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# The Role of Negative Emotions in Shaping Tourist Experiences

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# The Role of Negative Emotions in Shaping Tourist Experiences

## Introduction

Emotions are complex mental states in response to external environments or internal thoughts, usually accompanied by physiological changes, cognitive thoughts and behavioral reactions (APA, 2002). Researchers have noticed the importance of the emotional dimension of tourist experience, and many studies have been done to explore the influence of emotions on tourist attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Lee, 2014; Hosany & Gilbert, 2010; White & Scandale, 2005). However, research on negative emotions is rare, and findings from existing studies on negative emotions are still inconclusive.

According to Hosany (2012), the lack of negative emotion studies in tourism may be attributed to the hedonic nature of tourism consumption. Tourism and hospitality industries focus on creating happiness and positive emotions, and tourists seek pleasant and memorable experiences through taking vacations. From a psychological viewpoint, people tend to forget and avoid negative experiences in order to reduce their cognitive dissonance (Hosany, 2012). Nevertheless, negative experiences are unavoidable, especially for tourists who travel to unfamiliar environments where much uncertainty is involved. More importantly, the Negativity Bias theory in psychology asserts that, when of equivalent intensity, the effects of negative entities (experiences/events/emotions/information, etc.) are stronger than that of positive entities because negative information attracts more attention than positive ones (Ito, Larsen, Smith & Cacioppo, 1998; Smith, Cacioppo, Larsen & Chartrand, 2003; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Thus, negative emotional experiences of tourists warrant more attention.

The purpose of this study is to explore the mechanism of how negative emotions shape tourist experiences. A conceptual model of negative emotions in tourism context was constructed based on literature review; methodologies and expected outcomes are discussed.

## Literature review

Cognitive theories define emotions as processes rather than states (Moors, Ellsworth, Scherer & Frijda, 2013). According to the Cognitive Appraisal Theory, the process of emotions starts with an external or internal stimulus, which is followed by the individual's cognitive appraisal or evaluations; after that, the individual's responses of physiological arousal and emotions are induced simultaneously (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Johnson & Stewart, 2005). There are mainly two approaches to describing and categorizing emotions: the discrete approach and the dimensional approach (Lopatovska & Arapakis, 2010). Discrete emotion theory argues that emotions are experienced separately and can be recognized universally (Ekman, 1992). The dimensional approach regards emotions as continuous and interconnected with two or more dimensions (Lopatovska & Arapakis, 2010). The Pleasure-Arousal-Dominance (PAD) model includes three bipolar dimensions: pleasure-displeasure, which measures how pleasant an emotion is; arousal-non-arousal represents the intensity of an emotion; and dominance-submissiveness describes the controlling and dominant nature of an emotion (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974).

### *Emotion in tourist experiences*

Generally, emotion studies in tourism and hospitality mainly focus on two aspects: emotional responses to a specific stimulus, like a destination, a festival or a service encounter, and the role of emotions on tourist attitudes and behaviors. Most studies focus on the outcomes of emotions, including satisfaction, perceived value, loyalty and decision-making, but few studies attempted to involve antecedents or determinants of emotions (Ma, 2013). Despite the extensive body of emotion studies, relatively less attention has been paid to negative emotions and no conclusive findings have been achieved on the role of negative emotions.

The role of negative emotions is significant and negative in some studies but tends to be less obvious in some other studies. Generally, negative emotions are expected to generate negative impacts, for example, Prayag, Hosany and Odeh (2013) found that the negative emotion of displeasure has a significant negative impact on tourist satisfaction and behavioral intention. However, the negative emotions fail to predict revisit intention and word-of-mouth in Su and Hsu (2013)'s study on Chinese natural heritage tourists. In addition, not all negative emotions lead to dissatisfaction and complaint or switching behavior. A study by Mattila and Ro (2008) investigated negative emotions following a service failure in a restaurant setting. Their results show that anger, disappointment and regret are more likely to be related to various dissatisfaction responses, including complaining, negative word-of-mouth, and switching, while worried customers are less likely to be dissatisfied. Tronvoll (2011) found that frustration is the most important predictor of complaint behaviors in tourism industry. Another study found that anger and regret work as mediators between dissatisfaction and switching intention, complaint behavior and negative word of mouth (Sánchez-García & Currás-Pérez, 2011).

These inconclusive findings may be attributed to several reasons. First, prior studies mainly treated emotions as discrete, and failed to take specific characteristics of negative emotions into consideration, such as intensity, duration, dominance, as well as the triggers of negative emotions. Emotional experience at a destination or an attraction could also be affected by irrelevant aspects, like previous experiences, memories, and interaction with travel companions. Second, negative situations or emotions are usually accompanied by coping strategies, like support from others, positive thinking, etc. which help ease negative emotions. When coping actions are implemented, negative emotions tend to be less powerful in predicting tourists' attitudes and behaviors. Third, after the coping actions or after a period of time, tourists might have a process of reappraisal of the benefits and costs of the travel experiences. The reevaluation might help explain why some people complain during the trip, but still highly appreciate the experience after the trip. In this study, the reevaluation is represented by perceived value, and it not only refers to monetary value, but also includes the meaning of the experiences, the knowledge and personal development gained from the tourist experience. The inconclusive findings about negative emotions make it necessary to devote more efforts to this topic.

