

**Analysing the Influence of Post-COVID Consumer Behaviour
on Hotel Industry in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province**

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has an ongoing influence on consumer behaviour, which in turn will affect the entire tourism and hospitality industry. In the period following the epidemic, the hospitality sector in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province also faces significant opportunities and challenges, such as adjusting to evolving consumer expectations regarding health and safety, utilizing technology to enhance service provision, and navigating operational expenses amidst changing tourism patterns. Combining the Theory of Planned Behaviour and the Organisational Resilience Framework, this report will uncover the various determinants of shifts in hotel consumer behaviours and analyse the remarkable impact of post-COVID consumer behaviour on the hotel industry in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province. Furthermore, It will explore both the perspectives of hotel consumers and managers in Zhuhai through face-to-face interviews, immersive observations and relevant documentation, aiming to gain comprehensive insights into these behavioural changes and identify effective strategies for the hotel sector's recovery and growth in the post-pandemic landscape. The rationale for the choice of interpretivism paradigm and qualitative research method is discussed then, and ethical issues as well as reliability and validity are also considered. The theoretical significance of this study is that it will provide a reference for future qualitative research on hotel consumer behaviour in other regions or countries in the context of the post-epidemic era, and will expand the ideas of future researchers on consumer behaviour and its impact on other service industries in the post-epidemic period. The practical implication of this study is that it will provide practical guidance for hotel managers and contribute to the recovery and development of Zhuhai's hotel and tourism industries.

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered the global tourism and hospitality industries, with profound effects on consumer behaviour, especially in the hotel sector. In response, this report aims to dissect post-COVID consumer behavioural changes, their determinants, and subsequent impacts on the hospitality sector, particularly in Zhuhai's hotel industry. By exploring both hotel consumer and managerial perspectives, the study seeks to identify effective strategies for the hotel sector to recover and thrive in the post-pandemic landscape. While the literature generally studies consumer behaviours and organisational resilience strategies separately, this study synthesizes both to analyse the impact of evolving post-pandemic consumer preferences, attitudes and intentions on Zhuhai hotel resilience practices. In particular, the research will determine if post-pandemic changes in risk perception, social contacts, sustainability concerns, and digital engagement among Zhuhai hotel guests have specially driven adaptations in hospitality infrastructure, community ties, eco-initiatives and contactless services.

1.1 Background

The explosion of COVID-19 has led to dramatic changes in the tourism and hospitality industries (Fan et al., 2023). In China, the government implemented stringent containment measures, which significantly curtailed travel and hotel operations, leading to a drastic decline in the hospitality sector (Zhang and Xie, 2021). As the outbreak of pandemic was brought under control in China, these restrictions were gradually lifted, marking the transition to a post-pandemic phase. For this study, the post-COVID period refers to the phase following the substantial control of the pandemic in China, starting from mid-2021, when domestic travel restrictions began to ease, and the hospitality sector started its recovery process (Li et al., 2022).

Despite the pandemic has been controlled, and travel and hotel industries are taking positive steps to recover, the impacts of COVID-19 on tourism and hospitality sectors will continue in the post-COVID era due to the vulnerability of tourism and hospitality industry. Research by Das et al. (2022) highlights a post-pandemic shift in consumer spending patterns, with a sustained decline in discretionary expenditures such as travel, dining out, and entertainment. Instead, a heightened focus on essentials like groceries and digital services has emerged (Das et al., 2022). This behavioural shift has profound implications for the hospitality sector, necessitating adaptive strategies to realign with new consumer preferences. The China Hospitality Industry Development Report (2022) underscores the pandemic's impact, revealing a significant reduction of approximately 86,000 hotels and accommodations since 2020. In addition, as shown in the Figure 1 below, there was a slight increase in 2021 after the dramatically drop of domestic tourists' number and tourism income in the year 2020, but the figures dropped again when it came to the year 2022. Specifically, the fluctuation of data about hotel operating revenue and average occupancy rate in Zhuhai from 2017 to 2022 (Figure 2) stay the same as that of domestic tourism development. Therefore, these trends indicate that the hospitality industry in China still needs time to recapture its pre-pandemic prosperity.

In response to these challenges, this research aims to dissect the nuanced changes in post-COVID consumer behaviour, their determinants, and subsequent influences on the hospitality sector, with a specific focus on Zhuhai's hotel industry. By analysing these dynamics, the study endeavours to identify effective strategies for the hotel sector to not only recuperate but also thrive in the post-pandemic landscape. The investigation will consider both consumer and managerial perspectives to offer a comprehensive understanding of the evolving situation, thus enabling the formulation of tailored

solutions that align with the altered expectations and needs in the post-COVID era.

