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## The Role of Causal Attribution in the Structural Model of the Negative Tourism Experience

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### ABSTRACT

*The present study tests the antecedents and consequences of tourists' causal attribution after negative destination experiences. Adopting the attribution theory of Heider (1958) and Kelley (1973), the study probes if seriousness of the negative experience affects individuals' causal attribution and if satisfaction and post-trip loyalty are its consequences. It further examines if pre-trip loyalty and tourism situations affect the model. A two (seriousness) × two (pre-trip loyalty) × two (setting) experimental design with eight scenarios was used. The proposed structural model with experience as a predictor, satisfaction as its consequence, attribution constructs as their mediators, and post-trip loyalty as the outcome was tested by using AMOS 18. Results confirmed that stability and globality dimensions of attribution are affected by the seriousness of negative incidents. These two dimensions also were identified as important predictors of tourist satisfaction. Results also showed that there are differences in the coefficients of the model by different pre-trip loyalty and tourism situations. Attribution theory can be applied in tourism settings: the importance of each dimension of attribution is different and the function of attribution also varies by different conditions.*

**Keywords:** *attribution theory, loyalty, negative experience, satisfaction, tourist attribution.*

### INTRODUCTION

Tourists encounter many negative situations because of the complicated nature of tourism services and psychological processes are involved in finding the causes of the situations. Among the theories that explain the process, attribution theory predicts the consequence of the incidents by suggesting dimensions that describe to which people attribute the causes of them (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1973; Weiner, 1985a). Although this theory has been adopted to explain consumer behavior (Oliver, 1993; Weiner, 2000), no experimental study has covered and empirically tested the full dimensions of attribution in tourism settings by using structural equation modeling.

The present study tests the comprehensive dimensions of causal attribution process under negative tourism situations. A model of tourism experience, with negative experience as the antecedent and satisfaction and post-trip loyalty as the consequence of causal attribution, was tested. In testing the model, two different types of negative experience and different levels of loyalty were considered to reflect diverse aspects of tourism experiences.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism experience is a combination of diverse services and is frequently affected by unexpected negative situations. Some of the situations are destination-related. Poor weather, political instability, and violent encounters are among the examples. There also are sources of negative experiences that are less related to the attributes of the destination such as service failure caused by international hotel chains or airlines.

The relationship between negative experience and lower levels of satisfaction has been supported in the studies in consumer behavior (Bougie, Pieters, & Zeelenberg, 2003; Swan & Combs, 1976) and in tourism (Reichel, Lowengart, & Milman, 2000; Swanson & Hsu, 2009). In addition, there are intervening factors that affect the strengths of the causal relation. For example, external factors (e.g., service recovery) and personal factors (e.g., self-serving bias) are two intervening factors.

Tourist attribution is one of the personal factors that mediate the relationship. Attribution theory provides a framework to explain the way people interpret the causes of incidents. It has been known as an important way of analyzing people's psychological process and its behavioral outcome especially after negative experiences. Heider (1958) proposed that different aspects of interpersonal actions affect individuals' causal attribution. Kelley (1973) focused on information as a factor of it. He suggested the application of analysis of variance (ANOVA) to explain different types of attribution using the distinctiveness, consensus, and consistency dimensions. Weiner (1985a, 1985b, 1986, 2000) used locus, stability, and control dimensions. Martinko and Thomson (1998) synthesized those two viewpoints. They pointed out that Kelley focused on the information affecting social attribution while Weiner addressed the dimensions of attribution which cause a person's emotions and behaviors. In addition, they argued that effort, which partially reflects internal and unstable dimensions, had been overlooked by Kelley and can be proposed as another factor. Their synthesis revealed the difference in identification of attributional dimensions. As opposed to the suggestions of Kent and Martinko (1995) and the suggestions of Weiner (1986), for example, Martinko and Thomson (1998) did not identify the controllability factor as a separate dimension, suggesting that it is not independent of locus.

