

Non-interaction and identity change in Covid-19 tourism

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the fundamental desire for social interaction in international tourism. It is vital to understand how the loss of meaningful social interaction will impact on tourists' identity change. As the pandemic first appeared in Wuhan, capital city of Hubei province in central China, the study focuses on Chinese tourists' reflections on social identity change and its associated non-interaction during the time of the unexpected crisis. Using the constructivist grounded theory approach, this qualitative research explains how non-interaction with people and place influences, and indeed is influenced by, changes in their social identities during the crisis, and shapes their future social behaviours. Theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

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Introduction

“All people from our country are brothers”

[Confucius (551–478 BCE)]

In December 2019, Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) was first discovered in Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei province in central China. Wuhan quarantine started on 23rd January 2020, the first lockdown for this virus, which was then extended to the rest of China and then the rest of the world. On 31st January 2020, the World Health Organization declared the new coronavirus strain an emerging public health threat of international concern. Since then, the COVID-19 pandemic has extensively transformed social experience. By May 2020, over 90% of people worldwide were living under travel restrictions (Asquith, 2020), and as a result the tourism industry suffered. While the future of tourism remains uncertain, we are now in a position to empirically investigate the social changes this is inspiring.

At the heart of tourism is the interaction of people and places. However, as ‘social distancing’ and ‘quarantine’ become increasingly embedded in our lives, the ways we interact with people and places through travel are being altered. These measures restrict social interaction, prompting ‘non-interaction’ to strongly take root in our everyday social life. Indeed, a ‘new social normal’ is continually evolving. Thus, this paper is a response to the call for COVID-19 tourism research to go beyond the descriptive (Zenker & Kock, 2020), as this study applies the concept of social identity to understand how Chinese tourists reflect on the unexpected social identity change brought about through social (non-)interaction while travelling during the pandemic.

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In order to examine the changing (non-)interactions associated with Covid-19 tourism, this paper focuses on the experiences of Chinese tourists. Specifically, these tourists were in the midst of travel when the pandemic began to unfold and the first lockdowns in China were instituted resulting in them having difficulty or being unable to return as originally planned. The timing of the outbreak is particularly noteworthy in this context, having occurred at the very beginning of 2020 it swept through Chinese Lunar New Year, the most important festival and holiday season and a time when people commonly travel away from home. Their tourism experiences were framed by identity tensions due to the perceived associations between Chinese tourists and the virus. COVID-19, to a certain degree, has been strongly associated with Chinese people and therefore Chinese tourists, especially for those coming from Wuhan/Hubei. For a considerable time, COVID-19 was phrased as 'Wuhan virus', 'Chinese virus' or 'China virus' by politicians and mass media, both within and beyond China (e.g., Gao, 2020; Rovetta & Bhagavathula, 2020). For a while, the mega city was viewed as the virus capital and during that time, those who travelled from the city and the province were accused of being the chief spreaders of the virus around China and the world (e.g., BBC, 2020; Chen & Quan, 2020). This brought a sudden change of their identity from profitable New Year tourists to tourists with Coronavirus, as well as a transition from interaction to non-interaction with Chinese or Wuhan tourists as a way to avoid the disease. 'No Chinese Allowed' signs were posted outside restaurants and retailers in Korea and Japan, where China is a major source market (Los Angeles Times, 2020). Even within China, Wuhan/Hubei tourists became unwanted faces for host communities (Gao, 2020).

This social categorisation of Chinese and Wuhan/Hubei tourists and their perceived association with the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted the focus of this study on social identity change through tourism. Specifically, we argue that individuals' reflection on the imposed virus-related identity is inseparable from the practices of 'non-interaction' that have taken root in the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has inherent social consequences, with social distancing measures implying the need to alter meaningful interactions. As a result, many social psychologists have started to call for research on how this loss of meaningful social interactions and uncertainties brought by the pandemic impact both sense of self and social identity (Rosenfeld et al., 2020; Van Bavel et al., 2020).

For social psychologists, the concept of social identity has traditionally been employed to understand intergroup relations and behaviour (Brown, 2000; Hogg et al., 2017). The concept explains how individual's self identity derives from the social categories to which he/she belongs (Tajfel, 1979). Through an investigation of how people's thoughts, feelings and behaviours are influenced by the actual, imagined or implied presence of others, individuals can evaluate their sense of belonging and self-concept (Hogg & Vaughan, 2009). Despite significant events impact on tourists' social identities (e.g., Zhang, Fong, et al., 2019), understanding intergroup relationships between tourists and hosts, is still under-researched (Chien & Ritchie, 2018). Indeed, the majority of previous studies have focused on how tourism can facilitate a sense of group identity for tourists (e.g., Chen, Zhao, & Huang, 2020) and for host communities (e.g., Chen et al., 2018; Palmer et al., 2013). Only a few have started to examine the interactive nature of social identity formation through international travel (Zhang, Pearce, & Chen, 2019).

As social identity is particularly useful to understand individuals' attitudes towards 'self', 'us' and 'others' (Tajfel, 1979), we postulate that the investigation of social identity in tourism should be aware that it is individual's self-reflections on 'us' and 'others' in various social contexts that define the meaning of self and social identities (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Tajfel, 1979). Such identities are entangled in the social-constructedness of everyday travel experiences (Hollinshead, 1999). Thus, contextualising social identity in the ongoing pandemic motivates us to explore the interactive nature of social identity as well as to understand how the loss of meaningful social interaction through non-interaction practices influences identity change in the pandemic. Further, as this paper will demonstrate, the quickness with which interaction can change to non-interaction in the face of crisis can have knock-on effects to tourist motivation and demand, specifically shifting from international to domestic travel.

The paper begins by reviewing the concept of social identity in tourism, linking it to a discussion on identity change in the pandemic. This is followed by a discussion of the idea of non-interaction and its relationship with social identity changes. After introducing the methodological considerations relating to constructivist grounded theory, the study then conceptualises Chinese tourists' identity change through travel during the crises. In particular, the negotiation between self and social identity in response to a sudden shift towards non-interactions with place and people highlights a contribution to understanding identity change caused by infectious diseases, and crises more broadly.

Social identity change through COVID-19 tourism

Changes in social identity are often conceived as the outcome of social processes in which individuals negotiate between various meanings associated with 'us' and 'others' when contexts change (Ellemers et al., 2002; Pearce, 2013). As the COVID-19 pandemic continuously defines the new normal for our social experience, including tourism experience, it is important to understand how the pandemic impacts tourists' identity formation and maintenance processes.

