Emotions, Feelings, and Moods in Tourism and Hospitality Research: Conceptual and Methodological Differences

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Abstract

Researchers often tend to use the words emotions, feelings, moods, and affect interchangeably, which creates confusion in both conceptual and methodological domains of tourism and hospitality research. However, the insights from neuroscience and psychology demonstrated that there are fundamental differences between these concepts, including their causes, duration, intensity, and outcomes. This research note aims to discuss conceptual and methodological aspects related to using emotions, moods, feelings, and affect, provide comprehensive definitions, and outline opportunities to capture them comprehensively in tourism and hospitality research.

Keywords: emotions, feelings, moods, affect, tourism, hospitality

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Introduction

A considerable amount of tourism and hospitality literature has been published on the influence of emotions, feelings, moods, and affect on tourists’ motivation, satisfaction, loyalty, behavioral intentions, and other outcomes (e.g., Tung & Ritchie, 2011; Li et al., 2015; Hosany et al., 2017). The relevance of emotional states to consumer behavior has been magnified with the emergence of the experience economy bringing experiential consumption to the forefront in many areas of research. Over one hundred papers with the words “emotions”, “feelings”, “moods”, or “affect” in the title were found in premium peer-reviewed academic journals in tourism and hospitality during the last ten years. The role of visitor emotions was explored in different tourism and hospitality settings (Bigne & Andreu, 2004; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009; Hosany & Gilbert, 2010; Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017; Godovykh et al., 2019). However, researchers often tend to use the words emotions, feelings, moods, and affect interchangeably, which creates confusion in both conceptual and methodological domains of tourism and hospitality research.

Past research in neuroscience and psychology demonstrated that there is a fundamental difference between these concepts (Beedie et al., 2005; Ekkekakis, 2012; Kaplan et al., 2016). This research note aims to discuss conceptual and methodological aspects related to emotions, moods, and feelings in order to provide comprehensive definitions and outline research techniques to capture them comprehensively in tourism and hospitality research.

Emotions

Travel and hospitality experiences are based on visitor emotions such as fun, excitement, joy, fear, pain, etc. (Bigne et al., 2008; Godovykh & Tasci, 2020; Prayag et al., 2017). However, the applied definitions of emotions sometimes contradict each other. Some researchers explored emotions as mental states of readiness arising from cognitive appraisals of different experiences, thoughts, and events (Ali et al., 2016; Pelegrin-Borondo et al., 2017). In contrast, Brunner-Sperdin et al. (2012) conceptualized guest emotions as the states that they may not be fully aware of, while Kim and Fesenmaier (2017) described
them as a phase of the neurobiological activity to be measured instantly rather than its consequence. Similarly, dimensions and measures of emotions are also diverse in tourism and hospitality literature. Several researchers applied two dimensions of pleasure and arousal to describe tourist emotions (e.g., Yuksel & Yuksel, 2007; Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017), while others differentiated types of discrete emotional responses like anger, disappointment, regret, and worry (e.g., Mattila & Ro, 2008); joy, love, surprise (e.g., Sharma & Nayak, 2018); comfort and pleasure (Kwortnik & Ross, 2007); peacefulness (e.g., Bonnefoy-Claudet, & Ghantous, 2013).

Past research demonstrated that emotions of the same valence, like negative anger and sadness, could have different impacts on customer satisfaction (Machleit & Eroglu, 2000) and behavioral responses (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2004). Several researchers questioned using common language words to categorize human emotions (e.g., Zachar, 2006; Barrett, 2006; Kragel & LaBar, 2016; Cowen et al., 2019). They argue that emotions originate in the autonomic nervous system and limbic part of the brain that act largely unconsciously, and it is not a good idea to interpret emotions through cognitive words like love, surprise, or disappointment. Therefore, it is important not to confuse unconscious emotions with more conscious feelings and moods in tourism and hospitality research as they might be influenced by different antecedents and have different effects on consumer outcomes.