Attribution theory has been applied to marketing and consumer behavior studies. Mizerski, Golden, and Kernan (1979) used this theory to explain consumers' decision making process. They identified the stimuli that affect causal attribution and proposed the process of belief formation, integration process, attitude and behavioral responses as consequences of attribution. Weiner (2000) illustrated consumers' attributional process as the outcome of product and services experiences. Accordingly, the method of attribution determines consumers' likelihood of satisfaction, emotional outcome (e.g., anger), and behavior.

Despite extensive applications of this theory, little tourism research has explored the comprehensive perspective of causal attribution. Most tourism literature explained and tested the locus factor but failed to explain other attributional dimensions (Pearce & Moscardo, 1984; van Raaij, 1986). Furthermore, methodological limitations in testing the theory are found among the extant tourism studies. Although previous research has provided preliminary implications, structured and quantitative studies are limited.

Since retaining customers has been important in tourism as well as in marketing, loyalty and the anatomy of it have been scrutinized. According to Oliver (1999), brand loyalty involves a deep commitment and favorability towards a brand. In identifying its structure, there have been two research streams: the quatrochotomization of loyalty into cognitive, affective, conative, and action loyalty (e.g., Oliver, 1999); and the dichotomization of it into attitudinal and behavioral components (e.g., Dick & Basu, 1994). Although loyalty has been addressed in tourism, studies on its role in affecting tourists' psychological procedures, including causal attribution, have been limited. To fill the research gap, the present study examines the function of pre-trip loyalty in the tourist attribution process.

## **HYPOTHESES AND METHODOLOGY**

The present study tests a comprehensive set of attribution by focusing on the severity of the negative experience. Three dimensions of attribution are adopted. First, locus dimension (internal vs. external) clarifies if individuals attribute the cause of the negative experience to themselves or external factors (Weiner, 1985a). In tourism, the locus factor would be used efficiently to explain any self-serving bias (Heider, 1958). This principle clarifies that people tend to blame others under negative situations. Therefore, a severely negative experience would cause tourists to attribute it to more external factors of the tourism experience. Second, stability (stable vs. unstable) shows if people perceive that the negative event will consistently happen in the future (Weiner, 1985a). A more negative experience would lead people to think that those incidents are not accidental and will continue to happen during their next visits. Third, globality (global vs. specific) explains if people perceive that the attribute of the destination or tourism service can be generalized to the entire characteristics of a particular tourism experience. After a seriously negative destination or service experience, people are likely to think that the specific attribute represents the entire quality of the tourism experience and assume that the experience, overall, is poor. These statements lead to hypothesis 1.

*Hypothesis 1. There is a causal relationship between the severity of negative tourism experience and three types of causal attribution.*

*Hypothesis 1a. More severe negative experience leads tourists to attribute it to more external factors.*

*Hypothesis 1b. More severe negative experience leads tourists to attribute it to more stable factors.*

*Hypothesis 1c. More severe negative experience leads tourists to attribute it to more global factors.*

Hypothesis 2 includes causal relationships between three dimensions of attribution and satisfaction. First, if travelers think that the negative incident occurred because of themselves rather than the problems with destination and services providers, their overall satisfaction with the tourism experience would not be lowered. On the other hand, as they blame something outside of themselves, they show lower satisfaction levels towards the overall destination or service experience. Second, the stability dimension suggests that when the negative event occurs, causal attribution towards unstable factors decreases the level of dissatisfaction caused by the event itself and increases the level of overall satisfaction. Third, when the destination is perceived negatively because of tourists' generalization of partial dissatisfiers, tourists' overall satisfaction levels decrease.