Social identity and tourism

Social identity is best defined as the emotional and evaluative consequences of belonging to a specific readily labelled group (Tajfel, 1982). People are fundamentally motivated to establish positive shared identities with others to validate their own identity and social experience (Hogg & Rinella, 2018). Tajfel (1979) views people's affiliation with certain social groups, as well as their deliberate non-affiliation with other groups, as key drivers of behaviour. In this vein, our social life is categorised into different social groups (e.g., those specified by nationality, education, gender, sport teams) (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Tajfel, 1982).

In the tourism sphere, as tourists are not simply a distinct group of people, but are members of diverse societies and sub-cultures, their social interaction with others through tourism is crucial to developing and maintaining social identities (McCabe, 2002; Pearce, 2013).

A thorough understanding of the components of social identity and their implications for change is fundamental to understanding social identity change in divergent contexts, including COVID-19 tourism. Social psychologists believe that three interlinked components that contribute to an individual's social identity: cognitive, evaluative and emotional (Hogg et al., 2017; Tajfel, 1982). The first component, *cognitive*, highlights individuals' awareness of their membership and characteristics of the salient group that differentiate ingroups from outgroups, with which to categorise themselves into different social groups (Ellemers et al., 1999; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). Categorisation of self and others into ingroups and outgroups is a cognitive process in defining features or ideas of the group (Tajfel, 1982). For example, backpackers may be understood as a distinctive social group through their common ways of interacting with fellow backpackers and destinations are based on their shared cognitive awareness of key characteristics of being a backpacker (Chen, Zhao, & Huang, 2020; Murphy, 2001). It should be noted that salient group characteristics are dynamically responsive to immediate changes in contextual factors. Different contexts may prescribe different contextually relevant behaviour contingent on the same social identity (Hogg et al., 1995; Hogg & Rinella, 2018). Therefore, reflections on how the pandemic impacts the way we categorise or are categorised by 'us' and 'other' becomes crucial (Van Bavel et al., 2020).

Second, the *evaluative* component contributes to an individual's social identity insofar as the individual evaluates differences between ingroups and relevant outgroups on the basis of the cognitive characteristics of social groups (Brown, 2000). Specifically, the evaluative component links with group awareness to select the value connotations attached to membership of this social group, which fulfils individuals' desire for positive self-esteem (Tajfel, 1982). To create clear intergroup boundaries, members of a social group tend to privilege a positive ingroup identity over outgroups to avoid any potential loss of group status for the individuals involved (Hogg et al., 2017; Tajfel, 1982). While studies on social identity are likely to assume intragroup homogeneity in relation to intergroup differentiation, Hogg (1996) argues that it is possible to understand intragroup differentiation when it is viewed as interactive evaluations between different subgroups. Here, the evaluative process is not only limited to intergroup comparisons but also drives the monitoring of intragroup conduct (Tajfel, 1979). Studies of social identity in tourism often prioritise intergroup interactions, especially host-tourist interactions (e.g., Chien & Ritchie, 2018; Palmer et al., 2013). As social context determines the reflective evaluations on any given group memberships (Ellemers et al., 2002), it is valuable to obtain a comprehensive understanding of both intergroup and intragroup interactions in the pandemic context, which is a goal of the current study.

The third component of social identity highlights the *emotional* investment in the first two processes: cognitive and evaluative (Tajfel, 1982). The emotional investment people have in their social identities motivates social behaviours, including improving their group status (Ellemers et al., 2002). Individuals generally hold strong, positive emotions towards ingroups and/or rather negative emotions towards the relevant outgroups, which can simply be understood as ingroup favourism (Brown, 2000). A positive social identity serves basic needs for self-esteem, certainty and meanings. With close relations between self and group esteem, any changes in group identity can reshape the understanding of self (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). Tourism involves considerable social categorisation of 'us' and 'others', 'tourist' and 'local', 'Chinese tourists' and 'Western tourists'. Such social categorisations have motivated studies to understand how negative stereotypes of social groups potentially influence tourists' emotions and behaviours (e.g., Zhang et al., 2019).

Although it is foundational to tourism research that tourism occurs in different places with various contextual factors, researchers have paid limited attention to the importance of the relatively fluid and contingent nature of social identity in this context. Prior research on how tourists' experiences contribute to a sense of group identity assumes that interacting parties hold static positions (e.g., Palmer et al., 2013; Chen, Zhao, & Huang, 2020), with little acknowledgment of the contingent nature of social identity. Changes in contextual factors influence the nature of interactions between 'us' and 'others' and consequently shift intergroup relations and understandings of self and social identity (Hogg et al., 1995). An emerging interest in shifting from outcome-focused investigation to process focused inquiry on interactions between tourists and hosts (Chien & Ritchie, 2018) opens up opportunities for the current research to investigate the messy process of tourists' identity changes during the pandemic by embracing that social identity is interactive, fluid and contingent.

From social interaction to non-interaction in COVID-19 tourism

Through an investigation of how people's thoughts, feelings and behaviours are influenced by the actual, imagined or implied presence of others, individuals can evaluate their sense of belonging and self-concept (Hogg & Vaughan, 2009). Simply, social interactions in various social contexts define the meaning of self and social identities (Tajfel, 1979; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). In tourism, unique and meaningful experiences are often achieved through social interaction (White & White, 2008), as tourists construct their own meaningful experience through interactions with people and place (Ma & Xie, 2015).

Social interaction is often defined as the way in which individuals act and react in relation to one another; through such interaction, individuals are able to interpret social experience and produce meanings (Argyle, 2017; Cerulo, 2009). For a considerable time, investigations into social interaction were based on examination of everyday encounters with other people, a perspective that limited analysis of interactions among humans. Scholars defended this approach by arguing that only minded humans have the intention to interact and therefore interpret the meaning of such interactions (e.g., Goffman, 1967). Early studies in the tourism sphere shared the same limitation. For example, citing Goffman's (1967) work on interaction ritual, Murphy (2001) proposes two levels of social interaction for backpackers: co-presence and focused interaction. Co-presence describes the minimal

level of social interaction and is about individuals' awareness of others; focused interactions occur when people gather and cooperate to sustain a focus of attention. While [Murphy's \(2001\)](#) study provides insights into backpackers' social interaction and meaning-making during a trip, various tourism contexts and tourists' desire to experience a place have been overlooked. Consequently, there has been a growing trend in recognising interaction with non-humans and treating perception as seriously as action ([Cerulo, 2009](#)). In this vein, some tourism studies argue that tourism provides an arena for interaction: tourists' encounters and engagement with places, people and cultures of destination are equally important to interactions with hosts and fellow tourists ([Ma & Xie, 2015](#); [Wearing & Foley, 2017](#); [White & White, 2008](#)).

