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More Negative, More Memorable: The Role of Social Sharing of Negative Emotions in Shaping Dark Tourism Experiences

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More Negative, More Memorable: The Role of Social Sharing of Negative Emotions in Shaping Dark Tourism Experiences

Introduction

Emotions, both positive and negative, play a key role in shaping memorable tourism experiences (Tung & Ritchie, 2011). In dark tourism, tourists often encounter intense negative emotions such as anger, sadness, or shock. These negative emotions are central to the dark tourism experience and can enhance satisfaction and promote return visits (Nawijn et al., 2018). A truly memorable dark tourism experience derives significant value from negative emotional experiences, which amplify the trip's impact, leaving enduring impressions that shape tourists' attitudes and behaviors long after the visit (Nawijn & Fricke, 2015). However, research on how to effectively manage and leverage these morally complex negative emotions remains underdeveloped, particularly in terms of their impact on tourists' memorable tourism experience (Lin et al., 2023).

The concept of Social Sharing of Emotions (SSE) provides valuable insight into how tourists process and communicate their emotional experiences (Rimé et al., 1998). In the context of dark tourism, the SSE is particularly relevant as tourists are often compelled to share the intense negative emotions evoked by visits to sites associated with death and suffering. While emotional sharing can sometimes provide relief (López-López et al., 2014), in dark tourism contexts, it may instead amplify these emotions, intensifying their impact and contributing to lasting memories. Despite its significance, the role of social sharing of negative emotions in shaping memorable dark tourism experiences remains underexplored. Further investigation is needed to understand how and why sharing negative emotions influences tourists' emotional responses and enhances the overall impact of dark tourism experiences.

Literature Review

Dark tourism experience

Dark tourism, characterized by visits to sites linked to death, disaster, and tragedy (Foley & Lennon, 1996), engages tourists in experiences that often evoke profound emotional responses. These emotions, including sadness, anger, fear, and empathy, differentiate dark tourism from leisure or entertainment tourism (Sharpley, 2012). While negative emotions such as sadness and shock are prominent in these contexts, they can also contribute to meaningful reflections on history, identity, and moral values (Zheng et al., 2018; Oren et al., 2021). However, existing research often treats these emotions as static, focusing on their immediate impact rather than their dynamic nature (Tucker & Shelton, 2018).

Social sharing of emotions (SSE)

SSE refers to the process of communicating one's emotions to others, and it plays a crucial role in how emotions are regulated and processed (Rimé et al., 1991). In the context of tourism, sharing emotions, especially negative ones, can influence tourists' experiences and how they remember them (Gable, 2006). The act of sharing negative emotions often intensifies these feelings, yet it can also provide emotional relief and deepen cognitive appraisals of the event (Rimé, 2007). While SSE is widely studied in other fields, its role in dark tourism, especially with respect to negative emotions, remains underexplored. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating how SSE

impacts the intensity of emotions and the formation of memorable tourism experiences (MTEs) in dark tourism contexts.

Memorable Tourism Experiences (MTES)

MTEs refer to tourism experiences that are vividly remembered and emotionally significant for the tourist (Kim et al., 2012). Research on MTEs has traditionally focused on positive emotions and hedonistic contexts, with studies showing that emotional intensity, social interactions, and novelty contribute to memorable outcomes (Kim & Ritchie, 2014; Kim & Chen, 2019). However, dark tourism often evokes negative emotions, and little attention has been paid to how these emotions influence the formation of MTEs. This study seeks to explore how the interplay of negative emotions and social sharing shapes memorable experiences in dark tourism.

Hypotheses Development

Building on the literature, this paper proposes the following hypotheses regarding the impact of social sharing of negative emotions in dark tourism on MTEs:

H1: Social sharing of negative emotions (vs. no sharing) in dark tourism will make tourism experiences more memorable.

H2: The effect of social sharing of negative emotions on MTES is mediated by the intensity of negative emotions.

The social sharing of emotions also involves feedback from the recipient, which can influence the intensity of emotions experienced by the sharer. Feedback, such as empathy or validation, can intensify the emotional experience, making the event more memorable (Nils & Rimé, 2012). This leads to the hypothesis:

H3: The recipient's feedback moderates the relationship between social sharing of negative emotions and the intensity of negative emotions, such that the relationship is stronger when feedback is provided (vs. no feedback).

