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The Influence of Post-visit Emotions on Destination Loyalty

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The influence of post-visit emotions on destination loyalty

Abstract

Purpose

The influence of different factors including emotional states on loyalty has been previously discussed in the literature. However, the influence of post-visit emotions evoked by emotional stimuli on tourist loyalty lacks empirical attention. The purpose of the study is to investigate the effects of post-visit emotional stimuli on destination loyalty.

Design/methodology/approach

The study applied an online scenario-based experimental design to identify the impact of positive and negative affective pictorial stimuli on destination loyalty. A sample of 500 adult US residents who visited Orlando within the past 12 months was recruited to take part in the experiment. One-way ANOVA was used to compare the loyalty of three groups, two of which were manipulated with emotional stimuli, positive pictures and negative pictures, and one control group with no pictures.

Findings

Results show that it is possible to influence visitor loyalty after visitation. Post-visit exposure to positive emotional stimuli generates higher levels of destination loyalty, while negative emotional stimuli generate lower levels of destination loyalty, in comparison with no stimuli scenario.

Originality

The study adds to the literature by providing support for the influence of post-visit emotional stimuli, which lacked empirical attention thus far. Since visitor experience lasts much longer than the visit itself, the study results are significant for providing post-visit stimuli to increase destination loyalty.

Keywords: loyalty, destination, emotions, loyalty, affective stimuli.

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Introduction

Loyalty is one of the most widely discussed outcomes of customer experience due to its commonly accepted influence on the success of a brand through loyal consumers' intention to return in the future, willingness to pay more and spread positive word-of-mouth about the brand (Oliver, 1999). Consumer loyalty towards destinations has also received much empirical attention for the same expectations, namely, destination success through tourists' desire to visit the destination, generate positive word-of-mouth, and recommend it to others (Oppermann, 2000; Anton *et al.*, 2017). Several studies discussed and measured the main antecedents of destination loyalty, mostly satisfaction with prior visits, motivation, destination image, and perceived value (Akroush *et al.*, 2016; Cakici *et al.*, 2019). Tourists' emotions were also described as antecedents of loyalty and other behavioral outcomes in tourism and hospitality (Torres *et al.*, 2017; Prayag *et al.*, 2017).

Positive and negative tourism experience can elicit positive and negative emotional states, and even negative emotions could lead to positive outcomes in tourist behavior (Sharma and Nayak, 2019). The literature suggests that emotional states change over time and can be different before, during, and after a trip (Nawijn and Biran, 2019). Therefore, emotions are suspected to play a role not only during a visit experience but also long after the trip. Tourist experience lasts much longer than the actual trip because of memories and post-visit retrospective evaluations. The emotional aspect of these memories is a critical factor in consumers' retrospective evaluations of a product and service (Rubin and Kozin, 1984).

Even though researchers discussed the significant influence of emotions on loyalty (Prayag *et al.*, 2015; Leri and Theodoridis, 2019), the temporal dynamics of the emotional impacts, as well as the influence of post-visit emotions on tourist loyalty lack empirical attention. The emotional association with destinations was described as one of the most critical factors influencing tourists' motivation, decision-making, and post-visit behavioral intentions (Kwortnik & Ross, 2007; Pestana *et al.*, 2019). Several studies suggest that external emotional stimuli might trigger emotional responses (Brosch *et al.*, 2010), which lead to specific outcomes and behavioral intentions (Sharma and Nayak, 2019). The purpose of this research is to investigate the effects of post-visit emotional stimuli on destination loyalty using an online experiment where emotional states are manipulated with positive and negative pictures, as opposed to a control group with no

pictures.

This experimental research on the influences of post-visit emotional stimuli on loyalty is important from theoretical, methodological, and managerial perspectives. Theoretically, the results of the study would explain if loyalty can be manipulated after a visit experience, even with factors unrelated to the trip experience. From the managerial perspective, results would provide practitioners with tools to enhance visitor loyalty using emotional stimuli. In the highly competitive market environment, the ability for timely stimulation of consumer emotions to boost their loyalty towards a destination is a valuable resource for Destination Marketing Organizations and tourism practitioners. Furthermore, the study would reveal future research implications on the usability of an online experiment with visual stimuli to manipulate respondent reactions.