Social interaction is "not usually the object of evaluation but rather the instrumentality through which some goal might be achieved" ([Reed, 1972, p. 310](#)). Social contextual factors play a deciding role in understanding social behaviour and meanings embedded within social experience; investigation into the process of social interaction in various contexts provide insight into social behaviour change ([Argyle, 2017](#); [Reed, 1972](#)). In the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing restrictive rules on social distancing and quarantine challenge meaningful social interaction. As tourism is fundamentally about embedded social experiences, it is vital, therefore, to explore not only the social interaction but also the non-interaction that shift individuals' cognitive and evaluative reflection on 'self' and 'us' in this context.

The idea of 'non-interaction' is about the lack of social interaction, as well as the notion of absence. Exclusion of others, either consciously or unconsciously, implies one's self-concept is excluded in cognitive understanding of a social group, and therefore, shifts the boundaries of 'us' and 'others' ([Ellemers et al., 1999](#)). For example, the absence of one's identity representation in a museum shifts visitors' reflections on 'self' and 'others' and therefore, influences individuals' identities and social (non-)interaction with others ([Zhang et al., 2018](#)). Similarly, in understanding mundane interactions, [Lynn \(2017\)](#) argues the idea of non-welcome can be conceptualised as a process of denying one's identity and consequently influences tourists' emotional reflections and their interaction with service providers in tourism and hospitality context. Without a detailed discussion on identity change and social (non-)interaction, our moral turn in deploying tourism to facilitate a welcoming society ([Caton, 2012](#)) seems incomplete.

Our understanding of social non-interaction and its process in influencing social behaviour and social identity are still under-researched. The lack of meaningful social interaction during the current pandemic has necessitated a transfer of social psychology from research questions to research methodology; its implication for social relations, behaviour and identity needs urgent attention ([Rosenfeld et al., 2020](#); [Van Bavel et al., 2020](#)). Many studies have initiated a discussion of physical distancing to understand the implications for social connections ([Van Bavel et al., 2020](#)). In the same vein, tourism studies have tried to understand how technology and artificial intelligence could bridge this gap and facilitate service delivery (e.g., [Zeng et al., 2020](#)). Nevertheless, it is the lack of social interaction, rather than the loss of physical contact, that remains a problem for social identity change.

Only a few studies have tried to understand tourists and residents' social interactions during the pandemic. For example, [Thyne et al. \(2020\)](#) argue that social distancing rules influence residents' sympathetic attitudes towards incoming international tourists. [Kock et al. \(2020\)](#) adopted evolutionary psychology to understand how disease avoidance is a fundamental motive for tourists and influences their behaviour. Fear is an emotional responses in the pandemic ([Van Bavel et al., 2020](#)), which is implicitly discussed as part of residents' attitudes ([Thyne et al., 2020](#)) and disease avoidance ([Kock et al., 2020](#)). For the Chinese, specifically, it is the perceived fear about them from others which differentiates the current study. These quantitative empirical insights enhance our knowledge of outcome focused social behaviour inquiries related to the pandemic, but our interpretive sense prioritises not just a way of knowing, but also "a way of relating" ([Wilson & Hollinshead, 2015, p. 47](#)). As such, the paper contextualises the social identity change process during the pandemic and relates such changes to the role of social (non-)interaction. Here, we offer in-depth and critical insights into interlinks between social (non-)interaction and identity change dynamics in and beyond the pandemic.

Research design

This paper employs a social constructionist paradigm that conceptualises social identity and social interaction as socio-culturally embedded concepts. Though the literature on social interaction is adequate, the lack of conceptualisation around non-interaction led us to adopt a constructivist grounded theory approach. As 'non-interaction' is a contextualised idea that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, the constructivist grounded theory is particularly useful to enhance a contextualised understanding and get close to the data ([Charmaz, 2011](#)). Further, a constructivist approach helped us to learn more about how participants' meanings and actions are connected to broader social environments ([Charmaz & Bryant, 2016](#)). Constructivist grounded theory addresses the active role of participants and their interactions in the process of knowledge construction and enables reflexivity and dialogue between the researchers and the researched ([Charmaz, 2011](#); [Matteucci & Gnoth, 2017](#)).

Method

The interview protocol consisted of two main sections. First, participants were asked questions regarding demographics and some basic information about their trips during the Chinese New Year 2020. Second, a series of open-ended interview questions were designed to explore their tourist experiences, followed by questions around three components of social identity (cognitive, evaluative and emotional). To capture naturally occurring non-interactions in tourists' accounts, the term 'non-interaction' was not used explicitly in the interview format. Instead, the idea of 'non-interaction' emerged from participants' own experiences of travelling during the COVID-19 outbreak.

In adopting a constructivist grounded theory approach, this paper employed a theoretical sampling strategy to collect data. Theoretical sampling addresses the likelihood of providing theoretically relevant results; the selection of the sample and data analysis are often done simultaneously to provide heterogeneous and rich cases (Coyne, 1997; Matteucci & Gnoth, 2017). A total of 29 interviews were conducted between April and July 2020. At the beginning of 2020, a small number of Wuhan/Hubei tourists were approached during the Wuhan Quarantine. However, their uncertainty about the future demotivated them from participation. It was only after the opening up of Wuhan in April, and when all participants returned home, that the researcher was able to conduct the interviews.

First, both Chinese researchers contacted their Wuhan/Hubei friends and relatives to identify potential participants. Then, nine remote interviews were conducted in Chinese using WeChat. The first round of analysis revealed that 'non-interaction' emerged strongly through Wuhan/Hubei tourists' experiences during the pandemic. It was further noticed that other Chinese tourists seemed to play a significant role in formulating their lived social identities. While both Chinese authors continued to search for possible research participants from Wuhan and Hubei provinces by adopting snowball sampling techniques, the interviews were significantly extended to explore Chinese tourists' reflections, more broadly, in order to capture intragroup and intergroup behaviours and reflections.

