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Echoes of Disadvantage: A Qualitative Exploration of Relative Deprivation and Rumination in Digital Travel Experiences

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Abstract
The rising digitization of tourism has expanded access to prices, reviews, service information, and peer-generated vacation experiences, but it has also made the interpersonal comparison more immediate. The present qualitative study analyses travelers' experiences of relative deprivation after encountering perceived service differences via digital travel intermediaries and how subsequent cognitive rumination may lead to online spiteful word-of-mouth (WOM). The study is based on the Relative Deprivation Theory and the Cognitive Appraisal Theory. It is based on an interpretative phenomenological viewpoint and considers five participant profiles representing luxury and non-luxury travel scenarios. Thematic analysis of semi-structured interview accounts given in the source manuscript focused on relative deprivation, rumination, contextual expectations and spiteful digital responses. The stories demonstrate that objective service failure is not sufficient on its own to explain retaliatory communication. Instead of just comparing themselves with other tourists, interpreting inequality, mentally replaying the occurrence, and reviewing digital information, these processes appear to be tied together in a systematic way. Qualitative information also includes gendered descriptions of post-failure emotional elaboration, as luxury travel expectations are evident in the reports as a contextual amplifier. The study contributes to the service-failure and tourism literature by bringing together relative deprivation and rumination in a single qualitative description of online revenge. The findings imply that digital travel intermediaries should think about not just the first service failure but also comparative cues, transparency of recovery and the post-complaint period. The study provides a process-oriented conceptual framework and points to future research avenues on digital comparison, algorithmic customisation, and cross-cultural sense of fairness.

Keywords: *relative deprivation; cognitive appraisal; rumination; digital tourism; service failure; online vindictive word-of-mouth; social comparison.*

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I. Introduction:

Digital technologies have transformed the tourist sector, affecting the way in which passengers seek, compare, book, assess and communicate about services. Online travel agencies (OTAs), booking platforms, review aggregators, social media and other digital intermediaries have made travel information more accessible, while raising the visibility of other consumers' outcomes. Studies on internet-based travel planning have shown that electronic devices are incorporated into the trip decision processes and social media and other information sources are becoming more essential parts of tourist information behavior (Xiang et al., 2015). This increased visibility offers an atmosphere where tourists can compare pricing, accommodation classifications, upgrades, compensation, service encounters and treatment received by other customers. Digital transparency is thus two-sided. On the other side, it minimizes information asymmetry and can help passengers make better informed choices. However, repeated exposure to peer outcomes can increase social comparison. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) posits that individuals assess their situation partly in relation to others, and further work on relative deprivation has shown that disadvantage is felt when an individual compares their position against a relevant standard and perceives an unfavorable gap (Smith et al., 2012). In tourism, this form of comparison may occur when the visitor finds out that another client obtained a lesser rate, a better hotel, an upgrade, preferred access, or more generous recompense for a similar transaction. Relative deprivation has been identified as a relevant perspective for understanding conflict, attitudes, and behavior in tourism settings in recent tourism scholarship (Pan & Yang, 2023). Relative deprivation is not the same as objective deprivation. Even if a traveler obtains an objectively adequate service, they could nevertheless feel deprived if another passenger receives a better outcome. The psychological importance is the comparison and the understanding of

the difference. This distinction matters in digital travel spaces because platforms make comparison information unusually accessible and persistent . Reviews, social media posts, screenshots of bookings, conversations about reward programs, and promotional messaging all provide a constant flow of comparison standards. Research in tourism also reveals that relative impoverishment is often related with negative coping reactions, such as uncivil behavioral intentions (Pan et al., 2024).

Another relevant perspective is offered by service failure research. Not all negative experiences result in the same behavioral response. Depending on the perceived severity of the failure, the recovery response, and the consumer's coping process (see El-Manstrly et al., 2021; Grégoire & Fisher, 2008; Joireman et al., 2013), consumers may complain, transfer providers, forgive, warn others, or engage in retaliatory communication Online vindictive word-of-mouth (OVWOM) is particularly important, as digital platforms make it possible to share bad experiences with a large audience. Unlike typical negative WOM, which may only serve to inform or warn other consumers, spiteful communication may involve an explicit wish to punish or harm the offending provider (El-Manstrly et al., 2021; Wetzer et al., 2007).

