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A Preliminary Assessment of Traveler's Emotional Response to Their Vacation

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ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that researchers have linked individuals' interpretation of their emotions to behavioral outcomes such as well-being, resilience and service evaluation, few researchers have studied emotions during a vacation. We rose to the challenge by conducting a study that involved the use of a diary, which individuals completed each day of their vacation. Respondents used the diary to document their emotions on the modified Differential Emotions Scale and through a follow-up open-ended question. Results provided support for the notion that emotion is a multidimensional construct, and converged with past research that suggests existing emotion scales may not be entirely appropriate for the measurement of emotions in a pleasure travel context. Managerial implications of the findings are discussed and directions for future research are noted.

Keywords: emotions, vacation, Differential Emotions Scale.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism, "...arguably one of the largest self-initiated commercial interventions to create happiness on the planet" (Pearce, 2009, p. 39), has received limited attention from emotion researchers. This is surprising given that positive emotions have been linked to: (a) well being, (b) engaging in activities, and (c) broadening and building individuals' resilience and capacities through social relationships.

In response to the dearth of research on emotions in a tourism context, and our own interest in advancing scholarship, we conducted a study of individuals' interpretation of their emotions during a pleasure travel experience. The research questions guiding our study were: "How do individuals interpret the emotions they felt each day during their pleasure travel experience?" and "How do their interpretations align with the modified Differential Emotions Scale (mDES; Cohn et al., 2009), commonly used to measure emotions in an experiential context?" Understanding individuals' emotions during a pleasure travel experience is critical to the success of tourism organizations' promotional campaigns as well as their on-site service delivery.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

According to Cognitive Appraisal Theory, “evaluations and interpretations of events, rather than events per se determine whether an emotion will be felt and which emotion it will be (Roseman, Spindel, & Jose, 1990, p. 899). They “...are transient, intense reactions to an event, person or entity” (Gootie, Connelly, Griffith, & Gupta, 2010, p. 980). Using a cross-sectional, quantitative approach, various researchers have studied the affective response to pleasure travel experiences (from now on referred to as “vacation”) (e.g., Sirgy, Kruger, Lee, & Yu, 2010). Others have chosen to narrow their focus to the study of the positive emotion of “happiness” which, according to Diener and Diener (1996), may be the most frequently experienced emotion and is associated with health and well-being.

Emotional responses to vacations are not always positive. Vingerhoets, van Huijgevoort, and van Heck (2002) coined the term “leisure sickness” after hearing tourists complain about headaches, fatigue, for example, especially prior to and/or during the first few days of a vacation. Other researchers (e.g., Kop, Vingerhoets, Kruithof, & Gottdiener, 2003) documented a rise in diarrhea, heart problems, and even death during the initial stage of a vacation. And, Sonmez and Apostolopolous (2009) noted the negative impact of willingness to take a risk while on vacation.

Taking into account the positive/negative continuum of emotions, Cohn et al. (2009) generated the mDES. The Scale, which has been shown to be a valid and reliable measure of emotion (Fredrickson, 2009), includes positive (i.e., amusement, awe, contentment, gratitude, hope, interest, joy, love, and pride) and negative (i.e., anger, contempt, disgust, embarrassment, fear, guilt, sadness, shame) emotions. The mDES was chosen because it treats emotions as multidimensional (usually labeled positive and negative) and, according to Schoefer and Diamantopoulos (2008, p. 68), “simplifies the representation of emotional responses by identifying a set of common dimensions that can be used to distinguish specific emotions from one another.” To the best of our knowledge, researchers have not explicitly addressed the validity of the Scale in a tourism context.

METHODOLOGY

A convenience sample of 20 American travelers was recruited through snowball sampling and an on-line listserv at a university in the Northeast region of the United States. In all cases individuals had to be 55 or older and planning to take a vacation lasting at least five days or longer in August or September 2010. The decision to sample individuals 55 years of age or older was dictated by colleagues in the Netherlands who were conducting a parallel study. Mandating a vacation lasting five days or longer was linked to our desire to document variation in emotion and the fact that most vacations last 5-7 days. The study instrument was a diary (i.e., mDES and opportunity to describe emotions), which individuals completed each day of their vacation. The data presented in this study only represents respondents’ answers to the statement: “Please feel free to write about anything meaningful that happened today.”