*Hypothesis 2. There is a causal relationship between the tourists' causal attribution and satisfaction.*

*Hypothesis 2a. Tourists' causal attribution to internal factors causes higher levels of satisfaction.*

*Hypothesis 2b. Tourists' causal attribution to unstable factors causes higher levels of satisfaction.*

*Hypothesis 2c. Tourists' causal attribution to specific factors causes higher levels of satisfaction.*

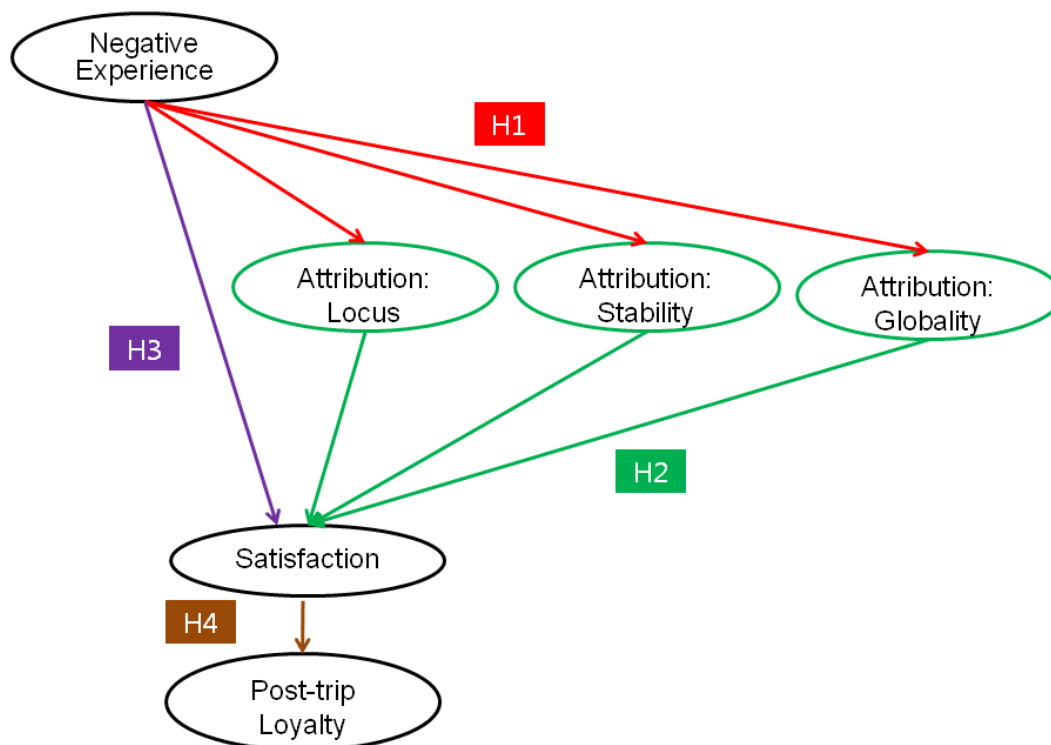
With the third hypothesis, a direct relationship between negative experience and satisfaction is proposed. This path is justified because factors other than tourists' own causal attribution also affect their satisfaction.

*Hypothesis 3. There is a causal relationship between the seriousness of negative experience and satisfaction level.*

Finally, the relationship between satisfaction and post-trip loyalty is hypothesized. Previous studies tested and confirmed the causal relationship between these two constructs (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000; Yoon & Uysal, 2005).

*Hypothesis 4. There is a positive relationship between satisfaction and post-trip loyalty.*

The hypothesized diagram is represented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1**  
**Research Hypotheses**

To test the hypotheses, two hundred and nineteen university students enrolled in tourism, marketing, and consumer behavior classes at an American midwestern university participated in the study. The use of student samples has been validated from many previous experimental studies applying attribution theory (Folkes, 1984; Keltner, Locke, & Audrain, 1993; Laufer & Gillespie, 2004). That use is justified further because university students themselves are active customers in the travel industry and potentially can encounter negative tourism experiences.

A scenario-based approach has been suggested as a viable method to test consumers' causal attribution (Weiner, 2000). Therefore, a two (seriousness)  $\times$  two (pre-trip loyalty)  $\times$  two (setting) experimental design with eight scenarios was used. Negative experience and pre-trip loyalty were set with two levels (seriously negative, slightly negative; high loyalty, low loyalty). Two types of scenarios representing destination-based and service-based negative situations were used to represent each cell (see Table 1). A respondent was randomly assigned one scenario (i.e., either destination-based or service-based) per cell and answered questions associated with a total of four scenarios. Sequence of the scenarios was assigned randomly. A total of 802 entries was aggregated and used for the model testing.