Literature review

Destination loyalty

Loyalty in tourism is usually explained as tourists' willingness to revisit a destination, provide positive word-of-mouth, and recommend it to others (Oppermann, 2000). However, many different indicators of loyalty have been used to measure destination loyalty including the intention to recommend, intention to return/revisit, positive opinion leadership, continued future use, recommendable place perception, likelihood to visit/revisit (Yoon and Uysal, 2005; Tasci, 2011). Depending on the nature of the study, researchers use either single-item measures of holistic loyalty or multi-item measures of multidimensional loyalty with its behavioral and/or attitudinal dimensions (Tasci, 2017).

Many different factors have been proposed to affect consumer loyalty in tourism and hospitality, including experience, satisfaction, price, service quality, perceptions, familiarity, prior experience, sociodemographic characteristics, and some other factors (Akroush et al., 2016; Gallarza and Saura, 2020; Godovykh et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2019; Iordanova and Stylidis, 2019; Sthapit et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2019). These factors were grouped into five categories related to the brand itself, its competitors, consumers, the tourism and hospitality industry, and the wider environment (Tasci, 2017). Some cognitive antecedents of loyalty (e.g., motivation, destination

image, familiarity, service quality, and satisfaction) have received more attention than others (Kim et al., 2019; Tasci, 2016; Yoon and Uysal, 2005; Zhang et al., 2014), while the effects of emotional factors as antecedents of consumer loyalty towards tourism and hospitality products need further empirical support.

The effects of emotions on destination loyalty

Neurobiologically, emotions can be explained as automatic chemical and neural responses produced by the nervous system in response to affective stimuli, which could be both conscious and unconscious (Damasio, 2004). However, the tourism literature traditionally utilizes the simplistic definition of emotions as positive and negative reactions to specific external events (Leri and Theodoridis, 2019; Prentice, 2020), which often result from pleasurable consumption experiences (Li et al., 2014). It is acknowledged that tourist experiences might have both positive and negative influences on emotions (Song et al., 2019).

Although the majority of studies describe positive emotions like happiness, joy, or anticipation (McCabe and Johnson, 2013; Hosany and Prayag, 2013), tourism activities can elicit negative emotions like sadness, disgust, and anger related to visiting tragedy places, observing poverty, or taking part in dark tourism activities (Sharma and Nayak, 2019). The literature describes a strong influence of emotions on the general assessment of experiences, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions (Prayag et al., 2013; Sthapit et al., 2019; Sharma and Nayak, 2019).

Due to the complexity of measuring tourist emotions onsite, the majority of studies measures tourists' retrospective evaluations of the previous emotions and confirms the effects of post-visit emotions on different outcomes in different tourism and hospitality settings (Torres et al., 2017; Prayag et al., 2017; Sharma and Nayak, 2019). For example, Prayag et al. (2015) reported positive effects of positive emotions on behavioral intentions in the restaurant context while Prayag et al. (2017) revealed that the emotional experiences of domestic tourists visiting Sardinia influence their willingness to recommend the destination. Torres et al. (2017) found that combined valence of positive or negative emotions is related to the overall vacation experience evaluations. Sharma and Nayak (2019) confirmed that tourists' emotions influence cognitive and affective components of destination image as well as their behavioral intentions. While the

previous research confirms the effects of tourist emotions, there is a lack of understanding if it is possible to affect destination loyalty by presenting positive or negative emotional stimuli after a visit.

According to the Stimulus-Organism-Response framework, external stimuli can affect emotional responses, which in turn affect people's approach-avoidance responses (Russell and Mehrabian, 1977). Positive emotions lead to approach behavior, while negative emotions produce avoidance behavior (Yalch and Spangenberg, 2000). According to the literature, positive and negative emotional stimuli might trigger predefined emotional responses, which in turn, lead to specific behavioral intentions (Brosch et al., 2010). Hence, this study hypothesizes that positive and negative emotional stimuli presented after a visit might influence tourist loyalty towards a destination positively and negatively, respectively.

H₁: Post-visit positive emotional stimulus has a positive influence on destination loyalty.

H₂: Post-visit negative emotional stimulus has a negative influence on destination loyalty.

Methodology

Study Context

Orlando was selected as a study context for several reasons. First, Orlando is the most visited destination in the US with 75 million annual visitors in 2018 (Visit Orlando, 2019). Second, Orlando's most popular theme parks (Walt Disney World, Universal Orlando, Sea World) provide high levels of emotional experiences and can be considered as the best places to studying tourist emotions (Torres et al., 2019). The majority of visitors come to Orlando to experience theme parks and attractions, as well as sport, cultural, and business events. The study examined the destination loyalty of people who visited Orlando for different purposes during the past twelve months.