The three authors coded respondents’ answers for each day of their vacation (approximately 161 pages of text). We followed Huberman and Miles’s (1994) interactive model of data analysis, with its three iterative components of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

RESULTS

The most common emotions shared by respondents were positive (i.e., joy, awe, contentment, peacefulness, love, and excitement). Negative emotions were fear, sadness, disgust, boredom, and misery. Three emotions (two positive, one negative) are not on the mDES. And, two of the negative emotions included in the mDES (i.e., contempt, shame) were not cited by any of the respondents.

Individuals were most likely to describe their joy while vacationing using terms such as “good,” “pleasant,” and “wonderful.” For example, when describing their overall day, they said, “It was a good day” and “Life is good.” These emotional terms, however, were also linked to people. For example, while referencing her daughters, a respondent said: “They’re just having a good time cutting loose at the beach.” A second type of emotion focused on the amazing, beautiful, awe-inspiring sites at the vacation destination: “...Hiked... up some beautiful gorges... and [took] in some beautiful scenery” and “The skies were particularly beautiful.” Respondents also mentioned how “contented” they were visiting a gorgeous beach, spending time with family and friends, and more.

The next three most often cited emotions were negative. Respondents indicated that they were fearful, “afraid,” and “worried,” especially concerning traveling to and from the destination, the work left behind, and what they were going to face when they returned to work. Respondents also cited “sadness.” In this case, the emotion was almost exclusively linked to the end of the vacation: “Really feel sad that... the time with my friends had to end...” and “Sad to see trip end.” In terms of “disgust,” at times it was aligned with travel problems-- “Our plane was delayed 5 hours... I was so disgusted and upset...”--but it also was linked to family (e.g., “...Little miffed at my 17 year old...”) or other tourists (e.g., “Bunch of very loud middle-aged men with their wives. Drinking beer, mooning each other in the pool. I’m kind of disgusted...”).

Noteworthy were the emotions that are not included on the mDES (Cohn et al., 2009; Fredrickson, 2009). “A very good beach day, very relaxing and peaceful” and “easy day... not much happened,” for example, were representative of the peacefulness individuals associated with their vacations. At the other end of the continuum they were excited to see family and friends, and to “escape to the ocean...” The new negative emotion was “misery” (e.g., “We had a bad weather day” and “...Took a walk in some woods—disaster—full of mosquitos”).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

According to Diener and Diener (1999), happiness may be the most frequently experienced emotion. In this study it was one of the top three, but it followed joy and awe, two emotions linked to visiting a travel destination. Perhaps more important is the finding that “peacefulness” and “excitement” are new emotions associated with a vacation. Overall, these findings are important for a number of reasons. First, individuals’ emotional response to their vacation experience tends to be positive which, according to various authors (e.g., Sirgy et al., 2010), leads to health and well-being and may reduce cognitive dissonance. Second, the fact that “joy” and other positive emotions can arise from the destination provides DMOs and other travel-related companies with new strategies for positioning their destination. For example, highlighting the joy experienced while visiting the awe inspiring forests of Maine with old friends would complement and perhaps enhance the state’s current message, “*There’s More to Maine.*”

With respect to negative emotions, respondents were most likely to ascribe them to the travel experience. While the act of traveling has, unfortunately, become more onerous for tourists, travel suppliers can lessen the negatives by generating services that reduce stress, enhance the excitement of arriving and being at the destination, and more. For example, why do hotel van drivers not greet visitors at the airport with a care package (e.g., bottle of water, steamed towel or scented neck wrap)? Or, could front desk personnel print out travel documents for tourists rather than forcing them to find a computer, printer, pay an extra dollar, and more?

Our results provide insight to “how” tourists respond emotionally to their vacation experience. We now know, for example, that being in “awe” is, for our tourists, most often linked to a landscape. Further, being contented is multi-dimensional; individuals feel contented because they are in a unique/different environment with individuals they care about. While our results are preliminary, they do suggest that certain types of emotions gain in importance (e.g., joy, awe) while others (i.e., contempt, shame) disappear. Without future research on this issue, however, this is simply supposition. Further, our results suggest that negative emotions do occur during a vacation, but they are less pronounced than the positive emotions. They also do not align with the types of negative emotions shared by Vingerhoets et al. (2002), among others.

Finally, we provide partial support for the mDES (Cohn et al. 2009). To our knowledge this Scale has received limited attention in a tourism context. Our results suggest that the positive emotions in the Scale generally represent the emotions felt by tourists. The same can not be said for the negative emotions on the Scale. Thus, further qualitative research with tourists visiting an array of destinations is warranted to document what emotions are continuously elicited during vacations, regardless of destination type. The results of such research could be used to further refine the Scale.

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