Standing with our hometowns? The relationship between residents' perceived threat from COVID- 19 and intention to support tourism recovery in their hometown

Yan Liu[a], XinYue Cao[a], Xavier Font [b,c],, XingPing Cao[a*]

[a.] Business and Tourism School, Sichuan Agricultural University, Dujiangyan, China.

[b.] School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, University of Surrey, UK

[c] School of Business and Economics, UiT. The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, Norway

Authors' Information:

[a.] Yan Liu, Business and Tourism School, Sichuan Agricultural University, Dujiangyan, China. Email: liuyan@sicau.edu.cn

[a.] Xinyue Cao, Business and Tourism School, Sichuan Agricultural University, Dujiangyan, Sichuan 611830, China. Email: caoxinyue_11@outlook.com

[b, c.] Xavier Font, School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, University of Surrey, UK. Email: x.font@surrey.ac.uk; School of Business and Economics, UiT. The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, Norway.

[a*.] XingPing Cao, Business and Tourism School, Sichuan Agricultural University, Dujiangyan, China. Email: cxp@sicau.edu.cn (Corresponding author)

Abstract: Someone's hometown is the place to which they have an affective bond as a result of having been born there or having lived there for a long time. This article investigates people's intentions to support the revival of tourism in their hometown post COVID-19. We hypothesise that individuals are affected by the threat to ontological security, freedom of movement, and freedom of information, and this synthetic threat will affect their intention to support their hometown. Based on compensatory control theory and psychological reactance theory, we study how the need to belong, combined with psychological reactance, reveal the underlying mechanisms of perceived threat on hometown support intention. We analysed survey responses from 658 residents in China using a structural equation model. The results showed that the perceived threat has a positive effect on hometown support intention and their need to belong mediates that relationship. Instead, despite perceived threats to their freedoms, residents did not report psychological reactance when faced with hometown appeals. These results could help destinations to revive in the post-pandemic era; destination management organisations, especially in China, should be able to appeal to residents for

promotional support without expecting psychological reactance.

Keywords: intention to support hometown, perceived threat, need to belong, psychological reactance

1. Introduction

The restriction of free movement that resulted from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic had a pernicious effect on economic activity, especially tourism (Gössling et al., 2020; Pérez-Urrestarazu et al., 2021; Williams & Kayaoglu, 2020). By May 2021, COVID-19 was largely controlled in China (L. Miao et al., 2021) and people's lives had begun to return to their pre-pandemic routines and they had returned to spending their holidays travelling (Ecns.cn, 2021b). In the relatively safe situation of that time, domestic travel was already being encouraged by the government. The recovery of the visitor economy was an urgent priority for destination management organisations (DMOs) and for residents of tourism destinations who relied on the tourism industry as a source of income (Singh et al., 2022). In 2021, a boy named Ding Zhen endorsed his hometown online so ingeniously and successfully that it resulted in a travel boom to his county and led a trend in "appealing to people for hometown support" (Ecns.cn, 2020). As a result, several DMOs and local governments developed "Support your hometown" slogans and marketing campaigns that were designed to encourage residents to help them regain market demand and tourism revenue.

Someone's hometown is defined as a place where the individual was born or where they have lived for a long time. What makes a place a hometown is not its size, but the affective bond that it has on an individual (Huang et al., 2018). Young people tend to consider a hometown to be as small as a village or a town, yet, as they grow up, they may expand the perceived boundary of their hometown to include a city, a country or even a continent due to the various people they have bonds with (Huang et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2020). The words of residents (both those who lived there in the past and those who live there now) are perceived to be authentic and trustworthy, thanks to their detailed first-hand knowledge of the destination (their hometown), which makes them could be powerful ambassadors for the destination (Chancellor et al., 2021; Strandberg & Styvén, 2020; Zenker et al., 2017). Recognising this fact, DMOs appeal to residents saying: "Support your

hometown", "Your hometown needs you", "Endorse your hometown". The DMOs encourage residents to recommend, or invite, other people to visit their hometown by arousing their affective feelings of hometown and encouraging them to take responsibility for tourism recovery.

The current research aims to explore residents' response to the appeals to support one's hometown in the post-pandemic era and tries to answer to which extent these appeals work. It is important to understand how the pandemic has affected individuals' mental state and behaviours, to appreciate how previous assumptions of what determines behaviours are no longer valid in the post-pandemic era (Chirumbolo et al., 2021; Karatas et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020)(L. Miao et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2021). We suggest that people are still affected by three dimensions of threat: a threat to ontological security, a threat to freedom of information and a threat to freedom of movement, which have an effect on their intention to support hometown. Firstly, ontological security describes the degree to which people feel their world, and role within it, is secure and predictable (Campbell et al., 2020).The uncertainty caused by COVID-19 has created anxiety (Stewart, 2020; Xie et al., 2021) and concerns about a new pandemic outbreak that would threat their ontological security. Secondly, forced self-isolation, lockdowns, the suspension of overseas group tours and other similar restrictions all threaten people's freedom of movement. Thirdly, the hometown support appeals to residents may be subject to the same "boomerang effect" that has made individuals ignore the relentless messages to prevent COVID-19 transmission (Dillard & Shen, 2005; Kang et al., 2021; Prasetyo et al., 2020).

