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Determinants of daily happiness on vacation

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Introduction

The need for a happy holiday

Tourists take holidays for pleasure and when doing so, they implicitly assume that vacationing makes them happier. Recent research reveals that individuals indeed benefit from vacationing in terms of happiness. Anticipation of a holiday trip leads to higher feelings of happiness (Gilbert and Abdullah 2002; Hagger and Murray 2009; Nawijn et al. 2010), while post-trip, tourists experience less stress and are in generally better health, although these positive effects are short-lived (De Bloom et al. 2009). When returned home, happiness is only significantly higher for those who had a very relaxed holiday experience (Nawijn et al. 2010).

Tourism managers have a range of tools available, which inform them about customer behavior and attitude. For instance, image research informs managers how customers view a company or a holiday destination. Furthermore, customer loyalty programs, such as clubs, frequent flyer programs or online communities are also frequently used in the tourism industry. An even more often used tool for tourism management information is customer satisfaction research. This frequently and elaborately studied area (González, Comesaña, and Brea 2007; Alegre and Garau 2010; Heo, Jogaratnam, and Buchanan 2004; Kim, Ma, and Kim 2006; Nash, Thyne, and Davies 2006; Neal and Gursoy 2008; Oh and Parks 1997; Weiermair and Fuchs 1999; Wu 2007) concentrates mostly on the post-hoc appraisal of tourism products and services. It often does not provide any information on how tourists actually felt during their holiday trip. If feelings are taken into account, these are generally considered to the extent how they affect post-hoc appraisal (De Rojas and Camarero 2008; Gountas and Gountas 2004; Sirakaya, Petrick, and Choi 2004)

or how emotional elements of customer satisfaction are related to overall satisfaction (De Rojas and Camarero 2008; Del Bosque and San Martin 2009).

Data on the psychological aspects of the tourist experience (Larsen 2007) appear to be almost non-existent. The existing studies on emotions during a trip focus on post-hoc assessment of emotional experiences (Hosany and Gilbert 2009) or on emotions as predictors of customer satisfaction (Bigné, Andreu, and Gnoth 2005; Zins 2002). Even studies on the relation between holiday trips and subjective well-being focus mostly on post-trip appraisals (Filep 2008; Milman 1998; Neal 2000), or on comparisons of pre- and post-trip appraisals (Besser and Priel 2006; Gilbert and Abdullah 2004).

The post-trip/recollection phase of a holiday trip (Clawson and Knetsch 1966) involves savoring the holiday experience (Bryant and Veroff 2007), but such recollections are deemed unreliable (Braun-LaTour, Grinley, and Loftus 2006; Kemp, Burt, and Furneaux 2008). Although these unreliable recollections may add to wider happiness of vacationers in their everyday lives, this rosy view (Mitchell et al. 1997) distorts holiday memories and thus tourism managers do not have genuine insight into the actual experience of a holiday trip as it is taking place. Such insight is crucial, however, to the quality of the tourism product, to competitive advantage, and eventually to higher profits. Pine and Gilmore emphasized that managers “must focus on the experience customers have while *using their goods*” (Pine II and Gilmore 1999, p. 15). Tourism management is currently lacking such an insight. Moreover, tourists do not have such information either. If holidays mostly do not bring about a post-trip happiness boost (Nawijn et al. 2010), perhaps consumers are better off spending their money on other things than holidays.

Unfortunately, virtually nothing is known about individuals' levels of positive and negative emotions during a holiday trip. We do know that tourists tend to feel generally good during their holiday trip (Nawijn, 2010), but slightly worse at the start of their holiday (Pearce 1981; Nawijn, 2010), which is when tourists report more health problems compared to other days of their trip (Cartwright 1992; Kop et al. 2003).

Research questions

This paper adds to the existing literature by addressing the following questions: (1) How do tourists feel during a day of their holiday trip? (2) What affects these feelings? (3) Do they feel better on holiday compared to their everyday lives?

Methods

Respondents

Data were collected on different days of the week at 12 different tourism locations in the Netherlands during 13 days in the months of April, May and June of 2009. These locations included popular international tourism venues in Amsterdam and locations such as the Keukenhof, Delft, Scheveningen, Maastricht and Valkenburg. The choice of these locations was based on a list of the 20 most visited attractions in the Netherlands (Netherlands Board of Tourism & Conventions 2006). A convenience sample of 466 international leisure travelers filled in a self-report questionnaire. Respondents originated from 51 countries. The sample was relatively young; 60% were between 18 and 29 years of age. Men made up 50% of the sample.