Moreover, the manner in which emotions are expressed (e.g., feelings-oriented vs. facts-oriented) may influence the intensity of emotions, particularly depending on the type of recipient. Emotional expression aimed at fostering empathy (feelings-oriented) may lead to stronger negative emotions and make experiences more memorable when shared with close companions (strong ties), while expression focused on factual recounting (facts-oriented) may be more effective when shared with unfamiliar individuals (weak ties). Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4: (a) When tourists express emotions in a feelings-oriented mode (vs. facts-oriented), sharing these emotions with strong ties (vs. weak ties) will lead to more memorable tourism experiences, through (b) enhancing perceived empathy and (c) the intensity of negative emotions.

H5: (a) When tourists express emotions in a facts-oriented mode (vs. feelings-oriented), sharing these emotions with weak ties (vs. strong ties) will lead to more memorable tourism experiences, through (b) enhancing perceived social verification and (c) the intensity of negative emotions.

These hypotheses aim to uncover the complex interplay between negative emotions, social sharing, and memorable experiences in dark tourism, offering fresh insights into how tourists engage emotionally with tragic histories

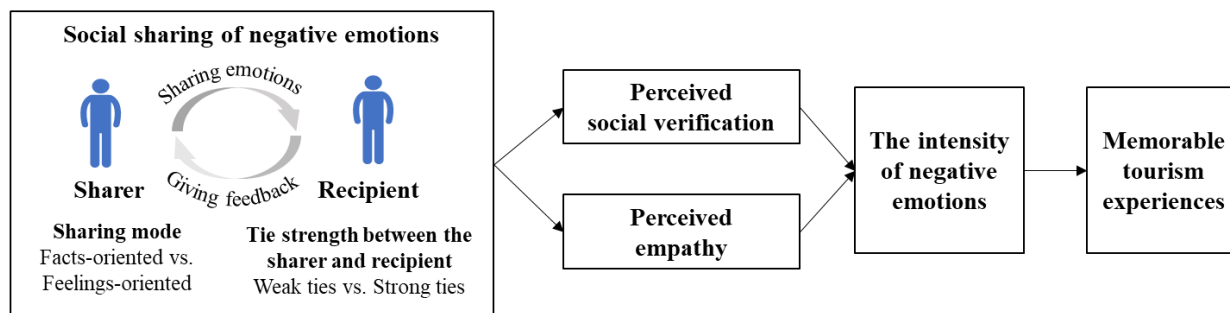


Fig 1. Conceptual model

Methodology

Based on the above hypotheses, this study proposed a conceptual (see Fig 1) and tested it through three experimental studies (see Table 1).

Table 1. Overview of the three studies

| Experiments | Design | Hypothesis Testing | Case Sites | Samples | Experiment Stimuli | Data collection Approach |
|-------------|---|--------------------|--|------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|
| Study 1 | 2 (sharing, no-sharing) between-subjects online experiment | H1, H2 | Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, Ukraine | 138 potential tourists | Tourism video | Online |
| Study 2 | 3 (no feedback, feedback, control) between-subjects lab experiment | H3 | The Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders, China | 165 college students | Virtual exhibition | Laboratory |
| Study 3 | 2 (feeling-oriented, facts-oriented) × 2 (strong-ties, weak-ties) between-subjects field experiment | H4, H5 | 5.12 Wenchuan Earthquake Ruins, China | 158 On-site tourists | On-site experience | Field |

Results

Study 1. Independent-sample t-tests was used to test H1 and H2. The results showed significant differences in memorable tourism experiences between the two groups ($t=11.440$, $p < 0.001$). In the sharing group ($M_{\text{sharing}} = 6.237$, $SD = 0.252$), the participants' tourism experiences were more memorable than no-sharing group ($M_{\text{no-sharing}} = 5.475$, $SD = 0.490$). There were also significant differences in negative emotion between the two groups ($M_{\text{sharing}} = 6.024$, $SD = 0.427$; $M_{\text{no-sharing}} = 5.251$, $SD = 0.625$; $t = 8.453$, $p < 0.001$). The intensity of negative emotions ($\beta = -0.311$, $SE = 0.061$; 95% CI: -0.441 to -0.201) served as a mediator between social sharing of negative emotions and memorable tourism experiences. Additionally, the direct relationship of social sharing of

negative emotions on memorable tourism experiences were significant ($\beta = -0.452$, $SE = 0.069$; 95% CI: -0.588 to -0.315). These results support H1 and H2.

