A Typology of Tourist Emotional Experiences toward Holiday Destinations

Sameer Hosany  
University of London  
Royal Holloway  
UK  
E: sameer.hosany@rhul.ac.uk  

Girish Prayag  
SKEMA Business School  
France  
E: g.prayag@skema.edu
EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Early conceptualisations portray tourists as a unitary type (e.g. MacCannell, 1976) but the late 1970s and early 1980s marks a major in shift focus with the development of tourist typologies. Cohen (1972) was the first sociologist to propose a typology base on tourists’ desire for novel versus familiar experiences. Since Cohen’s (1972) seminal work, a coherent stream of research has emerged on constructing tourist typologies either in the form of segmentation, classification, profiling or clustering studies (e.g. Wickens, 2002; Sung, 2004; Park and Yoon, 2009). In essence, typological studies attempt to classify tourists into homogeneous sub-groups and as result, from a marketing perspective, are beneficial in the formulation of targeting and positioning strategies (Lee and Crompton, 1992). Traditionally, socio-demographic variables such as gender, age and family life cycle were used to segment tourists. Over the years, such an approach has received a lot of criticisms (e.g. Decrop and Snelders, 2005) because of its failure to take into consideration tourists underlying interests, motivations and behaviors.

In response, researchers have developed tourist typologies using psychographic variables such as lifestyles (e.g. Lee and Sparks, 2007), personal values (e.g. Thrane, 1997), personality traits (e.g. Plog, 1974), novelty seeking (Weaver et al., 2009) and benefits sought (e.g. Frochot, 2005). In addition, Bigné and Andreu (2004) show that emotion elicited during the enjoyment of leisure services can be used as a segmentation variable. Indeed, the core component of tourists’ experiences is emotional (Aho, 2001) and reactions to the tourism experience influence satisfaction, behavioral intentions, attitude judgements and destination choice (Goossens, 2000). However, despite the general relevance of emotion in tourism, to date no typology exists that profile tourists on the basis of their emotional responses. Accordingly, the main objective of this paper is to empirically identify distinguishable patterns of tourists’ emotional experiences towards holiday destinations.

METHODS

Questionnaire Design and Data Collection

Emotion items were adapted from Hosany and Gilbert (2009) scale development study. The authors identified a three-dimensional (joy, love and positive surprise) 15-item measure to represent tourists’ emotional experiences toward tourist destinations. In addition, to ensure a balanced sampling of emotion items in terms of valence, a negative emotion dimension, unpleasantness, consisting of five items (unhappiness, displeasure, regret, sadness and disappointment) was added. Empirical data were collected from 520 British respondents via a
self-administered questionnaire, consisting of socio-demographic variables, trip characteristics and multi-item scales to capture tourists’ emotional experiences.

FINDINGS

Typology Development

A two-step cluster analysis (Punj and Stewart, 1983) was used to classify respondents into groups based on the mean scores for the four emotion dimensions. Ward’s hierarchical cluster method with squared Euclidean distances was performed on a randomly generated sample of respondents to first identify potential clusters in the data. The agglomeration schedule suggested the presence of four to six clusters. A non-hierarchical, K-means clustering algorithm was then used to develop four, five and six cluster solutions. An examination of group membership, group sizes and the associated dendrograms indicate that a five-cluster solution was deemed most appropriate.

Cluster I consists of 19% of respondents and labeled “unemotional” since this group express below average levels of joy, love, surprise and unpleasantness. Cluster II, “delighted” constitutes the largest cluster with 28.8% of the sample. Tourists in this group display elevated levels of joy and surprise and relatively low levels of negative emotions. In Cluster III, labeled “negatives”, tourists report the highest incidence of unpleasantness along with the lowest mean scores for joy. Cluster IV, the second largest group (22.4%), tourist express “mixed” levels of positive and negative emotions. Respondents in this cluster exhibit the third highest scores for joy, average levels of surprise, low incidence of love and moderate intensity of unpleasantness. Finally, Cluster V with 20.9% of respondents was labeled “passionate”. Tourists in this group display the highest levels of love, along with elevated intensity of joy and below average surprise.

DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Previous efforts to understand and predict behaviors have traditionally categorized tourists into homogeneous sub-groups using socio-demographic and psychographic variables. However, despite the importance of emotion in tourism, no typology exists that profile tourists on the basis of emotional associations attached to destinations. Using a K-means clustering algorithm, findings of this study indicate that distinct emotional response patterns exist among tourists. In particular, five groups of tourists were identified. The Delighted constitutes the largest group with tourists displaying elevated levels of joy and surprise. The emergence of a ‘delighted’ segment in this study is in accord with past research that
recognises the relevance of delight in understanding consumer experiences (e.g. Rust and Oliver, 2000).

Moreover, Unemotionals express below average levels of joy, love, surprise and unpleasantness. A plausible explanation for the emergence of an ‘unemotional’ cluster could be that tourists attach more importance to cognitive attributes in their evaluations of destinations. Research has established that tourists assess destinations in terms of both affective and cognitive image dimensions (e.g. Alcaniz et al., 2009) with more recent studies (e.g. Tasci and Gartner, 2007) recognising the superiority of cognitive attributes in tourist evaluations. The third segment, Negatives, in turn, exhibited a highly differentiated pattern of emotional response dominated by above average experiences of unpleasantness along with the lowest levels of joy. Unlike the other groups, a relatively small proportion of respondents (8.90%) constitute the negatives cluster. The existence of such a small group of tourist in the sample with unpleasant emotions can be attributed to the hedonic nature of holistic holiday experiences (Otto and Ritchie, 1996). Tourists anticipate pleasurable and memorable experiences through the consumption of their vacation and avoid negative emotions.

In addition, the Mixed group was characterised by mixed levels of positive and negative emotions. The identification of a group of tourists with mixed emotions is consistent with research in marketing (e.g. Andrade and Cohen, 2007) and psychology (e.g. Schimmack, 2001) establishing that it is quite common for individuals to experience mixed emotions. Finally, the Passionate cluster display the highest levels of love (affection, tenderness, caring, warm-hearted) along with elevated levels of joy. The emergence of a ‘Passionate’ group closely reflects Trauer and Ryan’s (2005) conceptualization of intimacy theory in tourism. The authors posit that places possess meanings and tourists can develop a sense of romance toward them.

From a practical point of view, the results offer important implications for destination marketers in terms of the design of fine-tuned segmentation strategies. Findings suggest the existence of different sub-groups of tourists with different emotional experiences. Hence, recognising such differences provide opportunities for destinations to tailor their marketing tactics in order to influence the perceived holistic destination experience. Moreover, findings indicate that tourists can be differentiated in terms of their emotional responses towards destinations. As a result, destination marketers and travel intermediaries such as travel agents and tour operators should actively promote the emotional content of the destination experience in their advertising campaigns.
The study findings should be interpreted with caution for a number of reasons. First, the results are specific to one culture (British nationals). Second, emotions were measured at the retrospective global level. Relying on retrospective evaluations can be problematic in capturing the dynamic aspects of tourists’ emotional responses. In addition, the classification of tourist emotional responses was based on cluster analysis, a data analysis technique known for not generating a single, definitive solution (Punj and Stewart, 1983). Finally, given the cross-sectional nature of this study, it was not possible to establish the likelihood of tourists’ moving from one cluster to another. Future research is warranted to investigate whether tourists can belong to multiple clusters depending on the destination visited.
REFERENCES


