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A DISCOVERY OF THE POSITIVE TRAVEL EXPERIENCE IN PRE-TRIP, ON-SITE AND POST-TRIP STAGE

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ABSTRACT

In visiting new and familiar places, travelers consistently face stressful situations and spend considerable sums of money for relatively short periods of time. Despite such hardships, people continue to travel and must have distinct motivations to do so. This study attempts to explore positive travel experience, specifically the construct of positive travel experience, in order to understand travelers' thoughts and behaviors that are manifested when taking a vacation. It is a key imperative to build constructs of positive travel experience within the moment while people enjoy travel experience throughout the three travel stages: Pre-trip, On-site, and Post-trip. The grounded theory approach is utilized to discover 22 categories: 6 for the Pre-trip stage, 8 for the On-site stage, and 8 for the Post-trip stage. The data collection reveals that transformative emotions are manifested within these stages.

Keywords: *Travel Experience, Positivity, Grounded Theory*

INTRODUCTION

Taking vacation is defined as a pleasurable travel experience which allows vacationers a reprieve from their typical life routines and increases life satisfaction, quality of life and well-being (Allen and Beattie 1984; De Bloom et al, 2009; De Bloom et al, 2012; Chen and Petrick 2013; Hills and Argyle 2001; Kuhnel and Sonnentag 2011; Mannell and Iso-Ahola 1987). Vacationers who holiday on a regular basis are better at fulfilling their needs and wants. Consequently, these regular vacationers can reach their life goals easier than people who travel less (Gilbert and Abdullah 2004).

Recent studies reveal that vacationers are generally positive while they are travelling (Nawijn 2010), and the anticipation beforehand and reminiscences after travel give travelers positive fulfillment (Nawijn 2011a; 2011b). Taking a vacation can bring about happiness in each travel stage: the anticipating stage, the on-site stage, and the recollection stage (De Bloom et al. 2009; Gilbert and Abdullah 2004; Nawijn 2010; Nawijn et al. 2010). In the pre-trip stage, anticipation about travel generates happiness, even though preparation for the trip may be stressful (Nawijn et al. 2013). In the on-site stage, escaping reality and responsibility in new environments leads to the experiencing of diverse situations, which does not occur so readily in normal life. As a result, these conditions intensify travelers' attentions and further strengthen the travelers' positive experience. In the post-trip stage, with respect to stronger positivity emanating from travel experience, emotional appraisal of pleasant memory can be more positive than the event happening while travelling is still occurring. In fact, travelers promote the reminiscence of positive memory (Sedikides et al. 2004) in order to be happier; people embellish facts or use cognitive images of memorable events (Bryant et al. 2005; Tung and Ritchie 2011).

While existing research has focused on the relations and following consequences between travel and positivity (De Bloom et al, 2009; De Bloom et al, 2012; Chen and Petrick 2013; Hills and Argyle 2001; Kuhnel and Sonnentag 2011; Nawijn 2010; Nawijn 2011a; 2011b), there is a lack of studies about specifically what the positive travel experiences within a vacation are. For example, what makes travelers happier or how travelers create positive emotional states, including transformative emotions throughout the stages. This study utilized a qualitative grounded theory approach due to the lack of knowledge emanating from the unclear constructs of positive travel experience (Strauss and Corbin 1998). This methodology allows for the discovery of important constructs and themes not formerly presented. Therefore, this method is utilized to develop theoretical explanations of human behavior grounded in data collection.

METHODOLOGY

Using a grounded theory approach requires entering the data collection phase with research questions and allows the theory to develop from the data. The research questions for this study are as follows: What is the construct of positive travel experience? How do positive travel experiences occur within each travel stage?

Participants in this study were selected from Northern British Columbia, which is situated in the Northwest part of Canada. The participants came from four different communities: Vanderhoof, Fraser Lake, Burns Lake, and Houston. The areas are nature-oriented small towns and the population of these areas ranges from 1,000 to 4,500. This study used purposive sampling as a selective sampling initially to collect information-rich cases in the instance when a particular group of participants cannot be readily recruited (Patton 1990; Robson 2002). This study targeted a group of people who were between 20-80 years old that were planning to travel in the near future for the purpose of pleasure. In particular, these respondents went abroad in search of warmer climate destinations and would subsequently return home shortly thereafter. Participants' companions included independent travelers, couples, families with children and families with older parents. A total of 23 respondents were interviewed for theoretical saturation which was presented to determine

the final sample size (Charmaz 2006; Lincoln and Guba 1985).