Causal attribution representing locus (5 items), stability (5 items), and globality (4 items) was measured. Measurement items were developed based on previous studies (Hunt & Keaveney, 1994; Klein & Dawar, 2004; Laufer & Gillespie, 2004; Russell, 1982) and the conceptual understanding of the dimensions. Satisfaction was measured with 4 items based on previous literature (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Post-trip loyalty was measured with 6 questions (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). All the questions were measured with 7 Likert-scale items. Structural equation modeling (SEM) provided by AMOS 18 (Arbuckle, 2009) was used to test the hypotheses and the suggested attribution model. All missing data was removed listwise. No significant violation of underlying assumptions of SEM was detected.

**Table 1**  
**Eight Scenarios Used in the Experimental Study**

Loyalty Level	Seriousness of Experience	Type (Setting)	Scenario
High	Seriously-negative	Destination-based	You love Destination X and frequently go there for vacation. You also know that Destination X is overall a fabulous vacation place with great beaches. This time you went there for a week of vacation with your family. However, a hurricane hit the beaches. You and your family members were all injured.
		Service-based	You love to fly Airline Y for your vacation travels. You frequently use its services, and always consider it as your first choice. This time you went to an offshore destination for a week of vacation. However, the flight was delayed due to the airline's service failure. Your entire vacation experience was spoiled because of that.
	Slightly-negative	Destination-based	You love Destination X and frequently go there for vacation. You also know that Destination X is an overall fabulous vacation place with great beaches. This time you went there for a week of vacation with your family. You went for a drive to go to the beaches, but bad weather forced you to return to the hotel.
		Service-based	You love Hotel Z because it provides the best service. You frequently use this hotel and always consider it as your first choice. This time you booked a room in this hotel to stay for two days. However, the room was not ready when you arrived. You waited for 30 minutes.
Low	Seriously-negative	Destination-based	You have never been to Destination X previously. You know that Destination X is a fabulous vacation place with great beaches. This time you went there for a week of vacation with your family. However, a hurricane hit the beaches. You and your family members were all injured.
		Service-based	You have never flown Airline Y for your vacation travels in the past. This time you used this airline to go to an offshore destination for a week of vacation. However, the flight was delayed due to the airline's service failure. Your entire vacation experience was spoiled because of that.
	Slightly-negative	Destination-based	You have never been to Destination X previously. You know that Destination X is a fabulous vacation place with great beaches. This time you went there for a week of vacation with your family. You went for a drive to go to the beaches, but bad weather forced you to return to the hotel.
		Service-based	You have never stayed in Hotel Z for your vacation travels in the past. You went to this hotel to stay for two days. However, the room was not ready when you arrived. You waited for 30 minutes.

## RESULTS

The model was tested by adopting the suggestion of Anderson and Gerbing (1988): measurement models were decided by CFAs and then the structural model was tested. Indicators of each construct with insignificant factor loadings or coefficients below 0.5 as well as cross-loaded items were removed. The measurement model showed an acceptable fit ( $\chi^2(67, n=802) = 256.792$ , NFI=0.950, CFI=0.962, RMSEA=0.059).

### Model comparison

Based on the measurement model, the structural model was tested. Model fit indices showed that the model was acceptable except for the chi-square statistic ( $\chi^2(83, n=802) = 515.111$ , NFI=0.901, CFI=0.916, RMSEA=0.081). Significant chi-square is likely to be caused by the complexity of the model and a large sample size (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998). Therefore, an alternative model was compared with the originally-suggested model. Modification indices were reviewed to improve its model fit. Modification indices showed that adding a causal relationship between stability and globality dimension or correlating the errors of those two would improve model fit. Though difficult to conceptually confirm the causal relationship between the two constructs, adding an error covariance would not conceptually harm the initially suggested model. Model fit indices of the alternative model—the model with the error covariance—showed that the model fit the data well ( $\chi^2(82, n=802) = 369.518$ , NFI=0.929, CFI=0.944, RMSEA=0.066) and the fit improved. The improvement of model fit also has a conceptual implication. Assuming that stability and globality are highly correlated, it may also be acceptable if either of the two dimensions is considered.