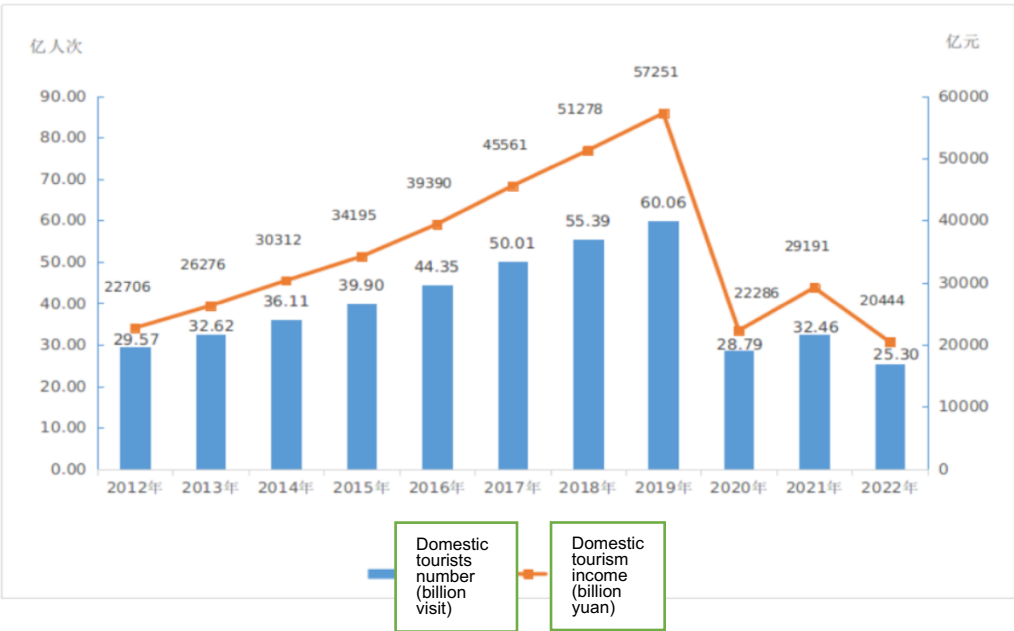


Figure 1: Domestic Tourism Development from 2012-2022 (Adopted from Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People’s Republic of China (2023), Statistical Bulletin on Cultural and Tourism Development for the year 2022. Available at https://zwgk.mct.gov.cn/zfxxgkml/tjxx/202307/t20230713_945922.html)

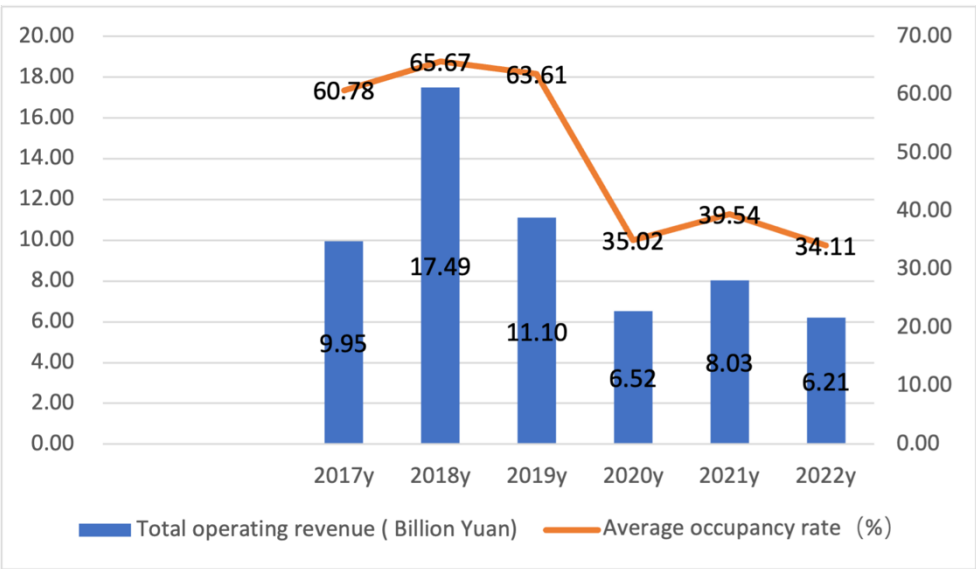


Figure 2: Main Indicators of Hotels in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province from 2017-2022 (Adopted from Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China on December 23, 2023. Available at https://zwgk.mct.gov.cn/zfxxgkml/447/465/index_3081_4.html)

1.2 Key Aim, Research Questions and Objectives

1.2.1 Aim

This study aims to analyse changes of hotel consumers' behaviour and their impacts on hotel industry in Zhuhai during the post-COVID time and provide both theoretical and practical implications for future study as well as local hospitality industry in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province.

1.2.2 Research Questions

1. What are the main behavioural changes of consumers toward Zhuhai hotels after the pandemic and the possible affecting factors of these changes from perceptions of both hotel consumers and managers?
2. How do they perceive these changes affect consumers' intentions for hotel and the resilience management practices of hotel industry in Zhuhai?
3. What are the main challenges, opportunities and key management strategies hotel executives recognize regarding hotel industry in Zhuhai recovery from the global epidemic?
4. What insights can be drawn from the above discussion to guide the long-term hotel resilience management practices in Zhuhai after the COVID-19 pandemic?

1.2.3 Objectives

1. To understand the changes and affecting factors of consumers' preferences and intentions after the pandemic from the perspectives of both hotel consumers and practitioners.
2. To investigate the influence of these behavioural changes on Zhuhai hotel industry in the post-COVID context.
3. To identify hotel executives' reflections on management strategies, challenges and opportunities related to hotel industry recovery and customer retention after the global pandemic.
4. To suggest measures to hotel stakeholders based on managers' and consumers' experiences and perceptions to facilitate the recovery and sustainability of Zhuhai hotel sector in the post-pandemic era.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition and Affecting Factors of Consumer Behaviour

The study of consumer behaviour, especially in the context of the hospitality and tourism industry, is a manifold subject which has evolved significantly over the years. In the post-COVID era, understanding consumer behaviour has become even more crucial for the hotel industry, where shifts in consumer preferences and intentions can significantly impact the industry's growth and sustainability. The foundational knowledge of hospitality and tourism studies, as pointed out by Dixit (2018), has been continually evolving in line with societal, cultural, and behavioural changes. Tracing the origins of consumer behaviour literature back to the 1960s, Veal (1991) highlighted the initial efforts to understand market segmentation through the division of people based on their values, which was an innovative approach at that time. This early work laid the

groundwork for more sophisticated analyses of consumer behaviour in later years.