Some of our interviewees also posted our interview request in their WeChat groups. The majority of participants joined different WeChat groups when they were trapped in destinations (e.g., Wuhan tourists trapped in Japan) in efforts to find ways to return home. Hence, another 20 remote interviews were conducted by the Chinese authors. To achieve a heterogeneous theoretical sample, different social-demographic characteristics, residential cities and travel destinations were considered (see Table 1). As shown in Table 1, the research participants came from diverse backgrounds, and both domestic and international tourist experiences were considered. The researchers terminated the data collection when it was apparent that the information being gathered was highly repetitive, effectively when the material being assembled had reached theoretical saturation (Coyne, 1997; Matteucci & Gnoth, 2017).

The interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the participants. They were then transcribed verbatim in its original language, Chinese, for further analysis. To ensure their anonymity, participants were coded as P1–P29. All transcribed interview data were analysed in an "iterative, comparative, interactive, and abductive" process (Charmaz, 2011, p. 361). The following three steps enabled the researchers to analyse the data: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. The authors read all of the transcriptions multiple times in order to conduct open coding and become familiar with the data. A small reflexive memo produced after each interview was reviewed to enable a better understanding of the data at this stage. The data were later aggregated into higher order concepts through categorising and selecting recurring themes in the codes (axial coding and selective coding). Then, major themes were eventually identified to show Chinese tourists' reflections on their imposed social identity change embedded in this developing idea of social (non-)interaction during COVID-19 tourism.

To ensure the quality of the codes and the trustworthiness of the qualitative themes (Decrop, 1999), data analysis was first conducted independently and then cross-checked by the two Chinese authors; one is a Chinese national who has lived abroad

Table 1
Demographic profile of participants.

Participant no.	Age	Occupation	Education	City	Gender	Marital status	Destination	Unplanned destinations
1	37	Travel agency	Bachelor	Wuhan	F	Married	Japan	Changsha
2	40	Civil servant	Bachelor	Wuhan	M	Married	Beihai	
3	30+	University Teacher	Doctoral	Wuhan	M	Married	Thailand	Bali island, Singapore, Guangzhou
4	60+	Retired	Bachelor	Xiaogan (Hubei)	M	Married	Guilin	
5	35	Jewellery designer	master	Wuhan	F	Married	Huizhou	
6	30+	Entrepreneur	Bachelor	Wuhan	F	Married	Xian	
7	50+	Real estate	Bachelor	Wuhan	M	Married	Hainan	
8	28	Fashion	Master	Huanggang (Hubei)	F	Single	Yunnan	
9	30	HR	Master	Wuhan	F	Married	Japan	
10	50	Finance	Bachelor	Dongbei	F	Married	UK	
11	37	Trade	Bachelor	Hangzhou	F	Married	Hainan	
12	31	Office	Master	Shanghai	M	Single	Ningbo	
13	38	Office	Bachelor	Hangzhou	M	Single	India	
14	38	Factory owner	Master	Hangzhou	M	Married	US	Japan
15	41	University teacher	Master	Hangzhou	F	Married	US	
16	27	Bank	Bachelor	Jinhua	F	Single	Switzerland	
17	32	Sale	Master	Sichuan	M	Single	UK	Guangzhou
18	37	Office	Junior College	Wuhan	F	Married	Guangxi	
19	24	Teacher	Bachelor	Wuhan	F	Single	Vietnam	Guangzhou
20	35	Trade	Bachelor	Shenzhen	M	Married	Xian	
21	47	Office	Bachelor	Shenzhen	M	Married	Changsha	
22	30	Real estate	Bachelor	Shenzhen	F	Single	Malaysia	
23	35	Office	Bachelor	Wuhan	F	Married	Jiangsu	Xuzhou
24	30	Entrepreneur	Bachelor	Xian	F	Married	Thailand	
25	23	Office	Bachelor	Chongqing	F	Single	Chongqing	
26	26	Office	Bachelor	Beijing	M	Single	Yunnan	
27	26	Finance	Junior College	Beijing	F	Single	Haikou	
28	22	Training	Bachelor	Xi'an	F	Single	Chengdu	
29	35	Software engineer	Bachelor	Xi'an	M	Married	Thailand	

for over eight years and who can therefore be considered as both an 'insider' and an 'outsider' based on the restricted definition of being a Chinese tourist. The other is a Chinese author who has resided in China for more than 30 years and could provide 'insider' insights into the researched context. The third author, a native English speaker, then, assisted in confirming the themes from an 'outsider' perspective. The reflexive recognition of the different theoretical sensitivities of the authors addresses concerns regarding the quality of the qualitative data analysis (Decrop, 1999).

Chinese self and social identity

The vast majority of social identity research has been carried out in Western society and Ellemers et al. (2002) remind us that Western social contexts have a strong emphasis on personal identity. This concern with the individual self inadvertently influences conceptualisation of social identity and intergroup interactions. Contextualising the discussion of identity change during COVID-19 tourism, it is necessary to understand how the Chinese conceptualise self and social identity.

In China, social interactions are largely influenced by Confucius, who argued that the Chinese are 'interdependent individuals' (Hwang, 1998). While the collectivist society seems to be purely group-oriented, it is the idea of interdependent individuals that defines the collective and group culture for the Chinese. Being a person or *ren* (人) means to behave in Confucius moral ways of conduct. Recognition of *ren* is determined by someone's social role and his/her fulfilment of the relational codes of conduct in the eyes of others. Being the 'real' *ren*, following moral principles and norms, provides a unique self-concept and justifies one's position in society and group. For the Chinese, an individuals' life can be meaningful only through coexistence with others, which is distinct from the independent individual self of Western people. In this vein, social identity is both interactive and interdependent for the Chinese and influences their international travel behaviour (Zhang, Fong, et al., 2019). Contextualising the debates of social identity change and social (non-)interaction, the paper examines how the change in social identity brought by the COVID-19 pandemic impacts the interdependent Chinese and the role of non-interaction played in this process.

Negotiating social identity change in COVID-19 tourism

Social interaction, and conversely social non-interaction, plays profound roles in shaping the way we understand self, us and others. Data collected offer an overview of Chinese tourists' reflections on the imposed identity change on them by others, as embedded in the social (non-)interaction of COVID-19 tourism. Three themes are strongly associated with three interlinked components of social identity (cognitive, evaluative and emotional) as illustrated below.

Cognitive awareness of identity change: non-interaction with place and people

The first component of social identity, cognitive awareness, can be observed in the ways these tourists experienced in/outgroup membership change. Their cognitive perceptions of being tourists, Chinese tourists and, for some, tourists from Wuhan/Hubei significantly influenced, and indeed were influenced by, increased social non-interaction with place and people (see Table 2). The Wuhan quarantine, beginning 23rd January 2020, was mentioned by all participants as the clear watershed moment that signalled the start of their 'unusual' holidays and their identity transformation.