Cognitive Appraisal Theory serves as a bridge between an external event and the behavioral reaction to that event. Appraisal perspectives imply that emotional responses depend on people's appraisals of an event relative to their goals, well-being, responsibility, and perceived control (Lazarus, 1991; Smith & Lazarus, 1993). Such a service failure can consequently be especially consequential when it is perceived to be unfair, malicious, disrespectful, or conflicting with what the consumer believed they were entitled to receive. Rumination may then sustain focus on the event. Nolen-Hoeksema et al. (2008) describe rumination as the repetitive thinking about negative experiences and their results, while Watkins (2008) differentiates between repetitive thought, which can be productive, and forms that sustain negative emotion.

Although existing research has provided important quantitative evidence on relative deprivation, service failure, coping, and negative WOM, the lived cognitive process through which digital comparison becomes sustained rumination and potentially retaliatory communication has received less attention.

This research tackles this gap by qualitatively exploring the travelers' narratives of the perceived digital service gaps. The study aims to answer three questions: (1) How do travelers experience and make sense of relative deprivation in digital travel contexts? (2) How do they talk about rumination when they detected some service discrepancies? and (3) How ruminating relates to online vindictive WOM in luxury vs. non-luxury contexts?

The study has three contributions. First, it focuses on relative deprivation in a narrative of service failure in digital tourism. Second, it leverages cognitive rumination as a process mechanism to link evaluation with behavioral communication. Third, it suggests that contextual expectations, particularly luxury versus non-luxury travel, may be an essential border condition. The resulting framework is intended to be a qualitative process model, not a statistical causal model.

II. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations:

2.1 Digital Travel Intermediaries and Social Comparison

Digital travel intermediaries have transformed the information environment of consumers' travel decision making. Travelers can see pricing, reviews, service information, images, ratings, loyalty perks and stories from other travelers before, during and after a trip. According to Xiang et al. (2015), internet-based information sources for travel planning (e.g. OTAs and social media) are becoming more important. Both settings make it easier to do business but also allow consumers to see comparative information on what other people have received.

The power of social comparison depends on the similarity and personal relevance of the items being compared.In the absence of objective standards, people will compare their own attributes to those of others (Festinger, 1954). Travel comparatives are in the digital world in the form of strangers posting their review, booking experience or outcome of the service. Kim et al. (2018) demonstrated that social comparison processes are intimately linked with personal experiences of relative deprivation, and thus turned comparative disadvantage into a psychological construct, rather than a result of objective facts. This is confirmed by recent studies of tourists.

Relative deprivation has become an increasingly important theoretical reference in tourism research, as shown by Pan and Yang (2023). Relative deprivation also may influence tourist behavioral responses to economic and social impacts (Pan et al., 2024). The findings suggest that future research on digital tourism should focus on not only convenience and information efficiency but also the impact of comparative information on consumers' perception of fairness.

2.2 Relative Deprivation Theory

Relative deprivation is the judgment that one's status is worse than a relevant comparison norm and is associated with negative affect such as resentment or rage (Smith et al., 2012). Runciman (1966) differentiated absolute deprivation from relative deprivation, by stressing comparison and perceived entitlement. The notion is thus applicable to digital service contexts where consumers can easily find alternative outcomes.

Relative deprivation can be economic or social in nature. In a travel context, economic comparison might be about price, fees, discounts or compensation, whereas social comparison could be about room quality, status recognition, upgrades, VIP access or treatment. Pan et al. (2024) distinguish between economic and social relative deprivation in tourism and show that these perceptions can be connected with negative behavioral intentions. This paper extends this reasoning and explores how such views are represented and processed cognitively in real travel narratives.

A crucial result is that a service failure becomes psychologically meaningful to the traveler when he or she can identify a relevant comparison target and perceives the difference as unwarranted. Thus, the sequence of interest is not merely service failure → negative behavior. In this qualitative paradigm, the suggested sequence is comparison → perceived relative deprivation → appraisal of unfairness → rumination → possibly retaliatory communication.

2.3 Cognitive Appraisal and Rumination

Cognitive Appraisal Theory discusses how people assess experiences in relation to their goals and well-being. The processes of appraisal involve the evaluation of relevance, responsibility, control and significance of an event for the individual (Lazarus, 1991; Scherer, 2001; Smith & Lazarus, 1993). Consumers may appraise a failure as a loss, unfairness, treachery, or boundary breach in service encounters. Such judgments can amplify emotional reactions beyond the objective features of the failure.