Dixit, Lee and Loo (2019) associate consumer behaviour with individual decision-making, influenced by four key elements: internal, external, situational, and marketing-mix factors. These elements collectively shape the consumer decision process, highlighting the multifaceted nature of consumer behaviour. Théophile (2021) points out the absence of a universally accepted definition of consumer behaviour. Instead, it is generally understood as the study of consumers' habits, lifestyles, attitudes, and practices. This broader perspective aligns well with the ever-changing nature of consumer behaviour, especially in the dynamic post-COVID context. John (2022) provides a more focused definition of consumer behaviour as the study of why people buy products and services and the decision-making process they go through when making a purchase, influenced by various factors such as environment, sociodemographic, psychographic, biological and situational factors. **Understanding consumer behaviour is important for marketers and businesses as it helps them satisfy consumers' needs and thrive in the market (McCarthy, 2016). In the hospitality and tourism sectors, understanding consumer behaviour involves analysing pre-visit, on-site, and post-visit phases of guests, as noted by Dixit, Lee, and Loo (2019). Given the high level of personal interaction in service delivery within these sectors, customer-oriented studies and data are vital for meeting customer expectations and ensuring the future success of businesses.**

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) has been widely applied to study tourist consumption behaviours (Park et al., 2017; Erul et al., 2020; Fan et al., 2023). Incorporating TPB into the existing discussion on consumer behaviour, especially in the post-COVID hotel industry context, offers a more nuanced understanding of how and why consumers make decisions. Ajzen (1991)

postulates that behavioural intention is influenced by three factors: attitudes, subjective norms (SN), and perceived behaviour control (PBC). These factors provide a framework for understanding the decision-making process in the hospitality context. Among them, attitudes refer to an individuals' positive or negative evaluation towards a specific behaviour; SN relate to individuals' perceptions of social pressures or expectations; PBC refers to the perceived ability to conduct the behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). In the post-COVID era, consumer attitudes towards travel and hotel stays have undergone significant changes. Safety concerns, health protocols, and the perception of risk play a crucial role in shaping attitudes (Fan et al., 2023). Subjective norms, or the influence of social factors and peer opinions, have also shifted, as consumers are increasingly relying on digital platforms and social media for travel information and recommendations (Nunkoo et al., 2023). Perceived behavioural control has become particularly relevant since during the post-COVID time, this might include considerations like travel restrictions, quarantine requirements, and personal health concerns (Baker et al., 2020).

Despite these insights, most studies tend to focus on general consumer behaviour patterns without adequately considering the specific post-COVID changes and the nuances of the local context. Additionally, there is a lack of comprehensive research integrating Ajzen's TPB with the unique cultural, social, and economic aspects of Zhuhai's hotel industry. Understanding how these local factors interact with the TPB components could provide more targeted and effective strategies for hospitality businesses in this region. Hence, this research attempt to adopt TPB to understand the changes and affecting factors of consumers' behaviour after the pandemic from perspectives of both hotel consumers and practitioners, which is aligned with the first and the second research questions and objectives.

2.2 The Influences of COVID-19 on Hotel Industry

The outbreak of coronavirus disease has affected world economics and tourism in particular. It has affected the consumer behaviour towards tourism as well (Kakkar, Chhetri and Dambhare, 2020). Han et al. (2020) claim that consumers tend to travel to domestic destinations that are perceived to be safer. Similarly, Kang and Zhu (2020) find that tourists pay more attention to the environmental safety of tourist destinations, and prefer scenic spots with good natural and ecological environment. Wang and Liu (2020) also have allied analysis and conclude the pandemic also prompt a rapid shift from traditional group travel to self-driving travel. While Chebli and Said (2020) examine impacts of COVID-19 on tourists' behavioural intentions, their study is limited to survey data rather than in-depth qualitative insights into evolving consumer perspectives. Jin, Bao and Tang (2021) conduct an assessment and characterization of Chinese consumers in the context of post-COVID travel. Their research acknowledges the presence of a significant and consistent group of tourists from mainland China, which is characterized by its demographic heterogeneity and geographic diversity. In addition, Fan et al. (2023) recently studied changes in travel behaviours in China during COVID-19 using the Theory of Planned Behaviour. However, their work did not specifically focus on hotels. This study will build on their findings by applying the theory to analyse shifts in hotel customers behaviours.

Amidst the prevalent social distancing guidelines and recurrent lockdowns, there has been a marked decline in consumer expenditure on hotels and restaurants (Baker et al., 2020), which has affected the hospitality sector adversely. Hu et al. (2021) investigate the changes of Chinese consumers' expectations on services provided by hotel sector during different stages of COVID-19 and find travellers' expectations may have experienced a lasting change as they appear to have adapted to the ongoing pandemic situation.

While Atadil and Lu (2021) examined safe hotel perceptions post-COVID, they did not link this to hotel revenues or Zhuhai tourism development goals. Ray, Gutpa and Rana (2023) demonstrate that consumers' preferences and consuming intentions for hotel have changed greatly after the epidemic. However, their India-based study may not transfer to the Chinese context.

Although some researchers recently have been working on the massive influence of COVID-19 pandemic on hospitality industry and consumer behaviour, almost all these studies are conducted through quantitative research methods such as exploring customers' online review or allocating questionnaires. Few of them use qualitative research approaches such as face-to-face interview, focus group or field observation to identify the perceptions of hotel consumers and practitioners through their personal experiences. Qualitative research is necessary to uncover and identify emerging aspects of hotel consumer behaviour characteristics and hotel executives' perceptions of potential impact from multi-angle and deep-lying lens. Besides this, it can be found that literature generally studies consumer behaviour changes and hotel challenges separately and has geographical limitations at the same time. Therefore, in order to fill the research gaps, this study will adopt in-depth interview and careful observation to understand post-COVID consumer behaviour and its impact on hotel industry in Zhuhai specifically and find out necessary steps to provide guests with quality services which meet their demands after COVID-19, which ultimately, will be conducive to the recovery and further development of the local hotel industry.