With the exception of P29, all participants focused on their experiences of social non-interaction with the destination space, supporting White and White's (2008) finding that immersion in the destination space is a significant motivation for tourists. For some, such as P1 and P11, the absence of others in the destination made this lived experience 'special'. This collective social non-interaction with the destination became imbued with meanings constructed by participants and making them cognizant that they were tourists travelling during a crisis.

Table 2
Cognitive change on identity and non-interaction with place and people.

Cognitive change classification	Participant no.	Non-interaction with place	Non-interaction with people
Chinese tourists travel during crisis	P1–P28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid popular attractions • Avoid indoor attractions and facilities • Empty airport, attraction & hotels • Avoid seafood and unfamiliar cuisine • Brief and rushed trips 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid Wuhan/Hubei tourists • Feel the non-interaction from others.
Undercover refugees: Wuhan/Hubei tourists	P1–P9, P18, P19, P23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stay in safe place • Avoid anti-Wuhan area & countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid Wuhan/Hubei tourists • Avoid non-necessary interaction with people • Feel the non-interaction from others.
Tourists	P29	Normal	No Wuhan tourists around, I will be fine

You can feel it happening. This makes us nervous. This is Chinese New Year – you expect to see lots of tourists in Japan - but airports, restaurants and hotels were very quiet ... We did not order any sashimi in Japan, can you believe?

[(P1)]

The edge of the world is a must-see attraction in Hainan. However, we knew that the city would be warmer and safer and so we started to avoid all the famous attractions and indoor spaces.

[(P11)]

Participants' desire to interact with the destination was disturbed; some expressed that their trips were “rushed”, “brief”, and they “just see the attraction rather than experience it”. Previous research indicates that the connection between place and self is best achieved through immersive trips (e.g., White & White, 2008). Here, rather than intense interaction with place giving meaning to participants' identity, it was the non-interaction. For example, P16 recalled:

I got lost in Switzerland, I approached locals to find my way but people did not want to talk to me. One man helped me, but he kept social distance. I still remember he said, China is sick now. Even though I am not from Wuhan, for them and for me we are the same, we are Chinese.

The narrative “for them and for me we are the same, we are Chinese”, exemplifies cognitive awareness through the projection of ‘self’ and ‘us’. While individuals have the flexibility to choose one social identity over another for better self-esteem (Ellemers et al., 1999), the perception of the Chinese as having an unchangeable social identity for all participants motivated them to keep a low profile during the crisis.

It is worth noting that Wuhan/Hubei tourists expressed being particularly sensitive to non-interaction due to their cognitive awareness of their newly-acquired identity as tourists from the virus capital. Indeed, tourists from other Chinese cities, such as P26 (below), expressed their concern about Wuhan/Hubei tourists both within and outside of China. All Wuhan/Hubei participants were extremely worried about their safety, especially in view of the increased unpleasant clashes between the Wuhan/Hubei tourists and locals that were reported within and beyond China. The awareness of this social identity and associated salient group characteristics differentiated Wuhan/Hubei tourists from other Chinese tourists travelling during the COVID-19 pandemic. This intragroup differentiation triggered by the outbreak made Wuhan/Hubei tourists an inferior intergroup for many (Hogg, 1996).

Why shouldn't they just stay in Wuhan? They are going all over here and there. I need to be careful.

[(P26)]

In response to growing non-interaction, Wuhan/Hubei tourists who could not return home after 23rd January generally chose to disguise their tourist identities in order to mitigate potential harm to themselves and their travel companions. P3 illustrated his 3-month experience of transforming from tourist to undercover refugee. This unpleasant experience was meaningful and reminded him of his responsibility as father and husband to ensure a good life for his family in the future:

I left Wuhan on 16th January and returned home in March. I travelled with my family to Thailand. We stayed in good hotels... My kid was playing with other kids happily for days. On 23rd, they asked him, 'Where do you come from?' He replied, 'I am from Wuhan.' All the parents picked up their kids and use hydroalcoholic gel to wash their hands. Then they demanded more details... from then we started to travel as refugees. We started to speak Mandarin rather than the Wuhan dialect. We flew around in southeast Asia and tried to return home... All flights were cancelled and so we then went back to Bangkok as everyone said Thailand is generally good to us... We had to stay in very cheap hotels, avoid contact with anyone. I had studied in Australia before and sometimes I pretended I was Australian Chinese... I've printed out the picture of us staying in the cheap hotel to remind me of this unpleasant moment.

Many also concealed their identities as tourists to avoid shame from family or friends at home. As interdependent individuals, the desire to hide their touristic activities not only shows the underlying meaning of their tourist identity has been changed, but also implies participants' desire to maintain a positive self-concept at home (Brown, 2000; Hwang, 1998). This highlights that formation and maintenance of social identity in tourism is inseparable from their social identity at home (McCabe, 2002). P4 said,

I would normally post pictures on my friends circle at Wechat when travelling. This time I did not. I was afraid people I know would regard me as an irresponsible old man who was running around during this serious pandemic.

As tourists are normally classified as outsiders, the fact that some participants were staying with relatives in other cities meant they could pretend to be locals. P1 recalled,

My sister lived in Changsha. We lived with them and we look very similar. When going out I always pretended to be her. With masks on my face, her neighbours did not question this.

Similarly, those who chose self-drive trips (P2, P4, P5, and P18) employed various measures to cover up their licence plate with ‘鄂’ (abbreviation of Hubei province). Participants' non-interaction with cars and licence plates made these items symbolic, an expression of identity (Argyle, 2017).

My self-drive trip turned into a walking trip. We did not take taxis or drive our own car... everyone was afraid of us, and we were also afraid of them.

[(P18)]

We stayed in a large resort but were forced to leave...when we wanted to drive back to Wuhan, we returned to remove the licence plate of our car. But it was missing, and had already been removed by the hotel.

[(P2)]

I am trapped here. My trip consists of travelling from the room to the balcony. But I can only stand the balcony at night. Everyone knows my floor is for those who come from Wuhan/Hubei.

[(P5)]

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 the expression “恐鄂” (Fearful Hubei) has been frequently used to express fear of people from Wuhan and Hubei, which further differentiates this subgroup from the other Chinese tourists. The everyday tourist experience of Wuhan/Hubei tourists shaped by social non-interaction therefore contributed to their social identity (Zhang, Pearce, & Chen, 2019). While the mere presence of others would be meaningful for tourists in normal conditions, for Wuhan/Hubei tourists, their actual, imagined or implied co-presence with others shifts their formation and maintenance of Wuhan/Hubei identity and their sense of self (Hogg & Vaughan, 2009).