Rumination is a mental activity in which the bad event is kept on our mind. Nolen-Hoeksema et al (2008) defines rumination as the repetitive thought focusing on bad experiences repeatedly, on their origins and consequences. Watkins (2008) differentiates between unproductive forms of repetitive thought that keep negative emotional states going and those that may be used to resolve problems. Recent research on repetitive negative thought suggests that rumination and worry have some basic cognitive features in common (Pucceti et al., 2024).

Rumination is not considered a clinical diagnostic in the present investigation. It is employed as a consumer-behavior concept characterizing frequent mental replay, persistent checking, ongoing attention to the incident, and difficulty disengaging from the perceived unfairness. This distinction is crucial as the study is concerned with ordinary responses to service contacts and not with mental health consequences.

2.4 Online Vindictive Word-of-Mouth

Negative WOM can be useful. Consumers may complain to warn others, to get social support, to vent, to get restitution, and to get revenge. The emotion is related to the reasons of negative WOM. Specifically, anger has been associated with revenge and venting motives (Wetzer et al., 2007). Similarly, in the service failure literature, retaliation is referred to when consumers feel betrayed and when efforts to recover the relationship are unsuccessful (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008; Grégoire et al., 2009).

A more specific form of negative digital communication is online spiteful word-of-mouth, where the consumer wants to punish the provider or to stop others from using its services. According to El-Manstrly et al. (2021), the traditional coping mechanisms give rise to OVWOM after major service disruptions.

In addition, some recent studies on online travel agencies have investigated the effects of service failure, recovery unfairness, service criticality and negative online cues on the escalation of online vengeance intentions. (2026. International Journal of Hospitality Management. The present research therefore conceptualizes vengeful WOM as an outcome of a sustained process of cognitive rumination rather than an automatic reaction to dissatisfaction. This bifurcation gives us the possibility of exploring why some negative experiences remain private and others are avenged in the public digital sphere.

2.5 Luxury Travel, Expectations. and Contextual Boundaries

Luxury services are unparalleled in that they enable you to raise expectations of quality, exclusivity, individuality, status and consistency of service. Thus, a failure in a luxury context might be judged to a higher standard than a similar failure in a budget or non-luxury context. The literature on luxury tourism emphasizes the experiential and symbolic characteristics of luxury consumption (Iloranta, 2021).

The original material shows that participants in luxury situations are highly sensitive to anomalies, such as upgrades, VIP access and remuneration. This observation should be interpreted as a qualitative contextual observation, rather than statistical evidence of luxury impact. The original material also includes gender-specific descriptions of rumination that are useful for formulating research questions for future research but are

insufficient for evaluating gender differences at the population level. The conservative view is consistent with the small qualitative sample.

2.6 Integrated Conceptual Framework

The study blends Relative Deprivation Theory and Cognitive Appraisal Theory in a process model. Digital travel intermediaries let users compare themselves against their peers. Relative deprivation develops when a traveler feels a negative discrepancy. The gap is thus judged to be unfair, insulting, or inconsistent with entitlement. Repetitive cognitive processing can sustain the sense of injustice and, under situations, contribute to vengeful digital communication. Travel setting, specifically the anticipation of luxury or non-luxury, is handled as a contextual amplifier, not as a statistically proven moderator.

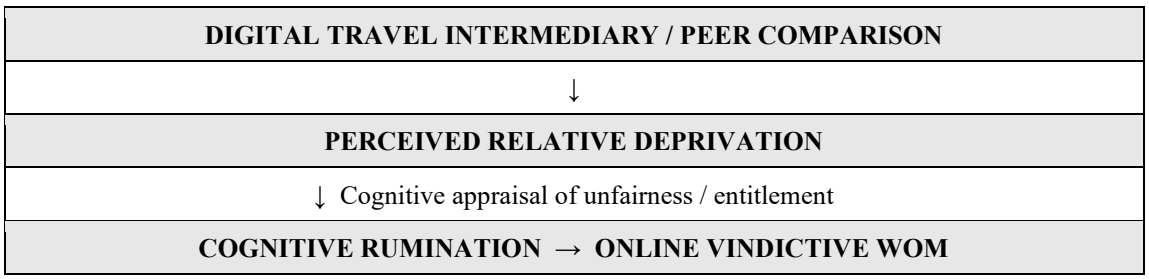


Figure 1. Qualitative process framework linking digital comparison, relative deprivation, rumination, and online vindictive WOM.