2.3 Organizational Resilience in the Hospitality Industry

The organizational resilience framework has recently received increasing attention, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which

dramatically impacted various industries, including hospitality. Organizational resilience initially emerged from the fields of psychology and ecology, focusing on the capacity of systems to absorb disturbance and reorganize while experiencing changes (Holling, 1973). It has since evolved, especially in business and management studies, to encompass an organization's competence to anticipate, cope with, adapt and grow from challenges (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011). Bundy et al. (2017) elaborate on this by describing resilience as a dynamic capability that enables organizations to cope with, adapt to, and potentially thrive following crises. What's more, a process-oriented model for resilience which encapsulates the stages of anticipation, respond to and innovation is proposed by Duchek (2020). This concept became increasingly relevant in the hospitality industry, as it faced unprecedented challenges during the COVID-19 crisis.

Recent scholarship has expanded the understanding of organizational resilience. Sigala (2020) highlights how the pandemic accelerated digital transformation in the hospitality industry, a clear indicator of organizational resilience. Similarly, El-Said et al. (2023) investigate the management of resilience in the hospitality sector during the COVID-19 crisis, highlighting the importance of adaptability and innovation to address the multifaceted and changing challenges. In the context of consumer behaviour, Zheng, Luo, and Ritchie (2021) note the shift towards safety and hygiene concerns post-pandemic, urging hotels to adapt their services accordingly. This aligns with the resilience framework, as it underscores the importance of responding to external environmental shifts.

Focusing on Zhuhai, the application of the organizational resilience framework is crucial in understanding how the local hotel industry adapted to the post-pandemic consumer behaviour changes. Jiang and Wen (2020) discuss the rapid implementation of health and safety protocols in hotels, a resilience

strategy to regain consumer trust. This also ties into the findings of Gössling et al. (2020), who suggest that destinations focusing on sustainability and local tourism might emerge stronger after the pandemic.

The insights derived from this review suggest that the organizational resilience framework can guide future hospitality practices in Zhuhai. It implies a need for ongoing adaptation, innovation, and a focus on sustainable and local market-driven strategies for long-term resilience. Based on Duchek's (2020) organizational resilience model, the approaches to managing the changes in consumer behaviour towards the hotel sector in Zhuhai in the wake of the pandemic and the resilience practices of local hotel industry can be better understood and identified through observation, documents as well as in-depth interviews with hoteliers, which is corresponding with the third and the fourth research questions and objectives.

2.4 The Hotel Industry in Zhuhai

While studies on consumer behaviours towards the hotel sector in the aftermath of COVID-19 exist in specific countries or regions, such as India (Kakkar, Chhetri, and Dambhare, 2020), the northeast of England (Spanaki, Papatheodorou, and Pappas, 2021), and Budapest, Hungary (Alreahi et al., 2023), consumer behaviours vary significantly across different geographic locations, necessitating localized insights into marketing and management strategies, products, and services.

The Outline Development Plan for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (2019) and the *Culture and Tourism Development Plan for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (2020)* call for expediting the development of modern service industries and building a bay area for leisure

as well as a world-class tourist attraction, which puts forward new requirements for the growth of tourism and hotel industry in the Greater Bay Area. As one of the vital components of the Greater Bay Area, Zhuhai has attracted much attention. The Hongkong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge, in particular, has opened new avenues for the growth of Zhuhai's tourism and hospitality sectors (Mo et al., 2020). However, in the post-pandemic era, the hospitality industry in Zhuhai city also encounters great opportunities and challenges, including adapting to new consumer demands for health and safety, leveraging technology for improved service delivery, and managing operational costs amidst fluctuating tourism flows (Wang and Sun, 2020). Moreover, current research on consumer behaviour in the hospitality industry, particularly in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province, exhibits notable gaps. Hence, there is a call for analysing consumer behaviour towards hotels in Zhuhai in the post-COVID context to facilitate the resilience, recovery and risk mitigation strategies developed by local hotels.

3. Conceptual Framework

In the post-COVID era, the impact of consumer behaviour on the hotel industry in Zhuhai can be analysed through the TPB (Ajzen, 1991) and the organizational resilience framework (Duchek, 2020). The conceptual framework (Figure 3) for this research has been drawn to show the constructs of two models and the connections between these concepts. As elaborated in the previous literature review, on the one hand, the TPB asserts that an individual's behaviour is directly influenced by their behavioural intentions, which are in turn shaped by a combination of attitudes, SN and PBC (Ajzen, 1991). Applied to the hospitality industry, consumer preferences and choices in travel and accommodation may be affected by factors such as health and safety concerns, environmental sustainability priorities and expectations of digital service experiences in the aftermath of the pandemic. On the other hand, the organizational resilience framework emphasizes that businesses, in the face of

a constantly changing environment, should be able to anticipate potential crises, respond quickly to changes in the marketplace as well as maintain and enhance their competitive advantage through adaptability, recovery and innovation capabilities (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011; Ducheck, 2020). For the hotel industry in Zhuhai, this means paying attention to changes in consumer behaviour and enhancing their resilience and competitiveness in the post-pandemic era by improving service quality, adopting new technologies and optimizing operational strategies.

The TPB focuses on understanding and predicting consumer behavioural intentions, while the organizational resilience framework concentrates on how businesses can maintain and enhance their adaptability during times of crises. For the hotel industry in the post-COVID era, consumers' behavioural intentions will directly affect market demand for hotels, which in turn will influence how hotels apply organizational resilience strategies to cope with these changes in demand. Consequently, this study will not only provide insights into understanding consumer behaviour during the post-pandemic period, but also provide practical strategic recommendations for the hotel industry in Zhuhai to cope with future challenges.

