groups are statistically and significantly different, multigroup analysis (MGA) was also applied. Before the procedure of MGA, the measurement invariance of composites method (MICOM) consisting of three-step testing (the configural invariance, compositional invariance assessment, and equality of composite mean values and variances.) was conducted [31]. The combined data successfully fulfilled step 1 and step 2, indicating the establishment of partial measurement invariance. Thus, the MGA was administered. Results showed that only H2 (TA → PCTI) was attested to be significantly different ($\beta_{Dom.} = 0.199$, $\beta_{Int.} = 0.085$, $t_{|Dom. - Int.|} = 2.297$, $p < 0.05$).

5 Discussion

5.1 Conclusion

Impacts of Cognitive Absorption. The results have revealed that the cognitive absorption of destination-related short-form videos positively affects people’s post-COVID travel intention in both domestic and international tourism situations. In addition, the

results show that cognitive absorption of domestic destination-related contents not only relieve domestic travel anxiety but also stimulate the desire to travel to the domestic destination during the pandemic. Conversely, the effects of cognitive absorption on travel anxiety and travel desire in the international data group were not verified, unexpectedly. Although the differences between these two pathways failed to confirm in the MGA procedure, such results still make sense especially given the relatively high travel anxiety and low travel desire in the international data group (see mean values in Table 2). Especially during the data collection, Chinese people are still placed under the government's rigorous ban on 'non-essential' international travel [32] and a series of long-term citywide lockdowns resulting from the emerging virus variant [33]. These situations are likely to have depleted tourists' travel desires and confidence in international travel, curbed the impact of media experiences, and hence such results.

Higher Anxiety and Higher Intention. The most striking finding resides in that travel anxiety could significantly boost post-COVID travel intention across the two data sets. A plausible reason for this result might be linked to the potential pent-up travel demands caused by COVID-induced anxiety and stress [3]. This is rational, particularly in light of the significant inhibiting effect of travel anxiety on travel desire during the pandemic (H1). As predicted by several tourism scholars that once the green light for travel is given by the government, the potential travel demand, which is suppressed by anxiety for a long time, will escalate people's travel intentions exponentially [3]. In fact, revenge travel has exactly been observed in some European and American countries in the middle of 2022, where COVID-related travel restrictions have dropped [34].

Make Up for Lost Time by Starting "Nearby". The significant effect yielded from the MGA is also noteworthy. The impact of travel anxiety on post-COVID travel intention was found to be significantly stronger in the domestic group, denoting that the respondents prefer to do domestic travel to release their pent-up demands post-COVID. This result is also consistent with the new trend of "travel nearby" as indicated by some scholars [35]. Although the quarantine and social distancing during the pandemic are suggested to motivate individuals to go outside and meet others in post-COVID-19 [36], the long-term persistence of the pandemic may solidify some of the behaviors of people, such as choosing familiar destinations or routes to reduce health-threatening fears while travelling in post-COVID-19 context [35, 37]. Furthermore, factors such as tourist xenophobia, tourist ethnocentrism, continued de-globalization, and regionalism may make international travel more expensive and less hospitable, which may deter tourists in the post-COVID-19 era [35, 38]. Besides, during the early stages of the post-pandemic period, the restoration of daily life and work is considered the first priority [36], as social and economic uncertainty and time shortages are likely to influence travelers' decisions as tourism constraints, potentially causing tourists to choose destinations close to home rather than long distances [39, 40].

5.2 Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study is one of the first to apply cognitive absorption theory to the context of destination-related short-form videos and interweaved users' short-form video experiences with the travel psychology in the context of the pandemic. It empirically verified

that cognitive absorption acts as a key trigger during the interaction with destination-related short videos and plays a predictive role in travel decision-making, such as users’ travel intention to a destination. The findings enriched the knowledge framework of cognitive absorption while filling a gap in existing research on the role of cognitive absorption in predicting tourists’ dynamic travel psychology (i.e., travel desire and travel anxiety) and behavioral intention within different travel settings during the pandemic. More importantly, this study has identified the paradoxical psychology of potential travel consumers (i.e., travel anxiety significantly contributes to higher post-COVID travel intention), providing an angle for future studies to positively interpret potential tourists’ travel anxiety post-COVID. Furthermore, although this study only focused on Chinese users of Douyin, considering the similar functionality of Douyin and TikTok, the findings have also offered a theoretical framework for other short-form video researchers to understand how users’ app usage experience can interact with their consumption psychology and behavioral intention.

Based on the results, this study suggests that practitioners of domestic destinations should catch on to the travel psychology of tourists and make the best use of short-form video platforms to promote their destinations. For example, introducing the destination’s pandemic prevention strategies and hygiene regulations through short video content to reduce people’s risk perception of the destination.

Meanwhile, tourism managers should also recognize the underlying opportunities for short-haul international travel (the proximal extension of domestic travel) in the near future. Particularly, practitioners are suggested to embark on the preparation for the “return” of tourists from neighboring countries and regions in the end of the COVID. In line with this, destination marketers should also take an early step to communicate well with destination stakeholders and work on establishing a hospitable destination atmosphere. To further amplify the positive impacts of cognitive absorption, short-form video platforms are suggested to collaborate with overseas destination institutions or travel influencers by promoting relevant professional content with an accurate recommendation algorithm. Together with this, the decentralized characteristics of Douyin’s special algorithm could also be leveraged to push overseas high-quality travel content posted by grassroots users.

5.3 Limitations and Future Studies

Several limitations need to be further addressed in future studies.

First, this study explores on the benefits of cognitive absorption and without looking at the drawbacks such as fatigue and media anxiety. Future studies are recommended to delve into the negative effects of cognitive absorption on tourists’ desire, anxiety, and behavioral intention. Second, there was no specific domestic or international destination designated in this study. Particularly, the number of infections and the disease prevention policy could vary in different countries or regions [3], making tourists’ levels of perceived risk and anxiety distinct. Also, as discussed earlier, even in the same international travel scope, tourists’ travel desires and intentions could fluctuate by the sense of distance. Thus, future studies are recommended to compare the effects of cognitive absorption while interacting with the content of a specific destination (short-haul vs. long-haul).

Last but not the least, the measure of cognitive absorption is insufficient, calling for a scientific measurement development in future studies.

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