As a relatively high correlation between stability and globality dimensions may negatively affect the model fit, a model without globality and another alternative model with only locus dimension were tested. Model fit improved in both models. In particular, the model with only locus dimension achieved a very good model fit ( $\chi^2(32, n=802) = 65.825$ , NFI=0.982, CFI=0.991, RMSEA=0.036). However, it would not be a useful model because both of the antecedents and consequences of the only attribution dimension, locus, become insignificant and only traditionally-known relationships—negative experience causing lower satisfaction (which eventually harms loyalty)—remain in the model. Furthermore, the model without globality showed almost the identical result as the originally-proposed model except for the fact that locus no longer significantly affects satisfaction. In addition, coefficients indicating the relationship between stability and satisfaction increased. It shows that globality dimension is importantly considered in two ways. First, it works as a controlling construct for the locus dimension while there might be an overlap between stability and globality in identifying the direct predictors of satisfaction. Second, increased coefficients in the direct effect of the negative experience on satisfaction in the model without globality indicate that global dimension also captures a certain variation of the relationship between negative experience and satisfaction.

Although alternative models with additional correlation or less attribution dimensions improved model fit, as shown above, the originally-proposed model was used in the ensuing analysis. The primary purpose of the study was to test the theory rather than to find the best-fitting model.



## Hypotheses testing

While all other coefficients supported the hypotheses, results showed that a slightly serious situation, as opposed to the hypothesis, might lead people to blame external factors more, although not significant (Table 2). Insignificance of the relationship between the negative experience and locus implies that people blame themselves or others depending on other factors, regardless of the seriousness of incidents.

In addition, regression coefficients by two different types of tourism situations and loyalty levels were compared (Table 3). Differences in significance were found across the four groups. The relationship between the seriousness of incidents and the stability aspect of attribution was significantly found only in the low-loyalty—service group. That means that first-time visitors with no preference of a particular service provider are more affected by the seriousness of the incidents in their perception of the possibility of repeated service failure. An insignificant relationship between the seriousness of the experience and the globality of attribution was found only in the high-loyalty—service group. The implication is that generalization of the service failure into the overall quality of the service provider would not necessarily be affected by the seriousness of the incidents for loyal customers.

Data showed that the relationship between the locus of attribution and satisfaction was affected by the levels of loyalty rather than by the types of travel. For low loyalty groups, locus of attribution was an important predictor of satisfaction while it was not for high loyalty groups. Furthermore, stability attribution significantly affected satisfaction only among the high loyalty group after service failure.

**Table 2**  
**Regression Coefficients of the Model (Aggregated Data)**

Hypothesis	Standardized Path Coefficient	Unstandardized Path Coefficient	P-value	Result
1a	-0.013	-0.024	0.725	NS
1b	0.079	0.102	0.057	MS
1c	0.159	0.397	<0.001	S
2a	0.165	0.226	<0.001	S
2b	0.183	0.356	<0.001	S
2c	0.644	0.646	<0.001	S
3	0.180	0.451	<0.001	S
4	0.720	0.706	<0.001	S

Note: S: supported, NS: not supported, MS: marginally supported (0.05<p-value<0.10)

**Table 3**  
**Regression Coefficients of the Model (Four Cells Compared)**

Hypothesis	High-Loyalty—Destination Group (n=209)				Low-Loyalty—Destination Group (n=201)			
	StdC	UStdC	P-value	Result	StdC	UStdC	P-value	Result
1a	-0.040	-0.090	0.531	NS	-0.010	-0.020	0.901	NS
1b	0.015	0.020	0.846	NS	0.059	0.063	0.433	NS
1c	0.269	0.500	<0.001	S	0.195	0.366	0.023	S
2a	0.127	0.158	0.052	MS	0.259	0.339	0.002	S
2b	0.067	0.127	0.350	NS	0.057	0.133	0.402	NS
2c	0.580	0.767	<0.001	S	0.498	0.667	<0.001	S
3	0.142	0.350	0.039	S	0.244	0.613	<0.001	S
4	0.678	0.679	<0.001	S	0.672	0.571	<0.001	S