Evaluating self: identity paradox in negotiating social non-interaction

Social identity construction is highly contingent. Tajfel (1982) argues that the study of social identity should pay greater attention to people's active attempt to make sense of, and to change, their social environments. Individuals evaluate cognitive differences among social groups to modify identity, when necessary (Brown, 2000; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019), as well as produce positive self-esteem (Tajfel, 1982) and monitor intragroup conduct (Tajfel, 1979). Three emergent identity paradoxes expressed by participants show how paradoxical perceptions towards different non-interactions with place and people influence their identity change (see Table 3). The use of the term ‘paradox’ naturally arose from participants' own phrasing, indicating that two opposing identities coexisted during their tourist experience in the crisis. Here, social identity becomes a contingent social construct (Hogg et al., 1995).

As shown in Table 3, most participants indicated a certain degree of luck at escaping the virus epicenter and staying in a relatively safer place. Here, as seen in the following quotes, the underlying social comparison between those staying in China and those outside China generated the sense of being lucky. Nevertheless, the increased non-interaction with destination communities and home motivated P17 to return home during the outbreak.

I'm very lucky. I did not know much about the virus when we were on the tour in India. Later, everyone in China was living in abysmal conditions. I am happy as I escaped from this.

[(P13)]

My mum advised me to stay outside. Luckily, I was not in China. Local areas became intense and I could feel people looking at me differently. It was safer to stay with family and a place I knew.

[(P17)]

However, this sense of being lucky is juxtaposed with the sense of being unlucky whenever there was unexpected uncertainty or intense social non-interaction. Many participants recalled their families asking them to return. For them, staying with family at

Table 3
Identity paradox.

Paradox(es)	Participant no.
Lucky to escape from the virus spot, yet unlucky to be trapped in unfamiliar places away from home	P1–P21, P23, P24, P26, P27, P28
Wanting to find a community, yet feeling distant from a community	P1–P9, P18, P19, P23
Angry about non-interaction, yet understanding of the non-interaction	P1–P9, P10, P16–P19, P21, P23, P25

home was regarded as a safer option. The sense of being lucky was short-lived and was soon replaced by the desire to escape from unfamiliar tourist destinations.

Even when we got back to Guangzhou, our motherland, we still could not find any hotels. The world abandoned us. Why did I plan the holiday?

[(P19)]

Despite knowing the potential negative reactions from the other Chinese, many still felt, “*It was better to stay with your compatriots in your own country land*” (P9). This provides evidence that in-group favourism (Brown, 2000) is still active when travelling during crises.

Compared with others, tourists from Wuhan/Hubei shared a distinct type of identity paradox. Many of them were compelled to leave hotel rooms, and some ended up with nowhere to stay. Many indeed felt the sense of isolation and the lack of meaningful social interactions with others in the destination; hence they had a strong desire to relocate to find a new social group that could fulfil a sense of belonging. Such processes of searching for a shared reality, specifically of being trapped in a destination, are meaningful to validate one's identity and experience (Hogg & Rinella, 2018). At the same time, they tended to conceal their Wuhan/Hubei identity, fearing that exposing it might be more harmful than helpful. P7 explained:

I had an apartment in Hainan. We left Wuhan in December. When the quarantine was announced, we knew we did not have the virus but we still reported to the authority. If not, our neighbours would report us. We wanted to find our way back to Wuhan after so many things had happened... We were forced to leave the apartment and stayed with others from Wuhan in one room waiting for the test. They might have had the virus!

Increasingly perceived inappropriate behaviour towards Wuhan/Hubei tourists was mentioned by many tourists and made Wuhan/Hubei tourists a distinct social sub-group for understanding the collective identity of being the Chinese. As a result, social interaction with other tourists remained online rather than offline. This in-person non-interaction among Wuhan/Hubei tourists triggered paradoxical feelings for some. Many participants expressed their sympathy for those who were trapped in the same destination with them in WeChat groups. At the same time, the fact that Wuhan/Hubei identity is strongly associated with the virus made them reluctant to have any face-to-face interaction even within their sub-groups. The following comments illustrate that crises can stimulate social group solidarity; the inability to help close compatriots influenced the perception of self for P1 (Hogg & Vaughan, 2009) and resulted in her paradoxical identities.

I knew the people on the next table came from Wuhan from their accent. They were discussing how to return home. We booked the ticket last night through an online group in WeChat. I wanted to tell them, but my husband stopped me. [...] They are my close compatriots. If it were a normal time, I would hug them and help them, but I was not able to do so. We even started to speak quietly. I feel so paradoxical.

[(P1)]

Wuhan/Hubei tourists were not the only group subjected to hurtful non-interaction during the outbreak (see Table 3). When reflecting on this non-interaction, participants were angry about others' inappropriate behaviour towards them, but at the same time, they tended to rationalise such behaviour, as shown below:

I visited Shaoshan, the home of President Mao. I only had bread with me and could not find anything else to eat. They stopped everything and agreed not to be in contact with outsiders. Nobody wanted to help me because I was not from Shaoshan. But we are all Chinese and they shared the blood of President Mao ... they were so selfish. The whole area was locked. I used a pack of cigarettes to bribe security and get away from the place... but I am sure the rest of people in the province are nice as they have the same blood as President Mao.

[(P21)]

The above quotation illustrates participants' rationalisation process when encountering non-interaction from both ingroup and outgroup. P21's (above) paradox lies in the gap between his expected interaction with Chinese compatriots and the reality of non-interaction due to the perceived outgroup identity by others. Chinese are interdependent individuals, such that moral principles and norms often make them extremely sensitive to how others view them (Hwang, 1998), such as P21 perceiving Shaoshan locals, who shared the similar kinship with President Mao, as behaving selfishly. However, the pandemic has increased uncertainties in our moral decision-making as benefits of helping P21 could have been perceived as harmful for their close group: Shaoshan people (Van Bavel et al., 2020), which consequently influenced tourists' and residents' social interaction during crises. Identity is contextually sensitive (Hogg et al., 1995) and crises like the COVID-19 outbreak can create insurmountable boundaries between what is perceived as 'us' (the Chinese) and 'others' (the tourist). It is interesting to find that some participants were still willing to rationalise non-interaction behaviours as “*the rest of people in the province are nice*”. Indeed, the phrase “*We are all Chinese*” was frequently mentioned when rationalising discriminatory behaviour; this shared social identity of being Chinese was referred to

when calling for understanding from compatriots. The following section further clarifies how these paradoxical feelings influence their intergroup relationships and behaviour.