From the perspective of compensatory control theory and psychological reactance theory, this article asserts this three-dimensional threat has an effect on individuals' intention to support tourism in their hometown. On the one hand, based on compensatory control theory, we argue that an individual's hometown can provide them with a group identity and the close connection that they need (Li & Xu, 2016). The threat to an individuals' ontological security, freedom of movement and freedom of information usually brings about the lack of sense of control and further positively motivates the basic human need to belong (X. Miao et al., 2021), which, in turn, leads them to be more willing to support one's hometown. On the other hand, the appeals to support one's hometown might induce psychological reactance, which is a mental state whereby an individual is keen to recover the freedom from which they were deprived or that was threatened (Brehm & Brehm, 1981).

Furthermore, since all dimensions of a perceived threat also restrict one's freedoms (e.g., of planning, movements and decisions), we argue that overloading restrictions to one's freedom may make appeals for hometown support act as punch bags for people to alleviate the psychological reactance caused by a perceived threat, explaining their negative attitude to hometown support.

Previous researchers usually focus on a single type of threat affecting individuals, such as self-threat (Choi et al., 2019), threat of scarcity (Cannon et al., 2019), threat of ontological security (Xu et al., 2020), or view the threat of COVID-19 as a single and whole one (Anjum et al., 2020; Kavaklı et al., 2020). We propose three specific threats resulting from the pandemic, however, the ubiquity of threats resulting from this pandemic means that researchers need to consider multiple threats as co-existing and intertwined, recognising that people cannot make a specific response to a single, isolated threat. Therefore, this study tests how this three-dimensional perceived threat influences people's intentions in a post-pandemic era to support their hometown's tourism recovery.

This study contributes to the threat-related literature with knowledge about compensation strategies and mental mechanism, framed in the compensatory control theory and psychological reactance theory. Although restrictions to travel resulting from the pandemic varied across countries, we argue that the knowledge gained from this study may help other destinations as part of their strategies to recover their tourism trade.

2. Literature review and development of hypotheses

2.1 Perceived threats in the post-pandemic era

COVID-19 has left a legacy of psychological problems worldwide (Anjum et al., 2020; Kavaklı et al., 2020) resulting from the multi-layered threats that relate to the risk of infection, inadequate supplies, inadequate information, social relationship crises and financial losses (Brooks et al., 2020; Campbell et al., 2020). Many studies have also found that threats from the pandemic shake people's intention to travel, by raising their risk perception (Im et al., 2021; Ojo et al., 2022; Xie et al., 2021; Zhan et al., 2020), anxiety (Li et al., 2021) and negative affect (Chua et al., 2020). However, this list is not exhaustive and how these threats overlay one another is still not fully understood (Chirumbolo et al., 2021; Foroudi et al., 2021; Kavaklı et al., 2020; Park et al., 2021). In this study, we have developed a synthetic measure of threat that is composed of three contributing factors, namely, the threat to an individual's ontological security, freedom of movement and freedom of

information, which are people basically perceived and might affect their intention to support the tourism in hometown under the post-pandemic era, as outlined next.

First, the pandemic threatens individuals' *ontological security* (Haney & Gray-Scholz, 2020), which is defined as "the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of their social and material environments" (Giddens, 1990). In other words, ontological security is someone's confidence and trust that the world is predictable and secure (Hawkins & Maurer, 2011; Phipps & Ozanne, 2017). The concept of ontological security has been widely applied in research on international relations, for example Zarakol (2017) and Narozhna (2018). In 2017, Phipps and Ozanne initially introduced the concept of ontological security into the field of marketing and discussed how consumers re-establish their ontological security after it has been threatened. Ontological security points out that once taken-for-granted routines are disrupted, people's ontological security is threatened (Phipps & Ozanne, 2017). The pandemic has had a profound impact on people's lives and routines, including, for example, not being able to meet others without wearing a mask, not holding a party without restrictions, and not travelling without following strict plague prevention measures. The fluctuating number of COVID-19 cases and worrying SARS-CoV-2 variants (WHO, 2021) have undermined people's beliefs that the world and circumstances are predictable; a fundamental premise of the concept of ontological security (Giddens, 1984).

Otherwise, in the post-pandemic era, prevention of cases and control of the pandemic remain of primary importance to governments, which, inevitably, increases individuals' perceptions of the existence of the threat to freedom of information and movement. Preventative measures and appeals (that act as suggestive information) activate the *threat to freedom of information* and the *threat to freedom of movement* concomitantly. The threat to freedom of information mostly comes from suggestive and instructive information, which serves to make individuals feel manipulated. In contrast, the threat to freedom of movement more explicitly relates to limitations on the range of movements or actions that people are permitted to undertake. Ranging from daily life to tourism activities, at the time of writing, there remain numerous restrictions to movements and actions. To control the spread of the virus, health institutes appeal to individuals to follow regulations to protect themselves and others by using masks, maintaining physical distancing and regular hand washing

(Prasetyo et al., 2020). In terms of tourism, many countries continue to have restrictions on in-bound and out-bound travel, such as forced isolation, or lockdowns, which bring about threats to individuals' freedom to travel (L. Miao et al., 2021). Except movement restrictions, those appeals like physical distancing or hand washing are considered as the threat to freedom of information for the suggestive purpose. Faced with threats to both freedom of movement and freedom of information, some people respond by ignoring appeals and health guidelines (Kang et al., 2021; Ringold, 2002).