Proper conceptualization of emotions demands referring to the previous literature in psychology, psychophysiology, neurobiology, and cognitive neuroscience. Emotions were originally explained as plans or neural programs that are activated when an organism gets out of the state of equilibrium (Miller, 1959). More recently, Rosenberg (1998) outlined emotions as intense, acute, and brief psychophysiological changes resulted from a response to some environmental stimuli. Damasio (2004) extended the previous definitions by describing emotions as bioregulatory reactions, providing physiological states to ensure human survival and well-being. He explained emotions as neural and chemical responses produced by the brain in response to emotional stimuli and suggested that these stimuli could be both conscious and unconscious, while the responses are always automatic. Frijda (1988) specifically emphasized the short-term and powerful nature of emotions. Pace-
Schott et al. (2019) investigated physiological feelings from different perspectives and purported that emotional responses could be evoked or shaped by specific stimuli, feelings, cognitions, and cognitive processes. They also defined emotion as “a programmed neural response evolved to serve an adaptive function by mobilizing specific neural activity in both the brain and periphery and by favoring certain behaviors” (p.269).

Consequently, measurements of emotions need to be consistent with their conceptualizations. However, there is an established common practice in tourism and hospitality research to measure emotions retrospectively after consuming a product or service (i.e., Oliver & Westbrook, 1993; Ladhari, 2007; Soodan, & Pandey, 2016). However, this practice has numerous limitations related to social desirability, mood dependence, memory limitations, and the unconscious nature of emotions (Ganster, Hennessey, & Luthans, 1983; Donaldson & Grant-Vallone, 2002; Brunner-Sperdin, Peters, & Strobl, 2012). The cognitive neuroscience researchers found that emotions occur in the subcortical brain regions (LaBar & Cabeza, 2006; Kober et al., 2008) and the neocortex (Bechara et al., 2000; Donoso et al., 2014). Damasio (2001) suggested that some brain structures like the amygdala and ventromedial prefrontal cortices trigger emotions, while other brain areas, including the brainstem, hypothalamus, and basal forebrain, alter the physical state of the body by creating biochemical and electrical reactions. As a result, emotions influence the skeletomuscular, neuroendocrine, and autonomic nervous systems (Barrett et al., 2007; Damasio & Carvalho, 2013). Therefore, it is possible to explore human emotions by objectively measuring bodily reactions. The most available moment-based research techniques to capture consumer emotions are electrodermal activity (Dawson et al., 2007), cardiovascular measures (Mauss & Robinson, 2009), pupillometry (Bradley et al., 2008), facial expressions analysis (Essa & Pentland, 1997), and event-related potentials (Luck, 2014).

Feelings

Although feelings are often used interchangeably with emotions in the literature, there are significant differences between these concepts. Damasio (2001) described feelings as a
mental representation of emotions. When emotions provide immediate bodily responses to external stimuli, feelings bring cognitive meanings of these emotions, which could enhance learning, amplify impacts of the stimuli, and have effects on future behavior. Similarly, Shouse (2005) explained feelings as sensations that are triggered by previous experiences. For this reason, infants could not experience feelings due to the lack of language and previous experience. Damasio and Carvalho (2013) characterized feelings as cognitive evaluations of body states, which could represent physiological needs, injuries, threats, optimal functions, or social attitudes.

Several theories also explain the differences between momentary emotional reactions and subsequent mental feelings. Kahneman (2011) described a dichotomy between two systems of human thinking. System 1 is emotional, fast, automatic, and unconscious, while System 2 is slow, logical, effortful, and conscious. Similarly, Jarymowicz and Imbir (2015) differentiated automatic emotions and reflective emotions that follow the former. Summarizing the previous studies, Pace-Schott et al. (2019) defined feelings as sensations originated from peripheral receptors or emotions that are processed through cognitive brain areas (brainstem, thalamus, frontal lobe).