III. Methodology:

3.1 Research Design

The qualitative research design was based on an interpretative phenomenological orientation to capture the lived experiences, cognitive processing, and emotional responses of participants to service discrepancies they encountered with digital travel intermediaries. A phenomenological orientation is appropriate when the purpose is to understand how individuals make meaning of a shared experience, rather than to estimate population-level relationships. In this study, the focal experience was perceived digital service unfairness and its consequent cognitive and communicative outcomes.

3.2 Sampling and Participants

The source paper reports purposeful and snowball sampling. Participants were recruited on the basis of having experienced a service discrepancy or failure while booking travel through digital intermediaries, such as OTAs or review aggregators, in the last 12 months. The manuscript describes five profiles of participants (P01–P05), including luxury and non-luxury travel environment and different types of platform. Where no explicit sample-size computation is reported in the source material, the sample should be considered as a tiny qualitative collection for depth rather than statistical generalization.

Participant	Gender	Travel context	Platform type	Key discrepancy
P01	Female	Luxury	OTA platform	Unmet room-upgrade comparison via online review
P02	Male	Non-luxury	Travel aggregator	Hidden fees compared with peer booking rates
P03	Female	Non-luxury	OTA platform	Substandard service relative to promotional claims
P04	Male	Luxury	Direct intermediary	Denied VIP lounge access seen granted to others
P05	Female	Luxury	Premium travel portal	Different compensation for flight delay

Table 1. Participant profiles reported in the source manuscript.

3.3 Data Collection

A series of in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to analyze the context of the service discrepancy, the comparison information experienced by participants, their interpretations of the incident, their following thoughts and feelings, and any digital communication that followed. The source manuscript states that interviews proceeded until theoretical saturation was reached but does not give sufficient detail on the saturation

technique. The author should retain interview dates, approximate interview length, recruitment process and the operational criteria used to establish saturation in the study record for a journal submission.

3.4 Data Analysis

Interview information was examined using thematic analysis, as described in Braun and Clarke (2006), a popular approach. The source material explains a line-by-line coding and categorizing into bigger themes, which are relative deprivation, cognitive rumination, contextual expectations, and vengeful digital action. Thus, the research presented here is concerned with systematic meanings across the five reported participant profiles, rather than frequency counts.

IV. Findings

4.1 Theme 1: The Emergence of Digital Relative Deprivation

Participants described relative deprivation as coming about through comparison and not by the service failure alone. Travelers were able to see alternate outcomes through online evaluations, booking information, peer experiences and content from social media. The difference was significant if the comparison indicated that the treatment of another passenger for a comparable or identical transaction was better. This trend follows the theoretical contrast between objective disadvantage and subjectively experienced relative deprivation (Runciman, 1966; Smith et al., 2012).

“It was not just that the room was smaller than expected,” explained P01, a luxury traveler. It was because I saw on the review site that someone paying the exact same fee through another digital booking link got a complete ocean view and complementary breakfast. “I felt like the platform was cheating and disrespecting me.”

The account exemplifies three elements of the proposed process: a comparison target, a perceived undesirable gap, and an evaluation of the gap as unjust. “The digital platform is important because it gives you the information you need to do the comparison.” Without the peer information, the participant may have just considered the space to be disappointing, but with the peer information, the experience became a comparable injustice.

4.2 Theme 2: The Cognitive Spiral of Rumination

Participants reported mental replay of the first service disparity in a recurring manner. Rumination took the form of continually remembering the occurrence, repeatedly checking review sites, continuing to pay attention to the provider's response and mentally simulating talks with customer care. These descriptions are consistent with the broader conception of rumination as repetitive negative thinking about unpleasant events and their origins or effects (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008; Watkins, 2008).

“I couldn’t let it go for the rest of the trip,” said P03, a non-luxury traveler. Every time I looked at my phone, I kept thinking about how unfair the platform’s response was. I would replay the talk with customer service in my thoughts before sleeping over and over.”

The story implies that digital connectivity can hold the service episode cognitively available. The smartphone is the genesis of the first comparison and the means by which the consumer continues to monitor reviews, messages and comments. Thus, the digital environment may not only induce comparison but also sustain attention to the apparent injustice.