Hypothesis	High-Loyalty—Service Group (n=192)				Low-Loyalty—Service Group (n=200)			
	StdC	UStdC	P-value	Result	StdC	UStdC	P-value	Result
1a	0.005	0.008	0.951	NS	0.007	0.014	0.924	NS
1b	0.088	0.134	0.283	NS	0.226	0.299	0.016	S
1c	0.126	0.314	0.133	NS	0.199	0.420	0.030	S
2a	0.065	0.096	0.266	NS	0.176	0.195	0.005	S
2b	0.407	0.630	<0.001	S	-0.030	-0.050	0.664	NS
2c	0.701	0.662	<0.001	S	0.893	0.911	<0.001	S
3	0.169	0.399	0.004	S	0.142	0.306	0.045	S
4	0.757	0.775	<0.001	S	0.619	0.680	<0.001	S

Note: StdC: standardized path coefficients / UStdC: unstandardized path coefficients  
S : supported, NS : not supported, MS : marginally supported (0.05<p-value<0.10)

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of the present study was to propose a tourist attribution model and to empirically test it. Although simpler models or additional constraints derived better model fits, they failed to provide meaningful implications for the theory. Therefore, the originally suggested model was used for analyses.

The results derived based on the aggregated data suggest that while stability and globality attribution being affected by the seriousness of experience, all of the three factors of attribution significantly affect satisfaction. Coefficients of the model showed difference by the types of incidents and loyalty levels. Only the low-loyalty—service group showed a significant relationship between the seriousness of incidents and stability. The high-loyalty—service group's satisfaction was affected by whether they interpreted the incidents as stable or unstable in future purchase. Groups other than the high-loyalty—service group showed that globality would be an important outcome of the seriousness of the experience. The implication is that generalization of one incident would not be involved with the seriousness of service failure among loyal customers. Results also show that loyalty levels have an influence on the way that locus of attribution affects satisfaction levels. A low-loyalty group's satisfaction is significantly affected by whether they attribute to internal or external factors.

Results address the importance of global attribution across all the models. Service providers' efforts can be involved in the process of tourists' attribution: efforts can be made so that customers do not generalize the incident into the overall attribute of the destination or service providers. Stability attribution is also addressed: Service providers' or destination marketers' reactions after negative incidents need to be made to ensure that such incidents will not happen in the future.

In addition, different patterns of causal relationships by groups suggest that tourist attribution could be controlled by different types of experience and by different loyalty groups. For example, the fact that the high-loyalty—service group is not affected by the seriousness of experience in their global attribution implies that service providers do not need to take actions to lead this group from generalizing negative incidents as much as other groups.

The study has the following implications. The suggested model provides a conceptual understanding of tourists' attitudinal and behavioral responses to negative experiences. Existing studies either disregarded possible intervening factors or focused on the service providers' actions after negative experiences by tourists. The present study, however, provides a conceptual framework to identify tourists' own mental processes. In addition, three dimensions of causal attribution were adopted and applied to tourism. The suggested attributional process model showed how each of the attributional dimensions would be related to tourist satisfaction and loyalty. Furthermore, the study identified how different types of tourism experiences and pre-trip loyalty affect individuals' causal attribution.

Limitation exists in the model fit and controlling factors. Although a homogeneous sample—students—was used in this study, other personal factors including demographic, socioeconomic, and psychographic factors were not controlled. Although the locus of attribution

was not supported as a consequence of negative experience in most of the models suggested in the study, additional constraints would clarify what causes the locus of attribution.

Another limitation exists with the experimental design. No control group was included and only two levels representing loyalty and seriousness were used due to a randomized complete design with repeated measurement adopted in this study. The survey questionnaire had to be short enough so that respondents would not lose concentration. Future studies, however, can address this limitation. Additional research can be done with different tourism scenarios by using multi-levels of such variables. Experiments also can be designed differently so that diverse phases of tourism experiences can be captured.

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