Study Instrument

Qualtrics XM was used to design manipulations and the measurement instrument. Based on the previous studies measuring destination loyalty (e.g., Tasci, 2017; Yoon and Uysal, 2005), the main construct of the study, destination loyalty, was measured by a 7-item loyalty scale (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree) with the most commonly used loyalty measurement items. Visit purpose (Skogland and Siguaw, 2004), satisfaction from the visit (Cakici et al., 2019), as well as sociodemographic characteristics (Mechinda et al., 2009; Prayag, 2012), can be influential on visit experiences; thus, questions about the purpose of the last visit, satisfaction, and typical demographic questions (age, gender, education, income, marital status, and race/ethnicity) were also included. Satisfaction was measured with a single item scale: Please, rate your overall satisfaction with your last visit using the scale below (1=very dissatisfied, 7=very satisfied). A screening question was included to ascertain prior visits; respondents were asked to provide the name of the favorite attraction they visited in Orlando. For manipulation checks, a question about respondents' emotional state after viewing pictures was also included to check if the pictorial stimuli created expected positive or negative emotions: After seeing those three pictures, how would you rate your emotional state on the following scale? (1=very negative, 7=very positive).

Study Design

An online scenario-based randomized experimental design was used to test the study hypotheses. Experimental design is considered as one of the more practical ways to analyze proposed relationships because an experiment provides control over confounding factors and has high levels of internal validity in measuring the expected effects (Victorino and Dixon, 2016). Three different picture scenarios were used to identify the influences of emotional stimuli on destination loyalty: a positive emotional stimuli scenario, a negative emotional stimuli scenario, and a no emotional stimuli scenario. Respondents were randomly selected and assigned to one of the three conditions.

The scenarios of emotional stimuli were designed based on the International Open Affective Standardized Image Set (OASIS), developed by Kurdi et al. (2017), which were specifically developed to provide stimuli for experimental studies of emotions. This image set includes various pictures that induce different levels of arousal and valence in respondents, ranging between high levels and low levels. From this image set, three positive and three negative

emotional pictures with high levels of arousal and valence were selected as the emotional stimuli in the current study. The positive emotional scenario group was subjected to three pictures (Figure 1) with the high levels of arousal and positive valence (valence averages ranging from 5.446 to 6.088; arousal averages ranging from 4.634 to 4.709). Similarly, the negative emotional scenario group was subjected to three pictures (Figure 2) with negative emotions (valence averages ranging from 1.64 to 2.029; arousal averages ranging from 3.788 to 4.663). The valence and arousal ranges were tested and reported by Kurdi et al. (2017), and therefore, assumed but not retested in the current study. The neutral scenario or control group was surveyed without any pictures.

Figures 1 & 2 here

Before exposure to scenarios, the purpose of the last visit and satisfaction from the last visit were assessed. Then, the emotional pictures were shown, followed by questions about their emotional states, about destination loyalty and demographic characteristics. Manipulation check was conducted to test the validity of manipulation by asking respondents to rate their emotional states after seeing the emotional pictures.

Data Collection

Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online survey platform, was used for data collection. MTurk is known as a reliable method of participant recruitment (Buhrmester et al., 2011). A sample of 500 adult US residents who visited Orlando within the past 12 months was recruited in March 2019 and March 2020. Online sampling is not considered a threat to the validity of the results since the emotional stimulus scenarios were designed to examine respondents' post-visit emotions' influence on loyalty towards a destination that they previously visited and all three groups were recruited with the same sampling method. The respondents were randomly assigned to the different experimental groups, and the possibility of introducing a systematic bias into the group assignment was low due to the sample size of 147-153 cases per experimental group.

Several analysis tools of IBM's SPSS version 24 were applied. Descriptive statistics and frequency distribution were used to check the sample profile, missing data, and normality of the

data. One-way ANOVA was used for manipulation checks and comparison of differences among the three groups: positive pictures, negative pictures, and no pictures.

Results

The sociodemographic profile, rating of satisfaction, and past visit purposes of respondents in each scenario group are provided in Table 1. The average age of respondents ranges between 34.67 and 36.95 years for different groups. The gender distribution shows some female dominance in all groups, 52.98% in negative pictures, 57.8% in no pictures group, and 58.2% in positive pictures group. The majority of the respondents in all groups were college or university graduates (between 57.8% and 60.8%). In all groups, about half of respondents' annual income was less than 50,000 USD, and the majority were Caucasian (between 65.9% and 69.0%). The average level of satisfaction from the visit ranges from 5.64 to 5.95 for different groups. The majority of respondents visited Orlando for pleasure/vacation purposes (between 66.7% and 72.2%).