Measures

Happiness. The dependent variable of this study is emotion, which Veenhoven (1984) sees as the ‘affective dimension’ of happiness. Emotions can be measured using a list of positive and negative such the PANAS (Watson, Clark, and Tellegen 1988). Emotion balance is the difference between the amount of positive and negative feelings experienced. In this study we assessed 12 emotions taken Kahneman et al. (2004); four positive emotions: *happy, competent/capable, warm/friendly* and *enjoying myself*, and eight negative ones: *impatient, frustrated/annoyed, depressed/blue, hassled/pushed around, angry/hostile, worried/anxious, criticized/put down* and *tired*. Respondents stated how they felt on the day they filled in the questionnaire, using a 7 step rating scale for each emotion ranging from “not at all” to “very much”. For each respondent I computed average positive emotion and average negative emotion and subsequently subtracted the latter from the former. The possible range of the resulting scale is –6 (average positive 1, negative 7) to +6 (average positive 7, negative 1).

Holiday stress. Respondents were asked to state how stressed they felt on a 7-point scale.

Activity. An open-ended question was included; respondents could state their most important activity of the day. These were later grouped into *tour, museum visit, travel, sightseeing, going out, relaxing* or *other* type of activity.

Travel party. The number of people in the travel party, attitude towards the travel party on a 5-point scale and type of travel party (alone, partner, relatives, friends, colleagues, other) were all assessed.

Type of holiday. Respondents had to state what type of holiday trip they had booked. The response alternatives comprised a cultural holiday, a nature

holiday, a city trip, a beach holiday, a cruise, an event holiday, a tour, or some other type of holiday.

Temperature. The mean outside temperature of the day was included as a variable, as it is known that temperature affects how people feel (Keller et al. 2005). Mean temperature scores were obtained from the website of the Royal Dutch Meteorological Institute.

Part of the trip. As day of the week and length of trip are both associated with daily happiness on vacation (Nawijn, 2010), both were assessed.

Time of day. The hour of the day in which respondents filled in the questionnaire was registered, because, in everyday life, time of day tends to be associated with emotion (Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter 2003; Egloff et al. 1995; Stone et al. 2006).

Socio-demographic variables. Age, income, and gender were all assessed.

Analyses

As all data besides gender, activities, travel party type and holiday type were measured at the interval level, variables of interest were described in terms of means and standard deviations. Relationships between interval-level variables were tested using Pearson correlation tests. Effects of nominal-level variables such as activities and holiday type on emotion balance were tested using ANOVAs.

Findings

Daily feelings on vacation

Average positive emotion ($M = 4.74$, $SD = .81$, $n = 445$) was much higher than average negative emotion ($M = 1.09$, $SD = .84$, $n = 426$), resulting in a mean emotion balance of 3.67 ($SD = 1.36$, $n = 419$). The low mean and standard deviation of negative emotion shows that hardly any participants felt negative emotion.

Positive emotion was moderately high and, like negative emotion, scores were not widely dispersed. Emotion balance had a somewhat higher standard deviation, indicating scores that were somewhat more spread out.

Emotion balance was significantly associated with age ($r = +.25, p < .01, n = 418$), income ($r = +.27, p < .01, n = 413$), holiday stress ($r = -.55, p < .01, n = 419$) and attitude towards the travel party ($r = +.31, p < .01, n = 395$). These associations were all mild or moderate and positive, except the correlation with holiday stress, which was strong and negative. The variables of temperature, day of the trip, length of stay, time of day and number of people in travel party were not significantly associated with emotion balance, although a higher number of persons in a travel party was mildly positively associated with positive emotion ($r = +.12, p < .05, n = 440$).

Group differences

One-way analyses of variance indicated no significant differences in emotion balance between different activities of the day (tour, museum visit, travel, sightseeing, going out, relaxing, other type of activity) or type of holiday (cultural holiday, nature holiday, city trip, beach holiday, cruise, event holiday, tour, other type of holiday). Levels of emotion balance did not differ in men or women either.

A one-way between groups analysis of variance did identify significant differences in emotion balance between types of travel party, $F (5, 411) = 5.4, p < .01$. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean emotion balance for colleagues as travel party was significantly lower than other types of travel party. In other words, respondents traveling with colleagues felt significantly less positive than other respondents.

