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The Transformation of Hot Spring Destinations in Taiwan in a Post-pandemic Future: Exploring the COVID-19 Impacts on Hot Spring Experiences, Individual, and Community Resilience of Residents From a Posttraumatic Growth Perspective

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Abstract : The natural and men-made disasters have become huge challenges for tourism destinations as well as emphasizing the fragility of the industry. Hot springs, among all destinations, are prone to disasters due to their dependence on natural resources and locations. After the COVID-19 outbreak, hot spring destinations have experienced not only the loss of businesses but also the psychological trauma. However, evidence has also shown that the impacts may not necessarily reduce the resilience for people but may be converted into posttraumatic growth. In Taiwan, a large proportion of hot springs are located in rural or indigenous areas. As a result, hot spring resources are associated with community cohesion for local residents. Yet prior research on hot spring destinations has mainly focused on visitors, whereas residents have been overlooked. More specifically, the relationship between hot springs resources and resident resilience in the face of the COVID-19 impacts remains unclear. To fulfill this knowledge gap, this paper aims to explore the COVID-19 impacts on residents' hot spring experiences as well as individual and community resilience from the perspective of posttraumatic growth. A total of 315 residents of 13 hot spring destinations that are most popular in Taiwan were recruited. Online questionnaires were distributed over travel forums and social networks after the COVID-19. This paper subsequently used Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling for data analysis as the technique offers significant advantages in addressing nonnormal data and small sample sizes. A preliminary test was conducted, and the results showed acceptable internal consistency and no serious common method variance. The path analysis demonstrated that the COVID-19 impacts strengthened residents' perceptions of hot spring resources and experiences, implying that the pandemic had propelled the residents to visit hot springs for the healing benefits. In addition, the COVID-19 impacts significantly enhanced residents' individual and community resilience, which indicates that the residents at hot springs are more resilient thanks to their awareness of external risks. Thirdly, residents' individual resilience was positively associated with hot spring experiences, while community resilience was not affected by hot spring experiences. Such findings may suggest that hot spring experiences are more related to individual-level experiences and, consequently, have insignificant influence on community resilience. Finally, individual resilience was proved to be the most relevant factor that help foster community resilience. To conclude, the authorities may consider exploiting the hot spring resources so as to increase individual resilience for local residents. Such implications can be used as a reference for other post-disaster tourist destinations as well. As for future research, longitudinal studies with qualitative methods are suggested to better understand how the hot spring experiences have changed individuals and communities over the long term. It should be noted that the main subjects of this paper were focused on the hot spring communities in Taiwan. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized for all types of tourism destinations. That is, more diverse tourism destinations may be investigated to provide a broader perspective of post-disaster recovery.

Keywords : community resilience, hot spring destinations, individual resilience, posttraumatic growth
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