At this juncture, governments that are eager to put local economies back on their feet have started to appeal, fervently, for hometown support, including encouraging residents to promote others to travel to their hometowns for leisure purposes. However, the appeals might become a "punch bag" for those individuals who are struggling to reinstate a sense of control over their own lives, with the result that they might ignore or reject such appeals (Shoenberger et al., 2021). We argue that there are mainly three dimensions of threat existing in the post-pandemic era that may be challenged by these hometown support appeals: threat to ontological security, threat to freedom of movement and threat to freedom of information.

2.2 Compensatory control theory and psychological reactance theory

Faced with the three-dimensional threat, according to compensatory control theory and psychological reactance theory, individuals tend to adopt control compensatory strategies and act to recover the lost freedom.

Compensatory control theory explains that individuals are motivated to perceive that they possess personal control for the sake of defending against perceptions of randomness and chaos within the social environment (Kay et al., 2008). In other words, people require a consistent level of perceived control, otherwise, the anxiety driven by the lack of control will lead them to seek for psychological compensation (Kay et al., 2009), such as showing a preference to something orderly, certain, or predictable (Kay et al., 2008; Kay et al., 2009; Landau et al., 2015). This is well exemplified in the now well-known phenomenon of hoarding food after public emergencies has proved it (Tingting et al., 2022). We propose that the familiarity and stability given by someone's hometown will bring a sense of control to individuals.

Furthermore, according to psychological reactance theory, when people perceive a threat to

their freedom, they are motivated to recover that freedom by changing their attitudes or behaviours (Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Quick & Stephenson, 2007). Threats to freedom can result as response to behaviours from individuals or organizations, but also including impersonal events like bad weather (Dillard & Shen, 2005). Post-pandemic restrictions and appeals like health guidelines have been found to activate people's psychological reactance and bring about the "boomerang effect" which makes individuals ignore them (Kang et al., 2021; Prasetyo et al., 2020).

2.3 Perceived threat and intention to one's hometown

To revive tourism post-pandemic, it is important to investigate both people's travel intention (Chua et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021; Ojo et al., 2022), and also residents' intention to support tourism. Much recent research on residents' intention to support tourism is based on emotional solidarity theory and the theory of planned behaviour (Erul & Woosnam, 2021; Erul et al., 2020). While Joo et al. (2021) found that perceived risk from the pandemic has a negative effect on residents' support for tourism, Woosnam et al. (2021) found it to have an insignificant effect, possibly owing to residents' hunger for tourists. Hence it is necessary to further explore residents' intention to support tourism post-pandemic. Xie et al. (2021) found that individuals who have empathy with suffered groups in tourism during the pandemic will show a stronger intention to travel. Similarly, we suggest the perceived threat will activate people's willingness to support their hometown, resulting from the emotional bond between them and their hometown.

The threat to an individual's ontological security makes that person lose their faith in the world as being predictable, which is based on controllable daily routines (Campbell et al., 2020). In other words, when an individual's ontological security is threatened, they conceive the world to be out of control. Similarly, the threat to freedom of movement and freedom of information lead people to the conclusion that they have limited decision-making and are losing control of their quality of life (Zhang et al., 2021). Specifically, suggestive information often makes individuals feel manipulated, while movement restrictions narrow down one's leisure choices. Therefore, people perceive the threats to their freedom of information and movement as manifestations of their loss of control.

According to compensatory control theory, people facing a loss of control are motivated to take compensatory control strategies (Kay et al., 2008; Kay et al., 2009), driven by a state of anxiety and uncertainty (Kay et al., 2009). Studies on threats to ontological security (Gustafsson & Krickel-Choi,

2020; Park et al., 2021) and freedom (Akhtar et al., 2020) verify that, at the threatening state, people are inclined to suffer negative emotions such as anxiety. While under the influence of those threats, support to one's hometown, by endorsing or recommending it to tourists, can act as a form of anxiety alleviation. The internal image we have of our hometown is generally that of a safe and comforting place, a refuge in times of perceived risk (Huang et al., 2018). As "the last safe haven", one's hometown possesses the characteristics of familiarity, safety and controllability (Morgan, 2010), and, therefore, can be part of one's control compensation regulation. Supporting one's hometown might lead to social approval from other hometown people, which enhances one's coping resource to deal with loss of control (Lin et al., 2015). Thus, we argue that a perceived threat activates an individual's intention to support their hometown and we hypothesise that:

H_1: An individual's perceived threat has a positive effect on their intention to support tourism recovery in their hometown.