### ***Cognitive evaluation***

The cognitive appraisal theories suggest that emotions are derived from individual's subjective evaluations of the environment or events based on some appraisal dimensions (Hosany, 2012). Based on the literature, Hosany (2012) identified five appraisal dimensions relevant to a tourist destination context, including pleasantness, goal congruence, certainty, novelty, and self-compatibility. His empirical results showed that appraisals of pleasantness, goal congruence, and internal self-compatibility predicted tourists' love, joy and positive surprise related to a destination. In another study, four appraisal dimensions (goal congruence, goal importance, goal

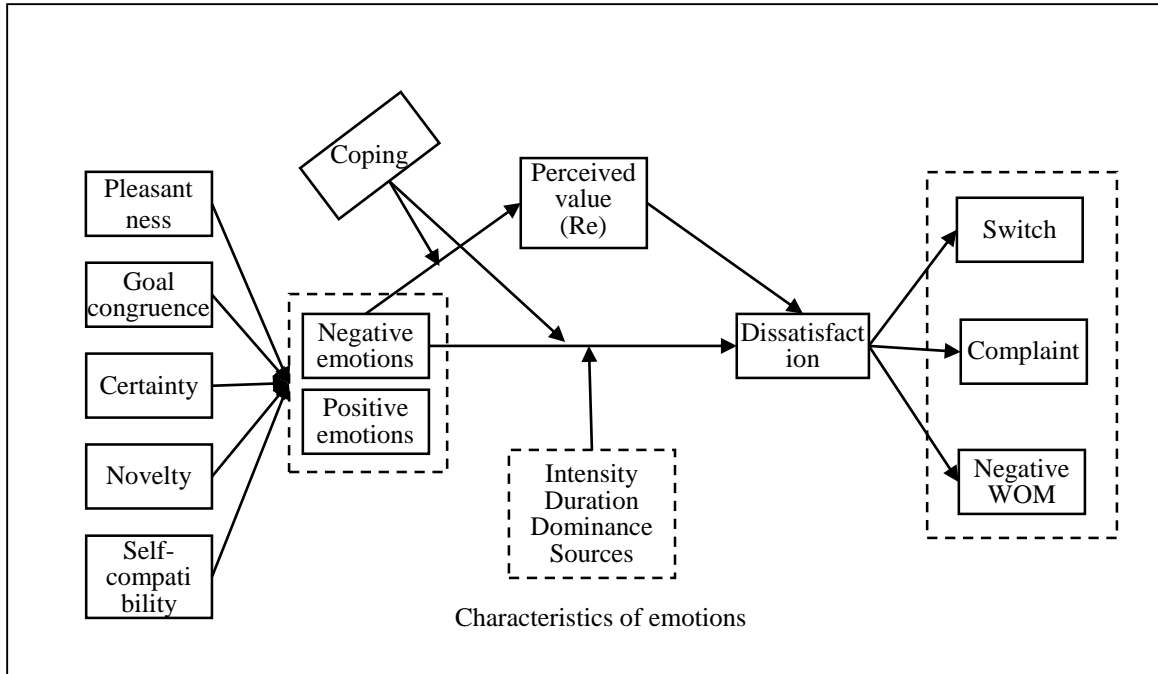
interest and unexpectedness) are found effective in predicting customer delight, which includes three positive emotions: elation, enthusiasm and excitement in theme park experience (Ma, Gao, Scott & Ding, 2013). Hosany (2012)'s five appraisal dimensions were adopted in this study due to its relevance to tourist experience. Among these dimensions, pleasantness concerns whether the outcome of a situation is positive or negative; goal congruence refers to motive consistency, desirability or goal significance; certainty differentiates emotions with a known outcome and unknown outcome; novelty represents disconfirmation of expectations; and the last dimension self-compatibility can be divided into internal and external self-compatibility, examines whether an event is compatible with one's normative and moral standards, either internal or external (Hosany, 2012).

### ***Coping mechanism***

Coping mechanism is defined as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p141). Coping mechanism is proposed from the perspectives of individuals' responses to negative situations or emotions, aiming at self-protection against stress and any possible negative outcomes (Duhachek, 2005). Coping strategies help co-create tourist experiences (Prebensen & Foss, 2011). Some coping strategies, e.g., taking direct actions to solve problems, seeking social support, positive thinking and reinterpretation, could possibly help ease negative emotions and moderate the relationship between emotions and satisfaction, as well as behavioral outcomes.

### ***Conceptual model***

Based on the foregoing literature review, a conceptual model is constructed for this study (Fig.1). The conceptual model starts with cognitive appraisals, followed by positive or negative emotional experiences at the destination or attractions. Negative emotions lead to dissatisfaction under the mediation of reevaluation of perceived value, and moderation of coping strategies and characteristics of negative emotions. Dissatisfaction further leads to three behavioral outcomes: switching intention, complaint behaviors and negative word-of-mouth.



**Figure 1. Conceptual model**

## Methodology

Following Kim and Fesenmaier (2015), Electrodermal activity (EDA), which is more objective and accurate than traditional ways of measuring emotions, will be used to monitor real-time changes and intensity of emotions. It will also be combined with other methods, including photos, interview and diaries, which help detect the meanings and interpretations of the negative emotions. A questionnaire survey approach will be used to capture key constructs in the study.

## Expected outcomes

Drawing on the literature in psychology and tourism, this study aims to explore the mechanism of how negative emotions shape tourist experiences. The following outcomes are expected to be derived from this study. First, appraisal dimensions that determine negative emotions will be identified. Second, results will provide external validity about negative emotions in existing studies using a new way of measuring emotions. Third, results will help explain the contradictory findings about negative emotions in prior studies through testing whether and how coping strategies, specific characteristics of emotions and the reevaluation of perceived value of tourist experiences could help change the impact of negative emotions on tourist attitudes and behaviors. The final study results are expected to advance our understanding of negative emotions and leverage negative emotions in industry.

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