4.3 Theme 3: Contextual Amplification in Luxury Travel and Gendered Accounts

The stories suggest that luxury travel had greater expectations for consistency, exclusivity and recognition. Discrepancies regarding improvements, VIP access and pay were particularly relevant to participants in luxury environments. This can be explained in terms of expectation and entitlement. When the reference standard is high, a violation may be perceived as more significant. Research in luxury tourism confirms the unique importance of symbolic and experiential expectations in luxury consumption (Iloranta, 2021).

P04 says: "When you buy a high-end luxury package on a premium portal, you expect faultless execution. It seemed intimate finding non-luxury tiers got the same privileges. “I thought about it for weeks.” The source manuscript also includes gendered accounts of cognitive processing, with female individuals experiencing more extensive emotional elaboration. This discovery should not be taken as a general gender impact, since the sample is relatively small and contains just five subjects. Instead, it is better conceived as a sensitizing observation for future investigation. Previous work has demonstrated gender differences in rumination and coping in broader populations, but such findings cannot be immediately extended to the present individuals without additional evidence (Johnson & Whisman, 2013; Tamres et al., 2002).

4.4 Theme 4: Retaliation Through Online Vindictive WOM

The third topic is the transition from internal cognitive processing to exterior digital action. Participants reported writing comprehensive unfavorable reviews, issuing warnings on social media, and discouraging others from using the relevant middleman. In P05's report, the extended obsession was expressly linked to the decision to post across various review portals. This trend is consistent with work that distinguishes typical negative WOM from revenge- or punishment-based communication (El-Manstrly et al., 2021; Wetzer et al., 2007).

P05 said: "After days of being obsessed with how unfairly I was treated, I didn't feel like writing a polite complaint was enough. I provided thorough warnings on three major review portals to make sure other passengers stayed away from that platform and harmed their booking numbers." The story suggests that vengeful WOM can have both informational and retaliatory intentions.

The participant framed the communication as a warning to other tourists and also described a wish to hurt the supplier. This dual function corresponds to the literature that finds negative WOM can serve distinct ends depending on the consumer's emotional state and perception of the incident (Wetzer et al., 2007).

V. Discussion

The findings support a process-oriented account of digital service failure. The crucial contribution is not the claim that all service failures lead to rumination or spiteful WOM but that the stories of the respondents suggest a progression whereby comparison seems to transform displeasure into a more personally salient emotion of unfairness. The comparative component is explained by relative deprivation theory, but why the gap becomes emotionally significant is explained by Cognitive Appraisal Theory.

The first stage is a computer match. Participants described the service failure not only in terms of their own experience but also, often, in terms of what other tourists experienced. This result is consistent with the growing role of digital information in the travel decision-making process and the studies that associate social comparison with personal relative deprivation (Xiang et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2018; Pan & Yang, 2023). Digital travel intermediaries are therefore both comparison and transaction infrastructures.

The second phase is the assessment. A discrepancy is psychologically relevant if it is perceived to be unfair, disreputable, or contrary to entitlement. This is consistent with appraisal theory which emphasizes the interpretation of the experience rather than the event itself (Lazarus, 1991; Smith & Lazarus, 1993). The results thus suggest that managers need to differentiate between objective service failure and perceived injustice, as the latter can affect whether the incident remains in the consumer's mind.

And then the third phase is the incubation. The participants to check it was an incident, a repetitive thinking, These stories provide a qualitative layer to research looking at recurrent negative thinking as a mechanism by which bad experiences stay cognitively active (Nolen-Hoeksema et al.,2008, Watkins, 2008). The digital world can accelerate this as the same gadgets used to arrange travel and communicate provide constant access to reviews, messages and comparison data.

Stage four: revengeful WOM on the internet. This shift from internal rumination to external communication is consistent with service failure research which suggests that consumers are likely to participate in negative online communication as a coping or punitive response (El-Manstrly et al., 2021).

The present study also suggests that the continued focus on comparative unfairness may be part of the psychological process identified by the travelers themselves. In the tales the luxury/non-luxury dichotomy is presented as a contextual amplifier, not as a tested causal moderator. The luxury travelers in the sample had higher expectations for consistency and recognition. This is an understandable position when considering research on luxury tourists, but is not a conclusion that can be made at a population level from the small qualitative sample. It is better to view the gender descriptions as exploratory observations rather than as evidence for a general gender difference.