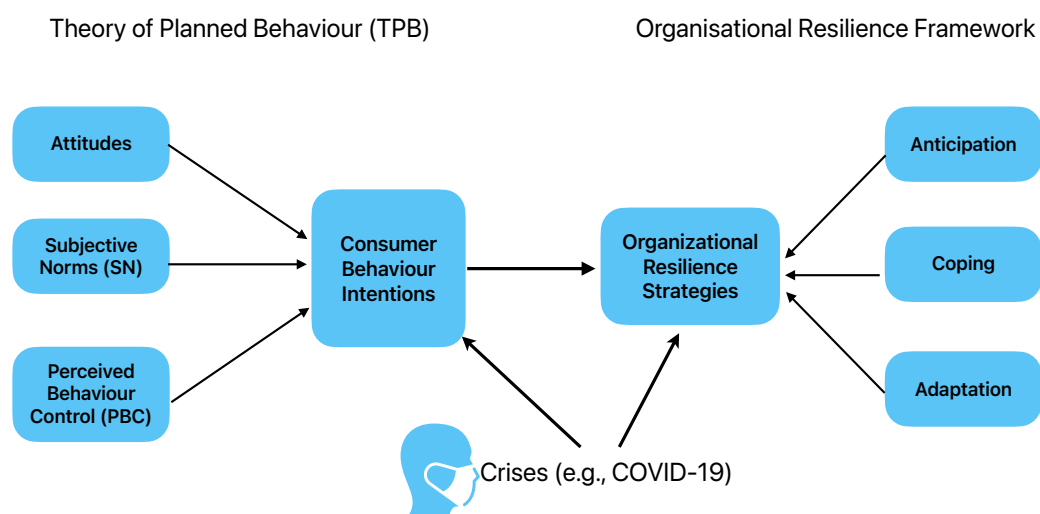


Figure 3: Conceptual Framework

4. Research Paradigm and Philosophy

4.1 Introduction

Thomas Kuhn (1997) characterizes the uses of paradigm into two fundamental meanings. The first interpretation denotes a paradigm as a "Disciplinary Matrix". Kuhn argues that advancement in science is contingent upon the common commitment of the scientific community to their shared theoretical beliefs, values, tools, techniques, and even metaphysical views. The other understanding of paradigm that proposed by Kuhn (1997) is as an archetype, symbolizing the collective agreement within the scientific community regarding model instances of research in the specific field. The interpretation about sociological paradigm from Burrell and Morgan (2016) aligns with the meanings defined by Kuhn, which explains that a paradigm encompasses fundamental and often unexamined beliefs that provide the foundation for the perspective, theoretical approach, and operational methods employed by a group. Historically, Guba and Lincoln (1994) described a paradigm as having three core elements: ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Yet, there's an evolving inclination to include axiology as a crucial fourth element of a paradigm, as suggested by Heron and Reason (1997). Axiology serves as a crucial foundation for any potential research, as it addresses the significance of the research and the ethical consideration to conducting research in that particular field (Patterson and Williams, 1998).

As Saunders et al. (2019) illustrated, research philosophy is a set of principles and beliefs regarding the acquisition of knowledge. In essence, researchers' research philosophies encompass fundamental assumptions about their perspectives on the world, which in turn influence every facet of their research endeavours. All research philosophies are based on at least three fundamental assumptions: ontological, epistemological as well as axiological, and the

distinguishing factor between different philosophies lies in the variations and similarities of their choices of ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions (Saunders et al., 2019).

Many scholars have discussed different paradigms and their features to define the reality. Guba and Lincoln (1994) propose examining four paradigmatic frameworks in research: positivism, post-positivism, constructivism, and critical theory. Saunders et al. (2019) explore five key philosophical perspectives within the field of business and management: positivism, critical realism, interpretivism, post-modernism and pragmatism from dimensions of ontology, epistemology, axiology and typical methods. Interpretive research aims to comprehend the underlying values, beliefs, and meanings of social phenomena, leading to a compassionate understanding of human social actions and experiences, as described by Hussain et al. (2013). Interpretivists consider all social research as inherently interpretive, driven by the researcher's intent to understand social reality. Thus, the interpretive paradigm aims to dig into individuals' perspectives, understand their shared meanings, and acquire a deeper understanding of the studied case (Bryman, 2016; Grix, 2018). The reason for conducting this research is to understand and describe shifts in consumer behaviour and the influences on hotel sector in the context of post-pandemic time from the views of hotel customers and practitioners, hence the paradigm of this research is interpretivism according to the key aim, research questions and objectives of this study mentioned above. The axiological, ontological and epistemological foundations of interpretivism will be scrutinized and illuminated in the following sections.

4.2 Axiology

Axiology contains moral deliberations and questions “what is morally right” within a research domain (Deane, 2018). It serves as a crucial foundation for

any prospective research, considering what is deemed valuable for the research and the ethical conduct of research in that field (Patterson and Williams, 1998). In examining the influence of post-COVID consumer behaviour on the hotel industry in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province, axiology serves as a crucial component of the study, offering a vital perspective on value judgments (Patterson and Williams, 1998). According to axiological principles, this research focuses on the value of changes in consumer behaviour and their potential impact on Zhuhai hotel industry after the pandemic. Within the framework of interpretivism philosophy, this analysis emphasizes understanding the subjective experiences of consumers and how these affect their hotel choices, subsequently affecting hotel resilience management practices. For instance, the global outbreak of COVID-19 has significantly altered consumer perceptions of travel safety and hygiene, subsequently influencing their preferences for hotel selections (Atadil and Lu, 2021). Moreover, as the long-term influence of the pandemic on tourism sector becomes more apparent, the increased demand for local experiences among consumers may lead to a fundamental shift in hotel business models (Hall, Scott & Gössling, 2021). Thus, this study aims to assess how these changes are shaping the future of the hotel industry in Zhuhai.