Comparison to everyday life

The mean emotion balance of the current study was compared to individuals' mean emotion balance in everyday life. The latter score was derived from the World Database of Happiness. The mean emotion balance in everyday life was calculated by using data on all 40 countries listed in that particular section of the database (Veenhoven 2010). Since these scores are on a 0-10 range, linear scale transformation had to be used on the current study's emotion balance to allow for accurate comparison of mean scores. The mean emotion balance while on holiday ($M = 8.06$) was significantly higher ($p < .01$) than the mean score observed in everyday life ($M = 6.30$).

Discussion

The tourist experience

The present findings show that tourists are generally happy during a day of their trip. This corroborates recent research (Nawijn, 2010; De Bloom et al. 2010), which found that tourists are generally happy during their holiday. Emotion balance while on vacation is significantly higher than in everyday life. Thus, tourists feel generally better on holiday compared to everyday life.

Tourists' daily emotion balance during the holiday is only partially determined by their socio-demographic backgrounds. Most of the variance in emotion balance was explained by variables associated with the holiday trip itself. Holiday stress and attitude towards the travel party were the strongest predictors of tourists' feelings during a day of their holiday trip. The importance of holiday stress was already acknowledged in a recent study by Nawijn et al. (2010). Their study found that holiday stress affects vacationers post-trip happiness. The current study shows that holiday stress is also detrimental to happiness during the holiday itself.

Implications

Tourism managers are generally doing a good job, as most tourists feel good during their holiday trip. Management could further enhance the psychological experience of a holiday trip by trying to reduce holiday stress. Long travel periods are apparent stressors. However, reducing the length of travel will most likely be difficult with most trips. Jet lag (Stokes & Kite, 1994) and health problems related to air travel may also cause holiday stress (Vingerhoets, Sanders, and Kuper 1997). Airlines or tour operators could provide better information on how to prevent jet lag or other health issues. Where possible, tourists should try to avoid such situations. Furthermore, they need to think about whom they want to go on holiday with. Finding the right travel party could greatly enhance their tourist experience.

The current study also shows that more research is needed on emotions during a holiday trip. The tourism industry should include more emotional components in their questionnaires, as post-hoc customer satisfaction studies do not provide a genuine insight into the consumer experience while it is taking place.

Limitations

The current study focused mostly on between-person differences, as opposed to within-person differences. For practical reasons it was not possible to question respondents several times throughout the day or in their everyday lives. Adopting such an approach may produce somewhat different results. Furthermore, the fact that days for data collection as well as respondents themselves were selected based on convenience means that the sample was not random. Therefore, it is not possible to generalize from the respondents to a larger population. To do so, a probability sample would be necessary.

Future research

More research is needed on the causes of holiday stress. Depending on the individual, certain events are deemed more stressful than others (Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein 1983; Lazarus 1999). Future research should assess the extent to which certain aspects of holiday trips or certain types of trips are deemed more stressful than others and on finding the right person-environment fit. Specific attention could be paid to things tourists worry about (Larsen, Brun, and Ogaard 2009).

Additional work needs to be done to further explore the relation between real-time emotion balance and post-hoc feelings, and the willingness to purchase tourism products in the future. Research among vacationers who were on holiday showed that consumption emotions are linked to loyalty and willingness to pay more (Bigné and Andreu 2004; Bigné, Andreu, and Gnoth 2005). Another study, on spring break vacations, found that remembered experience, compared to predicted experience and actual experience, is a stronger predictor of the desire to repeat a vacation (Wirtz et al. 2003). The importance of holiday stress during a trip, as found in this study, and its influence on post-trip emotion scores, as found in another study (Nawijn et al. 2010), suggests a possible moderate to strong connection between on-trip feelings and post-trip feelings. Further research is required to establish this potential link.

Finally, to further assess how important a holiday trip may be for individuals, it is necessary to compare tourists' daily feelings during everyday life to their daily feelings during a vacation. A recent study by McCabe (2009) found that domestic duties were perceived as more pleasurable while on holiday, compared to when performed at home. Therefore, it would be particularly

interesting to examine whether ordinary experiences, such as talking with relatives, or common activities (e.g., grocery shopping or cleaning), which take place on holiday as well as in everyday life, are experienced differently-in terms of happiness-when in a different setting. This would shed more light on how the psychological experience of holiday is really different from everyday life.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

SPSS output



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