VI. Theoretical Contributions

It extends the Relative Deprivation Theory to the context of digital tourism service failure and indicates that consumers use peer information as a benchmark to evaluate their own outcome (Pan & Yang, 2023; Smith et al., 2012).

Second, this study integrates relative deprivation with cognitive appraisal theory and rumination. In this perspective relative deprivation is not a terminal state but an appraisal relevant state that might trigger further cognitive activity.

Thirdly, the study connects the cognitive process with online vengeful WOM. The previous studies reported the relationship between service failure and coping, and retaliation and negative WOM (El-Manstrly et al., 2021; Grégoire & Fisher, 2008). The present qualitative model suggests rumination as a process mechanism that merits empirical examination in the future.

Fourth, digital comparison is the oddness of modern tourism. Online platforms enable consumers to observe the results of peers' experiences before and after a service encounter. The comparison process may not be restricted

to the first transaction. The context of digital tourism is thus particularly relevant for the study of relative deprivation.

VII. Practical Implications

Consistent and transparent. OTAs and travel suppliers should be as explicit as feasible in communicating eligibility restrictions, upgrade criteria, compensation policies and service conditions. Inconsistent information can lead to impressions of injustice based on comparisons, even when the differences are operationally explicable.

Early Recovery Communications. Participants expressed repeated thinking after the failure and thus fast and empathic recovery communication may be helpful in preventing a negative experience from becoming extended. The aim is not to remove all bad WOM, but to guarantee that real complaints are given clear explanations and meaningful opportunity to be resolved.

Digital comparison cue management. Providers also should monitor publicly available information that could result in seeming conflicting results, such as promotional claims, upgrade messages, and announcements of compensation. If discrepancies are legitimate, then clarifying the relevant eligibility rules can reduce ambiguity. Consistency in luxury service.

Premium and luxury providers need to be particularly aware of the expectations that premium positioning generates. Where consumers are purchasing exclusivity or preferred treatment, the differences in access or acknowledgment can be more symbolic.

Complaint to recovery pathway Digital intermediaries can provide structured complaint channels where consumers can register the problem, get a response and understand the recovery process. This may lessen the apparent need to use public channels to achieve recognition of the situation.

VIII. Limitations and Future Research

The study has serious limitations. First, the qualitative evidence presented is drawn from five participant profiles, which limits transferability and does not allow for statistical generalization. Second, the source publication does not provide information in detail about interview time, recruitment period, coding reliability, reflexivity methods and the specific saturation decision. This information should be included in the final research record. Third, the findings are drawn from retrospective reports. Participants can reconstruct their experiences after the event and the outcome can then alter recall. Comparison and rumination may be more effectively assessed using diary methods or digital-ethnographic approaches in future research, closer to the time of the service outage. Fourth, luxury versus non-luxury travel is a qualitative contextual differentiation but has not been rigorously examined.

Future research may compare larger samples across travel levels and assess if differences in rumination and retaliatory communication can be accounted for by perceived entitlement, service criticality or status expectations. Fifth, the gender related observations are exploratory. Future quantitative research may explore if the relationship between relative deprivation and rumination is moderated by gender, coping style, social comparison orientation, or emotional regulation. Prior research can ask such questions, but the pattern in the present context is not prescribed (Johnson & Whisman, 2013; Tamres et al., 2002).

Finally there's algorithmic personalization to ponder. Recommendation systems and personalized offers may expose travelers to certain prices, enhancements or experiences. Future research can explore whether perceived personalization and algorithmic transparency influence how relative deprivation is developed. Recent research on social comparison within the framework of digital travel also suggests that online comparison can affect travel-related decision making, thus indicating a more general role for digitally mediated comparison in tourism behavior.

IX. Conclusion

This study evaluated travelers' perceptions of service differences in the digital travel environment and how perceived relative deprivation may lead to rumination and online vengeful WOM. The qualitative descriptions suggest that the psychological effect of a service failure is not only a function of what happened to the traveler, but also of what the traveler learns about the outcomes of other consumers. Digital comparison can transform a service gap into a perceived injustice, cognitive rumination can maintain that injustice as salient, and extended processing may contribute to public retaliatory speech. The suggested framework unites the Relative Deprivation Theory, Cognitive Appraisal Theory and the studies of negative and spiteful WOM into a coherent qualitative process model. The limited sample size of the study restricts the generalizability of the findings, but the narratives give a basis for future empirical testing across travel segments, platforms, cultures and types of digital customisation.

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