Study 2. A one-way ANOVA was used to test H3. The results show that there were significant differences in the intensity of negative emotions according to the recipient's feedback ($F_{(2, 162)} = 169.471$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.677$). Participants who received feedback from recipients experienced stronger negative emotions ($M_{\text{feedback}} = 6.324$, $SD = 0.431$) than those who didn't receive feedback ($M_{\text{no feedback}} = 5.498$, $SD = 0.715$) and who didn't share negative emotions ($M_{\text{no-sharing}} = 4.218$, $SD = 0.632$). There were also significant differences in memorable tourism experiences between the three groups ($F_{(2,162)} = 79.889$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.497$). In the feedback group ($M_{\text{feedback}} = 6.272$, $SD = 0.535$), participants' experiences were more memorable than the no feedback group ($M_{\text{no feedback}} = 5.708$, $SD = 0.641$) and no-sharing group ($M_{\text{no-sharing}} = 4.886$, $SD = 0.554$). The procedure for testing mediation is similar to Study 1 and produced similar results. The intensity of negative emotions ($\beta=0.586$, $SE=0.068$, 95% CI: 0.456 to 0.726) played a mediating role in the impact of social sharing of negative emotions (with recipient's feedback) on memorable tourism experiences. These results support H3.

Study 3. Two-way ANOVA with sharing modes and tie strength as between-subjects factors. Results showed that sharing modes and tie strength exerted significant interaction on perceived social verification ($F_{(1, 157)} = 25.699$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.143$). Participants share negative emotions in a facts-oriented mode in weak ties led them to report a greater sense of social verifications than those in other conditions ($M_{\text{facts-weak}} = 6.390$, $SD = 0.427$; $M_{\text{facts-strong}} = 5.980$, $SD = 0.494$; $M_{\text{feelings-strong}} = 5.646$, $SD = 0.561$; $M_{\text{feelings-weak}} = 5.241$, $SD = 0.531$). There was no significant interaction between the sharing modes conditions and the tie strength conditions on perceived empathy ($p > 0.05$). We used PROCESS Model 83 (Hayes, 2018) with 5000 bootstrapped samples to test the moderated serial mediation analysis. The results revealed that the interaction between sharing modes and tie strength could significantly predict memorable tourism experiences through the path of sharing mode \rightarrow perceived social verification \rightarrow intensity of negative emotions \rightarrow memorable tourism experiences ($\beta = 0.080$, $SE = 0.034$, 95% CI: 0.027 to 0.157), and the predictive effect was higher in the condition of weak tie than that of strong tie. These results support H5.

Conclusion and Discussion

Emotional interaction is central to tourism experiences, particularly in dark tourism, where visitors often encounter distressing events. The sharing of negative emotions in such contexts has become a common behaviour among tourists. Understanding how different modes of emotional expression (facts-oriented vs. feelings-oriented), and the strength of interpersonal ties (strong vs. weak ties), affect the intensity of negative emotions and memorable tourism experiences is crucial.

This research includes three studies. Study 1 shows that sharing negative emotions intensifies, rather than alleviates, distress, contradicting the traditional catharsis hypothesis (Scheff, 1979; Zech & Rimé, 2005). This aligns with López-López et al.'s (2014) finding that negative emotional sharing amplifies intensity. Study 2 finds that emotional intensity increases when the recipient provides feedback, highlighting the role of social validation in enhancing emotional outcomes in dark tourism. Study 3 reveals that the impact of emotional sharing depends on the relationship between the sharer and recipient. Specifically, sharing emotions in a facts-oriented mode with strangers leads to stronger negative emotions than sharing with friends. This challenges previous

research, suggesting that, in some contexts, sharing with strangers may be more impactful. Additionally, the reinforcing effect of negative emotions is mediated through perceived social verification.

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