The primary interviews were conducted during the period of September, 2012 to September, 2013, and used edited questionnaires from the first three interviews. Data were collected primarily through in-depth, interactive interviews. Most participants were interviewed twice (in the pre-trip and post-trip stages) for a total 42 interviews. While the face-to-face interviews were being conducted, the researcher recorded and wrote down the field notes. Each interview required approximately 35 minutes to 120 minutes. All interviews were transcribed in MS WORD program within one week and field notes were reviewed within 3 days. This study sent questionnaires via e-mails to participants while they were traveling. Respondents returned the answers to the researcher via email or delivered them when they met the researcher again for the post-trip interview.

This study follows the data analysis process outlined by Glaser (1978), Strauss (1987), and Strauss and Corbin (1998) to begin coding the data as soon as the data are collected and then using the analysis to shape the future data collection. In order to use an inductive theory, it is an important process to circumvent underestimated emerging themes from the entire process by remaining with preconceived ideas (Charmaz 2005; Creswell 1998; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss 1987; Strauss and Corbin 1998). The data analysis process, which includes reviewing interview transcriptions, field notes and memos is a constant, reoccurring process. The trustworthiness of this study used the memoing, thick description, members check, and peer reviewing techniques.

FINDINGS

A total of 22 categories are presented: 6 from the pre-trip stage which includes Memory from Past Experience, Expectation, Interaction with Others, Implementation, Appreciation and Roles of Companions; 8 from the on-site experience stage which consists of Memory from Past Experience, Learning Mode, Experiential Value, Creating Memory, Interaction with Others, Anxiety from Destination, Self-Oriented, Roles of Companions; and 8 from the post-trip stage which includes Travel Memory as a Story, Expectation for an Upcoming Trip, Interaction with Others, Rejuvenation, Appreciation, Maintaining Positive Emotion States, Self-Enhancement Thoughts, and Roles of Companions. Based on in-depth interviews, the categories of Memory of Past Experience, Interaction with Others, and Roles of Companions are influencing factors through all travel stages. Each stage has a unique factor that induces positivity, such as expectation in pre-trip, learning mode in on-site and self-enhancement thoughts in post-trip stage.

The finding of this study explains what kinds of travel experiences generate and enhance positive emotions throughout all travel stages. One of the significant factors throughout all stages is memory. Memory plays a crucial role for travelers because once travel is completed, people reconstruct and embellish memories in their own fashion. This reconstructed memory is not an exact replica of their true experience; the memory is recalled in a preferred way so that experiences can be embellished and overstated in their mind. Positive experiences become more positive and negative experiences become less negative which Michell et al. (1997) called “rosy view”. For this reason, throughout all stages travelers constantly induce embellished memories from previous travel experience in order to generate positive feelings.

Travelers tend to have interactions with others to induce their positivity or reduce their negativity from uncertain and unfamiliar situations. Sharing feelings with others, particularly through social media, can be extremely important for travelers today. While it is a somewhat controversial issue among participants whether sharing with others constitutes bragging or purely sharing one’s feelings, the ultimate result of the sharing with others is that both parties enter positive states. Bragging is one of the distinct motivation factors (Cha et al. 1995). It is imperative to note that sharing feelings and comparing one’s situation with others are basic human behaviors, and constitute ways of generating and enhancing positivity. Travel boasting is also a crucial factor in influencing the choice of holiday destination (Mutinda and Mayaka 2012), such as choosing to go places your

friends have not been to. One of the popular ways to interact with others is through utilizing social media such as Facebook and Twitter. The advantage of using social media is that it easily and quickly creates a greater connection with other people and, in the end, posting and commenting on social media reinforces relationships between individuals - even though some might say it constitutes bragging, a negative activity.