2.4 The mediating roles of the need to belong and psychological reactance

Need to belong refers to "the desire for acceptance and belonging" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary et al., 2013). From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, limits to personal power mean that individuals attempt to cope with threats by seeking reciprocity with others (Gintis et al., 2003; Higgins, 2008). For example, people cooperate more when they are confronted with a shared threat like an earthquake, as a disaster provokes people's need for social connection, acceptance and belonging (Rao et al., 2011). This need impels people to be sensitive to interpersonal cues that help them to uphold social connection (Pickett et al., 2004).

The fact of having been born, or having grown up, in a place is the source of numerous and deep interactions with that hometown (Brown et al., 2003; Xu et al., 2020). A person's hometown is invested with safe and sound memories, and, therefore, possesses the function of comforting them and lessening their anxieties (Schembri et al., 2010; Xu et al., 2020). Spending a long time in one's hometown breeds a strong attachment with that place (Dwyer et al., 2019; Morgan, 2010). Place attachment to one's hometown foster one's identity, self-esteem, and sense of belonging (Zou et al., 2021), which might result in a greater intention to support tourism to that hometown, such as ambassador behaviours (Chen & Dwyer, 2017). In marketing, there is evidence of people purchasing brands that promote belonging to their hometown, with those brands tapping into a sense of

familiarity, affiliation and collective link to the place (Brown et al., 2003; Schembri et al., 2010). As a symbol for people to maintain intimate contact with their origins, hometown brands often play a role in expressing individuals' attachments and sense of belonging to their hometown (Huang et al., 2018). Accordingly, we argue that when people are threatened, the need to belong is activated and it drives their intention to support their hometown. We hypothesise that:

H_2: A perceived threat has a positive effect on an individual's need to belong.

H_3: An individual's need to belong has a positive effect on their intention to support their hometown.

H_4: An individual's need to belong positively mediates the relationship between a perceived threat and their intention to support their hometown.

Conversely, *psychological reactance* triggered by a perceived threat might result in a block to the hometown support appeal. The precarious pandemic situation has threatened people's ontological security and, subsequently, has left people feeling that they have lost their freedoms, in terms of living routinely and planning their futures. The restrictions and prohibitions control people's movements and play noteworthy roles in generating people's perceived threat to freedom of movement (Kang et al., 2021). Similarly, the instructive information they have been subjected to makes people feel obliged to comply, and threaten to freedom of information which would be counterproductive (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Kang et al., 2021).

Influenced by the "boomerang effect" of psychological reactance, individuals display their response to the threat cognitively or behaviourally (He et al., 2016). However, even if individuals want to resist the threat, or to gain some freedom, they are still limited in their behaviour by their context; in the case of COVID-19, the pandemic is uncontrollable and one person cannot make it go away. Because breaking the prevention restrictions set by society is socially undesirable, individuals may instead choose to display their reactance by not engaging in other socially beneficial activities, such as endorsing hometown support appeals. Accordingly, we propose the following hypotheses:

H_5: An individual's perceived threat has a positive effect on their psychological reactance.

H_6: An individual's psychological reactance has a negative effect on their intention to support their hometown.

H_7: Psychological reactance negatively mediates the relationship between perceived threat and intention to support one's hometown.

Figure 1 shows the research model for the seven proposed hypotheses.

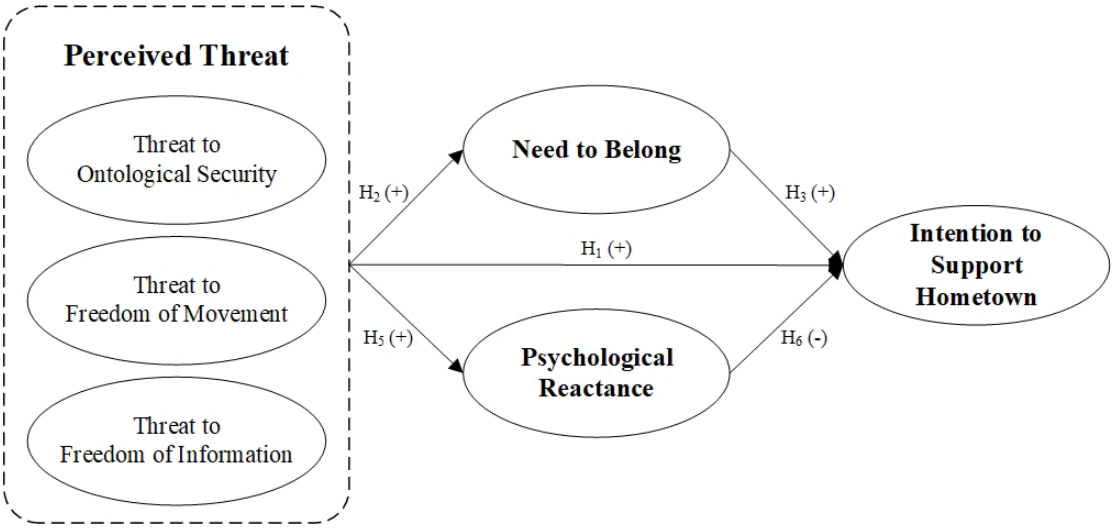

Figure 1: Research Model

3 Methodology

3.1 Background

This study was conducted in mainland China in April 2021. At that time, China possessed a comparatively optimistic pandemic outlook with few local, new, confirmed cases. To take precautions against further spread of the disease, while keeping people's lives as normal as possible, a set of public rules existed, such as wearing masks in public places and regularly displaying one's "pandemic prevention health information code"; the latter was a type of digital, green certificate that people were required to show to be permitted to enter public establishments, similar to the "Pass Sanitaire" in France. People could freely access public places in areas that weren't classed as high risk but they had to keep away from high-risk areas with reported covid cases. If a person travelled to a high-risk area, this would make their individual health information code turn red when scanned, resulting in entry refusal. Regularly having to display their health pass was tiresome and required people to plan ahead to ensure they had their smartphone with them, with sufficient power as well. However, such preventive measures afforded a gradual return to normality for Chinese citizens. Almost all tourism destinations in mainland China were rebounding, and DMOs aimed to revitalise