4.3 Ontology

Ontology in research refers to a researcher's fundamental hypotheses about the nature of reality and existence relevant to their field of study and topic of research (Gioia and Pitre, 1990). Depicting the ontology of a discipline requires making clear the shared understandings, convictions, and presumptions about how individuals in the discipline perceive the world and conceptualize the fundamental aspects of reality and phenomena that are the main focal points of the discipline (Ruona and Lynham, 2004). In plain terms, ontology involves recognising and illustrating the fundamental assumptions about reality that

determine the way a discipline thinks and acts. For interpretive researchers, they hold the belief that there exist multiple subjective realities, each shaped and constructed socially through the influences of culture and language, as noted by Brown and Dueñas (2020). The author of this report assumes that the pandemic has significant and lasting effects on consumer behaviour and the entire hotel industry, which is a subjectively reality. Utilizing existing theories and models – the Theory of Planned Behaviour and the Organisational Resilience Model - facilitates the construction of research epistemology and methodology, thereby enabling an in-depth analysis and identification of the determinants of hotel consumer behaviour in the post-pandemic period, as well as how the hotel industry responds to the long-term challenges and opportunities brought by the pandemic.

4.4 Epistemology

Epistemology is a philosophy field that explores questions regarding the nature of knowledge and what constitutes rational belief (Ruona and Lynham, 2004). It concerns the methods by which we acquire knowledge and interpret the world. When contemplating research epistemology, it can be valuable to ponder "what is deemed as knowledge in the world" and "the process of acquiring knowledge". (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012). As for interpretivists, the subjectivism epistemology urges them to get involved with their participants across different social and cultural environment, making great effort to understand and interpret why human behave in a certain way (Hussain et al., 2013).

In this research, it is perceived that each individual has different perceptions of crisis events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and their behaviours and attitudes towards consumption on hotel sectors also make significant differences during the post-pandemic period. Central to the interpretivist philosophy is the necessity for researchers to embrace an empathetic

perspective, and the key task for interpretivists is to immerse themselves in the social environment of the research participants and acquire a comprehensive understanding of their worldview (Saunders et al., 2019). Therefore, researcher expects to gain a deeper understanding of hotel customers' consumption preferences and intentions in post-COVID era through in-depth interview and immersed observation, and makes an effort to explain the characteristics of these behavioural changes and their influencing factors. At the same time, investigation and interview will be conducted with local hotel practitioners to understand their views on the opportunities and challenges of local hospitality industry in the special period.

As individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds construct different meanings and experience unique social realities in varying circumstances and times, interpretivists reject the positivist quest for definitive and universal 'laws' applicable to all (Saunders et al., 2019). Instead, they argue that simplifying this complexity into a set of law-like generalizations would lead to a significant loss of insightful understanding about human nature (Neuman, 2000; Saunders et al., 2019). Therefore, the aim of interpretivist research is to generate deeper and more nuanced interpretations and understandings of social realms and situations. Based on this, the study attempts to obtain a more comprehensive and meaningful understanding and answers by interacting with practitioners at various levels of the hotel industry, such as front desk receptionists, guest service agents, shift leaders and hotel managers.

5. Research Methodology

5.1 The Qualitative Research Paradigm

Qualitative research is a methodology that primarily deals with the exploration of phenomena by collecting non-numeric data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). It is often exploratory, with the goal of delivering a comprehensive understanding of human activities and their determinants (Creswell et al., 2007). Unlike quantitative research, which attempts to quantify the data through statistical analysis, qualitative research is more about capturing the richness and complexity of human experiences (Antwi and Hamza, 2015). Qualitative research is distinguished by its in-depth exploration of complex phenomena. It prioritizes the quality of data over quantity, focusing on the 'how' and 'why' rather than 'how many' or 'how much,' which is more typical of quantitative research (Bryman, 2016). This approach is particularly effective in exploring the subtleties and intricacies of human behaviour and social phenomena (Silverman, 2016).

The selection of qualitative research for this study is underpinned by the need to understand the complex, subjective experiences of Zhuhai's hotel consumers and practitioners during the post-COVID period. This approach enables a detailed examination of individual perspectives and experiences, which is crucial for understanding the dynamics of consumer preferences, intentions as well as their affecting factors. Furthermore, the qualitative method is ideal for capturing the reflections of hotel executives on management strategies and resilience practices of the hotel industry, as it allows for a deeper understanding of their own experiences and viewpoints. The post-COVID era in the hospitality sector is marked by unprecedented changes and challenges. The flexibility of qualitative methods will also facilitate the exploration of emerging responses and innovations of Zhuhai hotel industry in the context of post-pandemic time

(Maxwell, 2012). By focusing on qualitative data, the research can provide rich, detailed insights into consumer behaviours and resilience management practices in hotel sector within Zhuhai, which are essential for suggesting practical measures for the industry's recovery and sustainability.

5.2 Discussion of Five Qualitative Research Approaches

Creswell (2007) outlined five approaches for qualitative research: narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and case study. A case study approach is the most appropriate methodology for this research based on the stated aims and researcher's understanding of Creswell's five qualitative approaches. A case study allows for an in-depth exploration of a real-life phenomenon. This aligns well to the core objective of analysing changeable post-COVID consumer behaviours and corresponding impacts on the hotel industry specifically within the regional context of Zhuhai, China (Creswell, 2007). The rationale for using case study not the other approaches is outlined below.