Potential bias from sociodemographic and trip differences in different picture scenarios was analyzed by using one-way ANOVA and chi-square tests. The test results displayed in Table 1 fails to reject the null hypothesis on the absence of association between the experimental group scenarios and sociodemographic and trip characteristics, suggesting that three scenario groups are homogeneous. In other words, measured differences in destination loyalty in different groups can be attributed to the manipulated emotions of respondents rather than different group characteristics.

Table I here

Before comparing groups on destination loyalty, a one-way ANOVA test with post hoc Tukey test was used to check if the positive and negative pictures were effective in creating positive and negative emotions in respondents. The average rating of the emotional state is significantly higher for the group that viewed positive pictures ($M=6.08$, $SD = 0.99$) than the group that viewed negative pictures ($M=2.56$, $SD = 1.38$) at $\alpha < .05$; thus, we can conclude that the pictorial stimuli achieved the expected manipulation of emotional state in respondents.

Table 2 displays the average ratings of destination loyalty dimensions for all groups as well as one-way ANOVA test results; Table 3 displays the results of post hoc Tukey test of group comparisons. Overall, all destination loyalty dimensions were rated higher than the mid-point on the 7-point Likert scale. The highest-rated destination loyalty dimensions were willingness to encourage friends to visit the destination (between 5.11 and 6.06), willingness to recommend the destination (between 5.16 and 6.01), willingness to say positive things (between 4.97 and 6.02), and revisit intentions (between 5.09 and 6.00). Loyalty dimensions that received lower ratings are more on the extreme side, namely, the first choice to visit, promote on social media, and pay more.

Tables II & III here

One-way ANOVA was conducted to identify differences in mean scores of the seven items of loyalty across the three groups (negative pictures, no pictures, positive pictures). The results comparing the three groups on seven items in Table 2 show significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in all items among the three groups.

Post hoc Tukey test of mean differences in table 3 showed that the positive picture group's ratings were significantly higher than those of the negative pictures group for all dimensions of destination loyalty. Additionally, the positive picture group ratings were significantly higher on five destination loyalty items (recommend, encourage friends to visit, the first choice to visit, promote in social media, and choose even if costs more) than those of the group with no pictures. Furthermore, the negative pictures group's ratings were significantly lower on five destination loyalty items (say positive things, recommend, encourage friends to visit, revisit intentions, and promote in social media) than those of the group with no pictures (control group).

Since respondents are homogeneous in the potential confounding factors, namely sociodemographic characteristics, the purpose of the visit, and satisfaction from the visit, these differences can be attributed to the manipulated positive and negative emotional states. Thus, hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported; post-visit positive emotional stimuli generate higher levels of destination loyalty in comparison with negative emotional stimuli as well as the lack of emotional stimuli, while post-visit negative emotional stimuli lead to lower levels of

destination loyalty in comparison with the positive emotional stimuli as well as the lack of emotional stimuli.

Discussion and implications

The purpose of this study was to analyze the influence of post-visit emotional stimuli on destination loyalty. The results revealed the potential effects of post-visit emotions related to the post-visit positive and negative emotional stimuli. The results demonstrated significant differences between negative and positive picture groups in all destination loyalty dimensions, which means that positive and negative post-visit emotional stimuli have opposite effects on destination loyalty. Additionally, the study findings showed that post-visit emotional stimuli generate higher levels of destination loyalty in comparison with the lack of any emotional stimuli.

These results confirm the past literature reporting that emotional stimuli trigger emotional responses (Brosch et al., 2010), which in turn influence revisit intentions, willingness to recommend, and willingness to pay more (Barsky and Nash, 2002). Also, these results describe additional antecedents of destination loyalty related to respondents' post-visit emotional states. Post-visit loyalty may be a liquid state, affected by mood, emotions, memories, and other factors (Hosany and Prayag, 2013; Sharma and Nayak, 2019; Akroush et al., 2016; Cakici et al., 2019). The results suggest that presenting different post-visit emotional stimuli can affect revisit intentions, willingness to recommend, willingness to pay more and other dimensions of destination loyalty. Furthermore, the results demonstrate that loyalty towards a destination can be affected by emotions evoked by even those stimuli unrelated to a destination. This implies that destination loyalty can be manipulated at any point in time, closer to potential revisit time. The results also agree with the findings of other studies describing the importance of affective dimensions of loyalty and reporting the influence of emotional factors on different dimensions of customer loyalty (Leri and Theodoridis, 2019; Sharma and Nayak, 2019).