their tourism industries (Ecns.cn, 2021a). Some destinations chose to explicitly appeal to people to support their hometowns by visiting them for their holidays, with DMOs targeting locals on social media to become destination ambassadors with slogans like "Endorse your hometown" and "Recommend your hometown" (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Two example slogans of appeals to support hometowns

3.2 Measures

The measures adopted by this study are adapted from English originals. We followed a procedure of translation-back-translation by two English majors, following convention (Brislin, 1976). Next, we invited three professors and five postgraduates who majored in marketing and tourism management to adapt items suitable for the Chinese context and research theme. The measurements for *threat to ontological security* were derived by combining three previous studies (Callejo, 2016; Cui et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2020) and by adapting three items to the context, e.g., "I feel that the society, material and living environment around me are in an unstable state". We defined *threat to freedom of movement* by adapting three items from Dillard and Shen (2005) for tourism, such as "The pandemic forced me to cancel my travel plans", "The pandemic threatened my freedom to choose destinations" and "The pandemic has deprived me of many choices, such as I almost must choose domestic destinations". The measures of *threat to freedom of information* were adapted from Wang and Cheng (2013) with two items, for example "Those information are trying to convince me to make the decisions for hometown support". To measure the *need to belong*, we adapted three items from Leary et al. (2013), such as "If people from hometown don't seem to accept me, I don't let it bother me (R)" and "I have a strong 'need to belong' at present situation", while to measure *psychological reactance*, we adapted three items from Wendlandt and Schrader (2007), like "I reject the intrusion upon my freedom to decide as intended by the hometown appeals", "I do not share in

this kind of 'hometown mania'" and "I do not want to be bound by hometown appeals". To measure *intention to support hometown*, we adapted five items for tourism-related behaviour, such as "I am willing to purchase my hometown's tourism products, such as souvenirs and traveling to hometown", "I would like to recommend my friends to travel to my hometown" and "I want to make some contributions to the tourism publicity of my hometown". All these measures were set on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

3.3 Data collection and participants

Mindful of precautions due to the pandemic, we administered the questionnaires online during April to June in 2021, using a professional data collection and survey platform called Credamo.com by simple random sampling. The samples are the registered members and come from all provinces and cities of China. All the participants confirmed that they agreed to participate in the survey before starting it, or just close the web page. After the agreement, recent COVID-19-related news and several actual hometown support appeals were presented to them, to ensure a shared understanding of the key concepts with the help of an open-ended question which asks for their perception of the materials. To ensure the quality of the questionnaires collected, attention-check questions were concluded, such as 'Which one do you prefer, "mountain" or "sea"? This is an attention test, please choose "city"'. Any questionnaires where the answer was not "city" were excluded. Furthermore, we checked the occurrence of straight-lining, i.e., choosing the same option more than ten times in succession (Holbrook et al., 2003). In total, we collected 658 valid samples. Every participant whose questionnaire is valid received 3 CNY (about 0.5 USD) as a reward. The detailed sample demographics are reported in Table 1.

Table 1: Respondents' demographic profiles

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage	Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Gender			*Age*		
male	323	49.1	18~25years	199	30.3
female	335	50.9	26~30years	258	39.2
Education			31~40years	168	25.5
Less than high school	19	2.9	41~50years	26	4.0
College	70	10.7	51~60years	6	1.0
Bachelor's degree	462	70.2	>60 years	1	0.2
Postgraduate degree	82	12.5			
PhD	25	3.8			

3.4 Preliminary analyses

The normality test of the data was carried out before the measurement model test. The skewness and kurtosis of each item were estimated to check data normality. The distributions of the skewness values (from -1.336 to -0.267) and the kurtosis values (from 0.785 to 2.712) met the reference standard of absolute skew value below 2 or absolute kurtosis (proper) below 7, indicating data normality (Kim, 2013).

When all data are collected from the same source, common method variance is a likely concern. Several procedural and statistical remedies, suggested by Podsakoff et al. (2003), were used to minimise the potential for common source bias. First, the participants came from a variety of regions and groups. Second, the participants were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses, in order to reduce issues such as participants' evaluation apprehension and social desirability. Third, we statistically tested the potential impact of common method variance, using Harman's one-factor test, which states that the threat of common method bias is high if a single factor accounts for more than 50% of the variance. The combined five factors accounted for 70.14% of the total variance while the first (largest) factor accounted for 30.73; therefore common method bias is unlikely to be a pervasive problem in this study.