Emotional investments: from feeling inferior to group-affirming response

Findings discussed in the previous two themes indicated that through non-interaction with people and place, Chinese tourists become aware of their ingroup and outgroup social identity change. Specifically, participants expressed paradoxical perceptions towards defining 'us' and 'others'. For many social psychologists, paradoxical perceptions towards ingroups and outgroups might result in reduced ingroup commitment or even change in their group affirmation (Ellemers et al., 2002; Tajfel, 1982). While the imposed identity change did generate negative feelings towards ingroup members, all participants did feel the identity of being Chinese or being Wuhan people is unchangeable. Moving on to the third component of identity change, emotional investments, this section explains how individuals make sense of their relatively negative identity and how these feelings influence their behavioural responses and social (non-)interaction in and beyond the pandemic.

For many, their unexpected travel experience during the pandemic was an unforgettable and unpleasant journey. The imposed identity change from wealthy and superior tourists to tourists with virus makes them feel inferior as show below:

I've never felt before that being from Wuhan is a problem. We are a capital city for Hubei province... not ashamed but feel more wronged. I probably will not travel internationally for a while. Domestically maybe because we are all Chinese... we will be better [(P23)]

We tried to buy some stuff from a local supermarket in Japan. The shop owner said Chinese should go away...I was very angry, not ashamed, because I had not done anything wrong. I felt like a second-class citizen. [(P9)]

Many did address that they were just taking normal holidays and did nothing wrong, and as a result they felt "wronged" rather than "ashamed". The feeling of shame often regulates interdependent Chinese collective behaviours when ingroup behaviour is considered a cause for negative group perception (Zhang, Pearce, & Chen, 2019). Here, a "wronged" feeling related to the imposed negative social identity with the virus resulted in hoping for a better China. This is because strong social groups have the power to bring justice to its ingroup members when social identity is challenged by others (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). For example, some participants noted warm-hearted welcomes from ingroup members, which stimulated their feelings of home as well as tightened their social identity of being Wuhan and Chinese. Here, their inferior identity and negative cognition of self when a tourist shifted to a positive identity of being Chinese and/or Wuhan/Hubei people upon returning to a welcoming reception.

I trapped here is not my fault, but I started to feel it is. I thought when I returned, I will be blamed, but everyone I know send warm words to me when I returned home. [(P4)]

I cried when I saw the traffic police in Wuhan. He said, 'You must have suffered outside. Welcome back compatriots'. [(P6)]

It should be noted that while the social distancing rule was in place, some participants nevertheless received unexpected social interaction from destination communities, which made them feel warm-hearted and affected their future travel decisions. Such unexpected social connection with ingroup members was meaningful and positively helped them to cope with difficult times (Van Bavel et al., 2020). The feeling of inferiority in one's social identity influences self-esteem. To avoid any threat as a result of this inferiority, in-group favourism and desire to maintain a positive self-esteem shaped participants' willingness to travel domestically despite cases of non-interaction also being reported within China (Brown, 2000).

We added some WeChat groups, local Chinese there has been very helpful. Gave suggestions even delivered some Chinese food for me. unbelievable.... When I arrived in Guangzhou, I felt welcomed and my journey back to Wuhan was smoothly since then. Will travel to there again. [(P3)]

No one reported my Wuhan identity to the police. I feel grateful and will travel here again. [(P23)]

Indeed, many tended to focus on enhancing self-esteem through comparison with outgroup. When positive social identities are challenged through comparison with outgroups, individuals tend to focus on intergroup differentiation to enhance in-group status (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). For example, P8 (below) elaborated on the idea of “we are better global citizens”, which together with extremely low affected cases within China provided strong evidence for maintaining a positive social identity, despite that he also felt negatively towards social non-interactions received within China.

You saw news warning everyone that 5 million Wuhan citizens escaped the quarantine. When search for accommodations many asked why you are even here? Now looked at people in the West. Then look at Wuhan we are better global citizens.

[(P8)]

Those who travelled abroad have shared similar thoughts, and their negative social non-interaction with outgroups motivated them to modify their future travel decisions. For example, P19 and P24 stated:

Korean communities and tourists made some protests against all Chinese tourists in Vietnam... I will not travel to Korea in future.

[(P19)]

Some people are kind. Others are not. But to have a pleasant experience, I will search whether there are any anti-Chinese cases reported in the region during COVID-19.

[(P24)]

During times of crisis, communities are likely to set aside internal differences or conflicts and rally together (Collins, 2012). In response to the imposed identity change for Wuhan/Hubei tourists, as well as Chinese tourists more broadly, this shared experience of social (non-)interaction in destinations led to a strong group affirmation. Specifically, emotional attachments towards the broader social identity of being Chinese and social cohesion seem to have been enhanced during the crisis, which is further confirmed in participants' preference to travel domestically (P2) and forecasted international reputation (P22):

My wife always said we should travel to Europe to experience a developed country...after the crisis, look what China did in handling those crises compared with others. Our motherland has more to offer and is safer.

[(P2)]

We did well in handling the crisis. The idea of lockdown and wearing masks were very effective. Now, the US and UK government started to realise this...the international position of China is improving. Outsiders will respect us more.

[(P22)]

In these cases, intergroup differentiation motivated P2 to interact more with ingroup rather than outgroup (Brown, 2000), whereas P22 felt increased emotional attachment to their social identity and hoped they would be greeted with respect when travelling to international destinations in the future. Such remarks reveal the role played by self-esteem in individuals' reflections on the perceived improving status of their social group: the Chinese.

Conclusion

Tourism is fundamentally about social interaction, and tourists' construction of identities during travel is inseparable from such interaction. However, the COVID-19 pandemic restricts interactions, which suggests repercussions for identity formation and maintenance. Using a constructivist grounded theory approach, this exploratory qualitative study adopts social identity theory to understand Chinese tourists' reflections on social (non-)interaction and their changes in social identity as a result of travel during the pandemic. Theoretically, the paper contributes to understanding of the subject in three ways. First, the findings provide empirical results for a conceptual framework that explains how tourists make sense of social identity change and the role social (non-)interaction plays, specifically (Fig. 1). Here, the investigation of social identity in tourism should be aware that it is individuals' self-reflections on 'self', 'us' and 'others' in various social contexts that define the meanings of identity and social interaction (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Tajfel, 1979).