5.2.1 Case Study Research Design

Investigator adopting case study research explores a single or multiple bounded cases over time, through conducting a detailed exploration using multiple sources of data (Avery et al., 2011). The main goal for case study is to gain insights into specific organizations, relationships, industries and offer a nuanced, multifaceted exploration of a certain case (or bounded set of cases), which is align with the aim of this research. Employing a case study methodology enables the gathering of diverse data and perspectives from a range of sources, including interviews, observations and documents, facilitating a thorough and contextualized analysis of the shifts occurring after the global pandemic. Furthermore, cases can reveal subtle differences between hotel

segments based on factors such as star ratings, sizes, locations and so on, uncovering both common and distinct evolving patterns in consumer behaviour within Zhuhai city (Creswell, 2007). The valuable insights provided by case studies (Creswell, 2007) can directly inform practical strategies tailored to the unique challenges and opportunities facing Zhuhai's hospitality sector amidst the local and global evolution of consumer behaviours.

The challenges arising when using case study approach would be permission to observe in hotel lobby, and authorization from hotel and government to get internal data/information. Despite the outlined challenges, researcher still holds the view that case study is more suitable regarding the research questions and objectives illustrated above. The possible challenges are likely to be solved owing to researcher's former working experience in local tourism administration.

In contrast, the alternative qualitative approaches outlined by Creswell (2007) have notable limitations in their fit to the research aims. Phenomenology and narrative inquiry lack contextual analysis of an industry-specific phenomenon. Grounded theory minimises field immersion in actual real-world contexts. And ethnography has a significantly narrower focus on cultural groups rather than regional dynamics between industries and consumer bases (Creswell, 2007).

Therefore, as Creswell (2007) points out, the comprehensive, real-world analytical capabilities of case study research make it particularly well-aligned for developing a rounded, nuanced, and practical understanding of dynamic consumer behaviours and their impacts on the hospitality industry within China's tourism sector as the repercussions of the global crisis continue. When combined with deliberate, representative case selection and rigorous triangulation of qualitative data sources, the case study approach will promote impactful, contextualized insights into post-pandemic hotel consumers and the hotel industry's future trajectory in Zhuhai specifically.

5.2.2 Narrative Research

Narrative research focuses on stories told by individuals to reconstruct experiences into narrative chronological form (Polkinghore, 1995). It is used to understand lived experiences through the stories told by people and reveal how people make meaning of those experiences (Creswell, 2007). The challenge with using this research method is not only extensive information about the participant (Creswell, 2007), but also ownership, credibility and integrity of story (Pinnegar and Daynes, 2006 cited by Creswell, 2007). If narrative research had been utilised, the research question could have been altered to: what are the stories and experiences of hotel customers during the post pandemic era?

5.2.3 Phenomenology

Phenomenology emphasises the meanings of lived experiences in relation to a concept or a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). It is used to understand the essence of a shared experience in a phenomenon. This approach is very powerful in exploring the inner experiences and subjective feelings of individuals, but may not be sufficient to comprehensively analyse the impact of post- COVID consumer behaviour on the hospitality industry as a whole, especially in terms of macroeconomic and market dynamics.

5.2.4 Grounded Theory

Grounded theory focuses on the generalisation of theory from data, usually through a process of qualitative data collection and analysis to develop and test theoretical models (Strauss and Corbin, 1998 cited by Creswell, 2007). It is more suited to areas where theories have not been fully developed. However,

there is already a wide range of theoretical foundations and research on the impact of consumer behaviour and resilience management in the hospitality industry, so this study will focus on applying existing theories to achieve research aim and objectives rather than developing new ones from scratch.

5.2.5 Ethnography

Ethnography is also one of qualitative research methods which focus on a group sharing same culture through immersive fieldwork to explore and interpret values, beliefs, behaviours and language (Creswell, 2007). The biggest challenge of this approach is the requirement for researchers to fully immerse themselves in everyday lives of target people, which is time-consuming and may not be able to get access and trust of the culture-sharing group. Therefore, this research will not adopt ethnography not only because of the mentioned challenge but also for this study is not designed to examine daily lives and shared patterns of a cultural group.

6. Ethical Considerations

Regardless of the method used in qualitative research, an ethical researcher confronts numerous ethical challenges that arise while gathering data in the field, as well as during the analysis and sharing of qualitative findings (Creswell and Poth, 2016). Like Creswell and Poth, Flinders (1992) also acknowledges the importance of moral philosophy as a foundational element in any thorough ethical analysis. He emphasizes the necessity of ethical guidance in safeguarding human subjects in research (Stutchbury and Fox, 2009). As shown in Figure 4, Flinders (1992) outlines four distinct ethical frameworks to anticipate and navigate ethical dilemmas that emerge during research progression. These frameworks offer varied perspectives for examining each

phase of the research process. Flinders' proposed frameworks include Utilitarian, Deontological, Relational, and Ecological approaches. Each framework offers a unique viewpoint: Utilitarian ethics focus on maximizing the overall good; Deontological ethics stress moral behaviour beyond just outcomes, emphasizing principles like justice and honesty; Relational ethics prioritize our connections and concern for others; and Ecological ethics consider the broader environmental context (Flinders, 1992).

Ethical considerations in qualitative research are paramount, especially in studies involving human participants. Using the qualitative case study for this research requires adherence to established research ethics protocols and guidelines. Therefore, the Flinders Ethical Framework will be adopted to explore and address relevant ethical issues in the study through holistic consideration from these four philosophical perspectives as well as the positionality of researcher as a doctoral student and an outsider to the hotel environment and culture.

	Utilitarian	Deontological	Relational	Ecological
Recruitment	Informed consent	Reciprocity	Collaboration	Cultural sensitivity
Fieldwork	Avoidance of harm	Avoidance of wrong	Avoidance of imposition	Avoidance of detachment
Reporting	Confidentiality	Fairness	Confirmation	Responsive communication

Figure 4 Ethical Framework (Flinders, 1992)

At the Recruitment stage, participants (hotel consumers and key hotel practitioners) will be provided with full detailed information about the research, and they will also be given the options to voluntarily take part in the research. Building positive relationships with participants is crucial, ensuring mutual benefits. In addition, collaboration with hotel stakeholders is recommended to gain insights into consumer preferences and industry challenges during the

post-pandemic era. Cultural sensitivity is also highlighted, ensuring researcher awareness of stakeholder needs and clear communication of the study's goals. What's more, being opened to a role as a doctoral student enables stakeholders to provide information and access that are most suited to the researcher's level and needs.