3.5 Measurement model test

A six-factor measurement model was estimated using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) with Mplus (version 8.3) and SPSS 26.0. The results showed that the data fit for the model was acceptable: $\chi 2$ (144) = 263.594 ($p < 0.001$); CFI= 0.957; TLI= 0.949; RMSEA= 0.050; SRMR= 0.059, and all the standardised item factor loadings exceeded 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). We deleted one item: "The pandemic forced me to cancel my travel plans" from the threat to freedom of movement and one item: "I am willing to purchase my hometown's tourism products, such as souvenirs and traveling to hometown" from intention to support one's hometown, as their factor loadings are both lower than the threshold of 0.5 (Hair et al., 2010). After deleting these items, the analysis showed the data had a better fit: $\chi 2$ (111) = 197.034 ($p < 0.001$); CFI= 0.982; TLI= 0.978; RMSEA= 0.034; SRMR= 0.041, and all the standardised item factor loadings exceeded 0.6. The standardised item factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, Composite Reliability and Average Variance

Extracted (AVE) data are reported in Table 2.

Table 2: Measurement model results

Constructs and items	Standardised loading	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability
Perceived threat			
Threat to ontological security	0.610		
Threat to freedom of movement	0.706		
Threat to freedom of information	0.614		
Threat to ontological security		0.795	0.796
I feel that the society, material and living environment around me are in an unstable state.	0.726		
I can't decide where to go.	0.789		
My plans for the future are disrupted by the pandemic.	0.740		
Threat to freedom of movement		0.711	0.716
The pandemic threatens my freedom to choose between destinations.	0.716		
The pandemic has deprived me of many choices, to the extent that I almost can't choose anything but domestic destinations.	0.777		
Threat to freedom of information		0.797	0.798
The information is trying to convince me to support hometown brands.	0.811		
The information tries to manipulate me.	0.818		
Need to belong		0.788	0.787
If people from my hometown don't seem to accept me, I don't let it bother me. (R)	0.775		
I have a strong "need to belong" at present.	0.768		
I try hard not to do things that will make people from my hometown avoid or reject me.	0.705		
Psychological reactance		0.857	0.860
I reject the intrusion upon my freedom to decide as I intended that comes from the hometown appeals.	0.725		
I do not share in this kind of "hometown mania".	0.885		
I do not want to be bound by hometown appeals.	0.843		
Hometown support intention		0.874	0.873
I would like to recommend to my friends to travel to my hometown.	0.816		
I would like to make some contribution to the tourism publicity of my hometown.	0.771		
I would like to recommend the tourism products of my hometown to my friends.	0.789		

	When my friend asks me to recommend a tourism destination, I am willing to recommend my hometown.	0.803

As shown in Table 2, all the standardised item factor loadings exceeded 0.6, which showed sufficient reliability, and the Cronbach's alpha values of the constructs exceeded 0.7, which also indicated sufficient reliability (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The average variance extracted (AVE) of constructs ranged from 0.552 to 0.673, which exceeded the required limit of 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The values of composite reliability for each coefficient were all acceptably > 0.7 (Gefen et al., 2000). The correlation coefficients for all the variables are shown in Table 3. The square roots of the AVEs ranged from 0.743 to 0.820, all higher than the correlations the variables, which indicated that discriminate validity was satisfied.

Table 3: The correlation coefficients

Variables	AVE	*OST*	*MFT*	*IFT*	*NTB*	*PR*	*HSI*
Ontological security threat (OST)	0.566	**0.752**					
Movement freedom threat (MFT)	0.558	0.488	**0.747**				
Information freedom threat (IFT)	0.663	0.329	0.192	**0.814**			
Need to belong (NTB)	0.552	0.340	0.283	0.679	**0.743**		
Psychological Reactance (PR)	0.673	0.257	0.254	0.197	0.210	**0.820**	
Hometown support intention (HSI)	0.632	0.274	0.312	0.223	0.221	0.624	**0.795**

Note: Diagonal elements in bold are square roots of the average variance extracted.

The second-order statistics were then examined. Perceived threat was significantly measured by threat to ontological security (standardised factor loading $\beta = 0.610$, $p < 0.01$), threat to freedom of movement (standardised factor loading $\beta = 0.706$, $p < 0.01$), and threat to freedom of information (standardised factor loading $\beta = 0.614$, $p < 0.01$). All the path coefficients were significant and higher than the recommended standard of 0.6 (Chin, 1988).

3.6 Structural model test

We estimated all hypothesised structural model using Mplus (version 8.3). The model showed an acceptable fit to the data: $\chi 2\ (111) = 197.034$ ($p < 0.001$); CFI= 0.982; TLI= 0.978; RMSEA= 0.034; SRMR= 0.041. Figure 3 presents the standard regression weights of the causal paths in the model. The results showed that: i) perceived threat had a significant positive impact on the need to belong ($\beta = 0.639$; $P < 0.001$); ii) the need to belong positively related to intention to support one's

hometown (β= 0.589; P＜0.001); iii) psychological reactance had a significant negative relationship with intention to support hometown (β= -0.173; P＜0.001); and iv) perceived threat was positively related to intention to support hometown (β= 0.218; P＜0.05). However, there was no significant relationship between perceived threat and psychological reactance (β= 0.074; P= 0.224). The R^2 for need to belong, psychological reactance and intention to support hometown are 0.409, 0.005 and 0.574 respectively. Therefore, to summarise, hypotheses H1, H2, H3 and H6 were accepted, while H5 was rejected.