In response to the call for research to investigate how the loss of meaningful social interactions and uncertainties brought by the pandemic impacts individual's sense of self and social identity (Rosenfeld et al., 2020; Van Bavel et al., 2020), the study adopted the concept of social identity to understand Chinese tourists' identity change and social (non-)interaction. For social psychologists, three interlinked components contribute to social identity: cognitive, evaluative and emotional (Hogg et al., 2017; Tajfel, 1982). As shown in Fig. 1, the three components reveal the social-psychological processes underpinning the reactions to non-interaction and the responsive behaviours of those travelling during the crises. When COVID-19 first appeared in Wuhan,

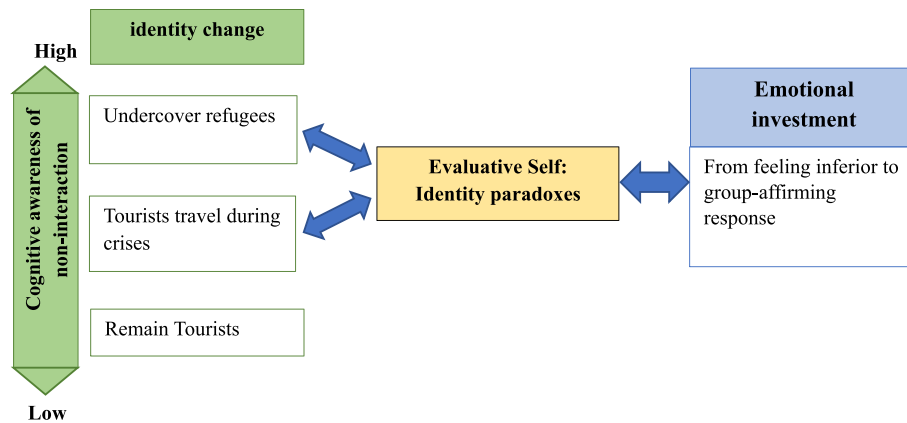


Fig. 1. Tourists' social identity change during crises.

Chinese tourists noted cognitive awareness not only of being tourists, that is being away from “home”, but of more specifically being Chinese tourists travelling during a crisis. This was most strongly experienced by Wuhan/Hebei tourists. As a result, some adapted practices of being undercover refugees, influenced by the increased non-interaction with place and people. It should be noted that the higher the non-interaction felt by individuals, the greater their social identities were affected by such non-interaction, and vice versa.

This cognitive awareness of non-interaction and changes to social identities influences the evaluative process between ‘us’ and ‘others’ (Tajfel, 1982; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). Boundaries between ingroup and outgroup are blurred and contingent (Hogg et al., 1995), especially during times of crisis. The study finds three identity paradoxes expressed by Chinese tourists, which reveal how paradoxical perceptions towards non-interaction with ingroups and outgroups influenced their identifications. The use of the word ‘paradox’ indicates that their belonging to different social groups is juxtaposed by negative non-interactive experience with other intragroup or intergroup members. Thus, the third component - emotional investment in both cognitive and evaluative process - becomes relevant. While experiencing social non-interaction both within and beyond China has resulted in relatively inferior identity for those who travelled during the pandemic, the study found the pandemic actually stimulated their emotional attachment to their social identity. Group-affirmation became their behavioural response to social identity change. In this way, participants suggest they are now more likely to travel domestically than internationally. It is the continuous reflections on the cognitive, evaluative and emotional components that explain the social non-interaction and identity change during crises.

Second, in conceptualising social non-interaction, the study extends the discussion on social interaction in tourism (e.g., Murphy, 2001; Wearing & Foley, 2017; White & White, 2008), and suggests that a focus on social interaction should extend to include the dynamic interactions with people and place (Ma & Xie, 2015). In particular, the study shows that perceived non-interaction with people and place both influences and is influenced by different social identities. Further, this COVID-19 tourism research reminds us that tourists are not just escapists from home but are members of boarder societies (McCabe, 2002). Their experience is influenced by their interactions with destinations, fellow travellers, host communities, people at home and even symbolic items expressive of their identities.

Third, the study offers fresh empirical insights into developing and maintaining social identity while travelling (e.g., Zhang, Pearce, & Chen, 2019). Tourism is contextually diverse and rich. Instead of assuming that tourists' experience contributes to a static sense of identity (e.g., Palmer et al., 2013), the current research contextualises the discussion of non-interaction within the COVID-19 pandemic to show that social identity is fluid and contingent (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). Individuals often make sense of the social world by choosing meaningful identities to suit their self-concept at the time. For example, the undercover refugee behaviour of some Wuhan/Hubei tourists shows how tourists respond to social identity changes during the pandemic.

Practically, by shedding light on social identity change and social (non-)interaction during COVID-19, this study reveals the meaningful but relatively unpleasant experience of Chinese tourists. Those unpleasant experiences are strongly associated with the tourists' social identity and the virus. Today, the global tourism industry is devoted to re-building destinations by encouraging social interaction. Without understanding the social-psychological underpinnings of non-interaction, the industry will not be able to achieve this with confidence. International marketing reports generally agree that future travel trends will shift from international to domestic travel, especially for the Chinese (e.g., Chen, Enger, et al., 2020). These findings are relevant for the current global lockdown period, but the anti-international travel emotions embedded within the collective social non-interaction revealed in the study could influence the recovery of the tourism industry. Therefore, the study advocates that tourism managers should understand the social-psychological ramifications of non-interaction and identity when planning their recovery strategy, especially for Chinese tourists.

As is true for all research, the study has its limitations and suggestions for future research directions. This conceptualisation of non-interaction is contextualised purely within the COVID-19 pandemic. The study does not deny the existence of other forms of non-interaction. However, as the first study to offer an explicit explanation of non-interaction, the authors believe that the notion

of non-interaction and its implications for the field could be extended beyond the context of tourist experience during crises. The growing popularity of virtual tourism and the desire to escape from popular sites are possible examples. Therefore, future studies could use different contexts where non-interaction is evident to better understand social behaviour and experience in international tourism. The study takes notice of some moral terms, such as selfishness and notions of welcome, employed by some participants who were negotiating their identity between self and others. Future studies might explore this interlink between social identity change and morality in the context of the pandemic. Further, while the virtual interviews did provide rich data revealing the interlink between non-interactive experience and social identity, we should acknowledge that the use of virtual interview to an extent involves a certain degree of non-interaction. Future studies should pay attention to how various methodological approaches could approach the non-interaction from different angles.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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