In terms of Fieldwork phase, researcher should pay attention to the avoidance of harm by informing participants about the research aims, potential risks and benefits, and ensuring their right to withdraw. All participants will receive equitable treatment during the data collection process, including equal access to information, prompt attention to any concerns and respect for their freedom and dignity. As an external researcher, it's crucial to be particularly vigilant in understanding the norms, power dynamics, and values of the local hotel industry to prevent cultural insensitivity. Moreover, in order to avoid detachment, researcher ought to maintain a connection with participants after finishing data collection, including sharing research findings and providing contact details.

When it comes to Reporting part, fair reporting of data without bias or distortion is vital. Gaining approval from participants for the reported information is important to ensure it reflects their experiences. Furthermore, the confidentiality of the hotel inner information and anonymity of all participants will be guaranteed by researcher, while all collected data will be stored safely. Meanwhile, seeking confirmation from hotel contacts regarding appropriate interpretation/publication of findings is key as an outsider. Finally, responsive communication with participants is advised to encourage openness and honest feedback about hotel services in the post-pandemic context. Frequent updates and various communication channels are essential for the researcher to maintain a reciprocal relationship and effectively convey their abilities and limitations as someone outside the industry.

7. Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity are two fundamental notions in the debate on the trustworthiness of scientific research (Silverman, 2015). Reliability refers to the consistency of the researcher's approach as well as the degree to which the methods and procedures are clearly described and can be replicated, while Validity, on the other hand, concerns the accuracy and truthfulness of the findings (Yin, 2009). While validity and reliability are often connected with quantitative research, they are equally important for qualitative researchers to take into account during the study design, analysis of results and evaluation of the study's overall quality (Patton, 2002).

Four essential criteria, namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, are proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to ensure rigour for qualitative research. Credibility refers to the trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), which can be fulfilled through prolonged engagement with participants, ensuring a deep understanding of the hotel sector in the post-COVID era. Triangulating data sources and methods, and conducting participant validation, where participants confirm the findings, are also essential for credibility (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Transferability is concerned with how well the results can be applied or extended to other settings. Although qualitative research typically concentrates on distinct contexts, thorough descriptions of the research environment, participants, and methodologies enable others to evaluate whether the findings are applicable in comparable situations (Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2011). Dependability involves the consistency of data across different times and circumstances (Becker et al., 2012). To ensure dependability in this study, researcher should provide a detailed record of the research process, changes made, and how decisions are reached. An external audit of the process can also be conducted to assess dependability (Kirk & Miller, 1986). Finally, confirmability is related to the degree

to which the findings are influenced by the participants' inputs rather than biases, motives or interests of the researcher (Becker et al., 2012). Maintaining a reflexive journal where you document your decisions, reflections, and biases throughout the research process can help in establishing confirmability (Bapir, 2012).

8. Conclusion

8.1 Research Contributions

Firstly, this study will be among the first to analyse consumer behaviour and its impacts on hotel sector within Zhuhai, China in the post-pandemic scenario through a qualitative lens. It will provide a reference for the qualitative study of hotel consumer behaviour in other similar second-tier Chinese cities in the context of post-COVID-19 and will bring new enlightening to the increasing amount of literature about persistent pandemic impacts.

Secondly, by investigating characteristics of consumers' preferences and intentions and their effects on hotel sector during the post-pandemic time, this study will broaden researchers' thinking for the future study of post-COVID consumer behaviours in other hospitality sectors such as airlines, restaurants, retail sectors, etc.

Thirdly, this study will be conducive to recovering hospitality industry in Zhuhai city from the pandemic, facilitating the development of modern service industries in this area, and realizing the goal to build a leisure Bay area as well as a world-class tourism attraction.

Finally, utilizing the Planned Behaviour Theory and Organizational Resilience model to the analysis of the collected data will provide hospitality managers with practical insights. These insights are particularly valuable in identifying potential crises and their impacts, equipping hotel managers with the knowledge to make informed decisions and develop appropriate coping strategies. Such strategies are essential for mitigating risks and aiding in the recovery of the local hotel and tourism industries.

8.2 Limitations and Recommendations

Firstly, this study is restricted to Zhuhai city. While this has allowed for a glimpse into the similar second-tier Chinese cities and even the wider Guangdong-Hongkong-Macao Greater Bay Area, it is not sufficient evidence of other regions or countries' experience in the face of the COVID-19. We call on future researchers using the Planned Behaviour Theory and Organizational Resilience Framework to further investigate the characteristics of hotel consumers and the responses of hotel industry in other cities or regions in China as well as other counties, which may enrich the study's scope and relevance.

Secondly, this research is primarily focused on the hotel industry in the post-pandemic context. The author encourages future researchers to shift their research perspective to other areas of the hospitality as well as tourism sectors, such as catering, airlines, tour operators, etc., to further explore and identify the on-going impacts of changes in consumer behaviours on the entire hospitality and travel industries during the post-pandemic era.

Thirdly, this research exclusively employs qualitative research methods to investigate perceptions of hotel consumers and industry practitioners, which will result in a certain degree of singularity. Moreover, the original data generated

in interpretivist research may not be universally applied, as it is heavily influenced by individual perspectives and values. Therefore, it is encouraged that future researchers adopt a variety of qualitative and quantitative research methods to complement and support the content of this study. Additionally, it would be beneficial to expand the range of respondents to include academics, professionals, the ministry of tourism, business associations, etc.

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