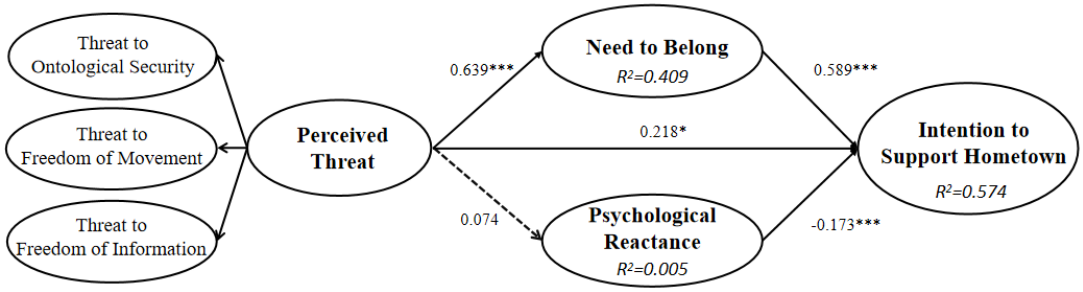

Figure 3: SEM results

3.6 The mediation analysis

The mediated effect of perceived threat on intention to support one's hometown via the need to belong and psychological reactance was examined. The total indirect effect of perceived threat on intention to support one's hometown was assessed by examining the 95 percent CI around total indirect using a bootstrapping procedure (using 1,000 bootstrap samples) (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). The total indirect perceived threat on intention to support one's hometown was positive and significant (the total indirect effect was 0.411, p < 0.001; the standardised total indirect effect was 0.364, p < 0.001). And the total indirect effect of perceived threat on intention to support one's hometown via need to belong was positive and significant (the indirect effect was 0.425, p < 0.001; and the standardised indirect effect was 0.376, p < 0.001; 95 per cent CI = 0.261-0.679). Therefore, Hypothesis H4 is supported. The total indirect effect of perceived threat on intention to support one's hometown via psychological reactance was not significant (the total standardised total indirect effect was -0.013, P= 0.279). Therefore, Hypothesis H7 is rejected.

As the results show, even in the post-pandemic era, people still perceive there to be threats. Specifically, each of the three threats being studied played a role in arousing the threatened mental

states of individuals. The dimensions of threats came from interference with individuals' worldviews, pandemic-related changes and the messages of hometown support appeals. Faced with both the COVID-19 threat and the hometown appeals for local tourism support, we found that people leant towards supporting their hometown in general (H1). The need to belong played a comparably decisive role in mediating the positive relationship between perceived threat and the behavioural intention to support one's hometown (H4). The shared threat of the pandemic triggered people's need to belong to a familiar group that could provide them with a sense of security and compensation for loss of control (H2). The emotional cues of the hometown brands, which inspired people with safe and sound memories of their hometowns, triggered the behavioural intention to support one's hometown and was seen to satisfy their need to belong (H3). Hypothesis 5, which proposed that a threat has a positive effect on psychological reactance, was not supported. It was encouraging to find that even when appeals to support one's hometown were perceived as manipulating and freedom-threatening, Chinese people reported to still actively chose to embrace their hometown without psychological reactance (H5). Hometown appeals were also found not to be "punch bags" through which people could release the stresses of threats to their freedoms. Indeed, the psychological reactance induced by a perceived threat was seen to have a negative effect on people's behavioural intention to support their hometown (H6).

4 Discussion

This study explores whether individuals are willing to support their hometown, after they perceive a threat, in the post-covid pandemic era. By analysing situational factors, we test how three dimensions of threat affect people's choices, namely, threats to individuals' ontological security, freedom of movement and freedom of information. Our findings expand on previous studies into how a disaster influences individuals' affections, mental states and behaviours (Campbell et al., 2020; Haney & Gray-Scholz, 2020; Rao et al., 2011; Wiegel et al., 2021). According to compensatory control theory, when people perceive loss of control, they adopt compensatory control strategies to recover their sense of control. Our results confirm that choosing to support one's hometown can be a great strategy in response to a threat, consistent with previous research (Verlegh et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2020), which further expands compensatory control theory. In terms of underlying mechanisms, our data shows that the need to belong has a positive effect on people's

intentions to support tourism in their hometown. It is human nature for people to pursue group belonging, especially when they are threatened (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). We confirm that in April 2021, reported to be the post-covid pandemic era in China at the time, people still perceived the likely threat of the virus, and this increased their need to belong. The emotionally collective and warm cues provided by hometown appeals triggered their behavioural intentions to support their hometowns, again confirming previous research (Huang et al., 2018; Pickett et al., 2004; Verlegh et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2020).