Another key revelation of this study illustrates how the role of a travel companion generates and increases positivity from travel experiences. While parents as companions create extremely complex and stressful issues prior to and during the trip, participants gain positive feelings from observing parents' excitement and enjoyment. The more individuals spend difficult time with elder parents during their vacations, the greater their satisfaction is because they feel that they did the "right thing" for their parents. However, children as companions create a different experience, even through difficult travel environments. Respondents became very positive when experiencing the world through their children's eyes. The positivity that emanates from children is related to a sense of parental duty. A successful trip with children gives parents pride, courage, satisfaction for life and a strong sense of parenting. The interesting factor is that the difference between parents and children as companions is the distinction between necessity and choice. Participants don't have to bring elder parents but they often must bring their children. The study of travel companions is underscored in the field of tourism because meaningful travel companions, such as parents and children, are huge factors in generating positivity throughout the travel stages.

Traveling is about going away to experience different cultures and environments. This situation places travelers into a role of an observer; this role serves to expand cultural knowledge, global understanding, and ultimately broadens travelers' minds. Based on this study, traveling and being out of one's comfort zone provides an opportunity to observe an unfamiliar environment rather than actively participating in it. In this study, this so-called "learning mode", a kind of observing mode, is induced from various situations involving spontaneous, novel, and authentic experiences. This observation-oriented behavior creates and builds tolerance and confidence, satisfies curiosity and ultimately, expands travelers' minds. Learning mode is an *in-vivo* code which emanated from the conversation of the participants. The "Learning Mode" creates various benefits for tourists. Travelers tend to be intrigued by different cultures while on vacation, thus vacationers become more open-minded and increasingly educated about global understanding. The majority of participants commented that getting to know about new cultural attraction or even different cultural norms instigated their interests and induced positive feelings from the experience.

Without exception, all participants in this study mentioned appreciation for being able to travel. In turn, travelers felt fortunate when comparing their lives with others who were unable to travel. Additionally, travel experience provides opportunities to gain additional benefits such as confidence, courage, pride, accomplishment, and self-awareness.

Even though this study focused on travel positivity, negative feelings towards traveling experience emerged in significant parts of the conversations. As a part of grounded theory methodology, researchers delve into the topics of how participants feel and act about negative feelings. The interesting discovery from this research is that vacationers are generally more relaxed and more understanding when it comes dealing with daily problems and potentially stressful issues. Negative feelings, related to travel, seem to be more easily tolerated than negative feelings that occur typically in normal life.

IMPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

This study attempted to explore positive travel experience, specifically the construct of positive travel experience, in order to understand travelers' thoughts and behaviors that are manifested when taking a vacation. Qualitative research, specifically the grounded theory approach, was utilized to discover 22 positive travel experience categories; 6 for the pre-trip, 8 for the on-site

and 8 for the post-trip stage.

Although this study focused on positive travel experiences, significant quantities of negative experiences like preparing for travel, financial problems, souvenir pressure, dishonesty, cheating and companion problems were captured during the interviews. However, based on the results of this study, vacationers constantly attempt to undo negative emotions stemming from unpleasant situations in all three stages in order to transit to positive states such as sharing feelings with others, comparing with others, intentionally thinking about positive things, or researching for reducing uncertainty. While these behaviors emerged either intentionally or accidentally, once travelers started to do this, their negative feelings began to diminish and ultimately they moved to a more positive state. Travelers' perspectives and attitudes become broadened and therefore more tolerant and accepting of an uncontrollable environment. This positive kind of letting-go and open-mindedness is helpful for reducing negative feelings. In the post-trip stage, most of the positive emotions emanate from cognitive thoughts. By the power of their own personality, travelers' emotions can shift while traveling (Lin et al. 2014), yet there is a lack of study about transit emotions related to one subject within all three travel stages.

This process occurred within the context of travelers' experience from Northwestern British Columbia, Canada, from the preparation stage through to the reminiscing stage. With this in mind, perspective towards travel experience provides a somewhat unique view to induce positivity because these participants' life styles and living environment are relatively different than people living in more southern, urban areas.

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