The results provide important managerial implications for the tourism industry as well. Results show that it is possible to increase destination loyalty by providing positive picture stimuli. Focusing on tourists' post-visit emotions may be a cost-effective way to improve loyalty since

stimulating emotions might be a lot easier and cheaper than spending valuable resources on an advertisement and loyalty programs. However, the effects of other stimuli (affective destination videos, affective texts, sounds, etc.) can be also significant and need further investigation.

Nonetheless, emotional stimuli cannot be assumed to be pictures of visitors having fun, which is typically what destination marketing and management organizations and tourism providers use in the hopes of creating a desire for potential visitors. Similar to the International Open Affective Standardized Image Set, different destination images need to be studied to identify the arousal and valence levels of different types of pictures with different contents. Additionally, potential negative emotions related to typical destination pictures also need to be identified. A beautiful downtown picture may induce both arousal and negative emotions for those people who are concerned about the destruction of nature for development. A comprehensive study of different pictorial, verbal, and audio elements can be identified as a benchmark for destination marketing and management to follow in creating their positive emotional stimuli.

Even though the current study context was destinations, the results have implications for any type of products and services. Similar emotional stimuli can be used to induce positive response on loyalty towards the micro-level products with a destination, namely hotels, restaurants, attractions, and events. When this strategy is used collectively by different industry partners within a destination, the cumulative impact on the positive response towards the destination as the encompassing product might be even larger than that of the effort by the destination marketing organizations only.

Furthermore, the study offers an important methodological implication related to using picture scenarios to manipulate emotions. Since the manipulation check revealed a significant difference between groups' average ratings of emotional states in the positive picture, negative picture, and no picture scenarios, this method can be applied in future experimental studies testing the influence of emotional states on consumer attitude in tourism and hospitality and other fields. The affective positive and negative pictures with highest levels of valence and arousal from the International Open Affective Standardized Image Set developed by Kurdi et al. (2017) and International Affective Picture System previously introduced by Lang et al. (2008) make it possible to manipulate positive and negative emotions in online and field experiments.

The limitations of the study warrant future research on the subject matter. First, online sampling can be considered a limitation in terms of the generalizability of the results. Hence, the study needs to be repeated with an offline sample of people who visited the destination. Second, the study utilized a 1-item scale for measuring the emotional state after viewing negative and positive pictures to test the validity of manipulation. The manipulations were simple, and a one-item scale was deemed sufficient to measure respondents' emotional response. However, in order to analyze the effects of more complicated emotional stimuli, it is necessary to apply a multi-item scale with a range of different emotions. For instance, Self-Assessment Manikin (SAM) as a non-verbal pictorial assessment technique can be useful in measuring pleasure, arousal, and dominance reaction to emotional stimuli in online studies (Bradley et al., 2001).

Additionally, the self-reported evaluations of emotions rely on respondents' memory and can be biased due to social expectations, autobiographical memory, self-concept and other biases (Wilhelm and Grossman, 2010). Hence, psychophysiological measures of emotions (electrodermal activity, electromyography, electrocardiography, pupillometry, etc.) may help to increase the reliability and validity of the results. Furthermore, this study did not aim at analyzing the influence of time after the visit on loyalty due to limitations in the sample size, thus, future studies with cross-sectional survey design would be useful in generating a large number of respondents in each time period after the visit in order to test the temporal influences on emotions' effect on loyalty.

Finally, the current study focused on visual stimuli's influence on emotions. A comprehensive study of different stimuli for different senses may provide a better picture of what evokes positive emotions to improve loyalty. Thus, future studies need to test the differential influences of not only affective pictures, but also texts, videos, and sounds on destination loyalty.

Despite these limitations, the current study helps in better understanding of destination loyalty or loyalty in general. The study reveals that destination loyalty can be manipulated by using different stimuli, even if they are not directly related to the destination. Consumers may consciously or unconsciously relate different stimuli to the destination and change their reactions based on the emotions evoked by these stimuli. Loyalty may indeed be a fragile concept vulnerable to many external influences.

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