We hypothesised that when exposed to threats to their daily routines, future plans, and freedom of movement and information, individuals might display psychological reactance (Akhtar et al., 2020; Kang et al., 2021; Shoenberger et al., 2021). However, the results contradicted our expectations that once freedom is threaten, individuals would tend to recover the lost freedom, as explained by reactance theory (Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Quick & Stephenson, 2007). Instead, we find that people processing this threat do not respond negatively, as expected, due to psychological reactance but, instead, they cooperate to overcome shared threats, which might indicate a resolution for unity and strong affective bond with their hometowns (Wiegel et al., 2021). Consistent with Woosnam et al. (2021), it also demonstrates residents' urgency to recover tourism to address the financial deficit of one's hometown after the pandemic. To explore more reasons for this unexpected result, we analysed the answers to an open-ended question that asked respondents to express their perceptions about the pandemic. The answers included key words/phrases like: "unity", "we are one" and "everybody has the responsibility", as exemplified in these three quotes: *"A single person seems too powerless to fight against the pandemic. We should work hard together and survive in this pandemic with no one excepted"; "No one can stand alone in this pandemic. In order to overcome it, all the people have the responsibility to fight together";* and *"Life is impermanent. Everyone should take the responsibility to combat COVID-19".* These thoughts show, and verify, that when people are faced with a disaster or threat, they tend to contribute to their core groups' strengths to enhance confidence and security. This traditional Chinese poem best exemplifies the feeling: "Like the mountain range stretches before you and me; Let us share common trials and hardships together."

6. Conclusions

Despite China's success in curbing the COVID-19 pandemic and the gradual adaptation to the

country's "new normal" (Ecns.cn, 2021a), our study shows that individuals' mental states and behaviours continue to feel threats to their ontological security and their freedom of movement, and information. This study contributes to the literature on how individuals respond to threats as a whole and on the associated mechanisms, in contrast to much of the earlier research that has focused on a single type of threat in isolation (Cui et al., 2021; Iqbal & Anwar, 2020; Kappenman et al., 2021). Instead, this study confirms that individuals perceive all three dimensions of the threat resulting from COVID-19, even in the post-pandemic era. These findings extend other studies that have commonly considered the COVID-19 pandemic to be a single, whole threat (Anjum et al., 2020; Kavaklı et al., 2020). This study sheds light on the roles of the *need to belong* and *psychological reactance* in response to a threat. We find that, in the face of a significant and shared threat, people tend to activate their need to belong. People's willingness to support their hometown can be interpreted as a compensatory strategy to cope with a loss of control, which helps us extend our understanding of compensatory control theory. Also, we find that psychological reactance is not a universal behavioural reaction (He et al., 2016; Kang et al., 2021) but, instead, we show that such reactance is influenced by the context and culture of the phenomenon studied. We find that, under the pandemic, Chinese people rallied together.

Our findings have management implications for DMOs in particular. Firstly, the data shows that in China it is feasible for DMOs to appeal to a hometown's community for help and support without expecting negative responses from psychological reactance. Secondly, it is important to remember that tourism destinations are also somebody's home. COVID-19 has initiated a profound public fear as well as travel-related fear (Zheng et al., 2021). A sense of the unfamiliar and out-of-the-ordinary daily routines might magnify individuals' perceived threats and fear. The need for control and a sense of belonging could trigger people to develop an in-group culture. Residents are more likely to show support when appeals refer to one's "hometown" than to more neutral language such as a "tourism destination". Thirdly, it is possible to draw lessons from this study to research non-tourism, such as those from agriculture and crafts. Consistent with Cui and her colleagues (2020), this study suggests that people are willing to stand with their hometown, and showing more "hometown cues" can make brands more attractive in the post-pandemic era. Fourthly, this study provides useful insights for countries with collectivistic cultures that are handling the aftermath of

COVID-19, to encourage residents to become tourism ambassadors. Similarly, for small or medium-sized destinations compared to large cities, tourism means more to local DMOs and residents, thus DMOs can appeal to residents for support with less concern about resistance from residents. Finally, those destinations where the concept of "hometown" does not induce a strong emotional connection can appeal to everyone for help by arousing their empathy (Xie et al., 2021).

Our study has some limitations that suggest further lines of research. First, there might be more dimensions of threat that arise from COVID-19 and the post-pandemic situation. Second, it would be useful to test how behavioural responses change over time, as individuals become desensitised to the COVID-19 aftermath. Third, we verify that individuals have a disposition to support their hometown via their need to belong in the cultural context of China. This result might be affected by the collectivistic Chinese culture; Joo et al. (2021) found that perceived threat has a negative influence on support for tourism in the context of South Korea. Therefore, cross-cultural comparisons would be helpful. Fourth, this study testifies that perceived threat in the post-pandemic era and hometown support appeals do not sensitise an individual's psychological reactance, however, there might be other negative effects resulting from hometown appeals that need to be explored. Fifth, the sampling procedure may have led to self-selection bias and a desire to be seen to conform with societal expectations may have led to social desirability bias and self-deception bias; hence, measuring actual hometown support behaviours or using second hand data in future studies might help. Finally, we only collected data online, which might result in missing those people who have little Internet experience. Future studies can use snowball sampling or conduct surveys on site.

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