Different from emotions, the conscious nature of feelings allows measuring them using self-report rating scales and interviews, which are currently applied in tourism and hospitality research. Additionally, Self-Assessment Manikin (Bradley & Lang, 1994), using graphic characters expressing different dimensions of feelings (pleasure, arousal, and dominance) is proposed to help eliminate cultural biases of verbal scales (Morris et al., 2002; Wissmath et al., 2010).

**Moods**

The literature usually presents moods as less intense generalized states, which last much longer than emotions and feelings. Thayer (1997) defined mood as “a background feeling that persists over time” (p. 5). Similarly, Parkinson et al. (1996) described moods as evaluative mental states influencing people’s interpretations and actions. Gray, Watson, Payne, and Cooper (2001) extended these definitions by suggesting that moods typically
represent feeling states of moderate-intensity that increase and decrease over time and reflect cumulative effects of internal processes and external events. Frijda (2009) emphasized the indefinite character of the mood as "the appropriate designation for affective states that are about nothing specific or about everything-about the world in general" (p. 258).

Moods differ from emotions in their diffuseness (Frijda, 1988; Clore et al., 1994; Larsen, 2000; Beedie et al., 2005). The dispositional theory determines moods as temporary dispositions to respond to different situations with certain emotional reactions corresponding to the mood (Siemer, 2009). One more distinction of moods from emotions and feelings is that moods are temporally remote from their cause and, consequently, the cause of a mood may not always be easy to identify (Morris, 1992). Correspondingly, Pace-Schott et al. (2019) defined moods as bivalent and persisting states which repeatedly evoke emotional responses and distinguish moods from emotions and feelings by their duration. Furthermore, several studies demonstrate that moods can be also formed by non-cognitive causes like hormonal changes or drugs (e.g., Clore et al., 1994; Palmiero, & Piccardi, 2017).

Several mood-related outcomes have been outlined in the literature. Previous studies reported that mood influences people’s behavior, psychological wellbeing, and physical health (Parkinson et al., 1996; Breidenbach & Docherty, 2019), while Rosenberg (1998) suggested that moods could not directly influence human behavior since they are not linked to specific situations. Among previously described health-related outcomes of moods are the impacts on the immune system, memory, reactivity to antigens and pathogens, pernicious habits, and eating disorders. (Maier et al., 1994; Melamed, 1995; Thayer, 1997).

A number of mood scales have been described in the literature. One of the most reliable mood measurement techniques applicable in tourism and hospitality research is the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS), which includes two 10-item scales to measure positive and negative emotional states (Watson et al., 1988). Another scale, the Mood Survey (Underwood & Froming, 1980), has two subscales related to the average level of mood, mood intensity, and the frequency of mood changes.
Affect

Affect is defined as a "neurophysiological state consciously accessible as a simple primitive non-reflective feeling most evident in mood and emotion but always available to consciousness" (Russell & Feldman Barrett, 2009, p. 104). Rosenberg (1998) suggested that affect is a broad explanation for all psychological states, including emotions, feelings, moods, and affective traits. Similarly, Fredrickson (2008) claimed that, unlike emotions, affect in general is not necessarily about anything but “often free-floating and objectless” (p. 218). Cohen et al. (2008) used affect to explain an internal feeling state in comparison with conscious thoughts about different events or objects. A few studies also outline affect as physical sensations while experiencing emotions. (i.e. Pennebaker, & Skelton, 1981; Shouse, 2005). Examples of core affect in the literature include pleasure and displeasure, tension and relaxation, energy and tiredness (Ekkekakis, 2003). Since the majority of past research describes affect as the totality of different psychological states, affect could be used as an umbrella term that includes emotions, feelings, and moods in tourism and hospitality research.

Conclusion

While emotions, feelings, moods, and affect are often used interchangeably in tourism and hospitality research, there are significant differences between these concepts (Table 1). Emotions are described as physical states or neurological reactions as a specific response to external stimuli, while feelings are mental reactions to emotions, which are influenced by personality and temperament. In contrast to emotions and feelings, the mood is a conscious state of mind, which is less likely to be provoked by particular stimuli. Meanwhile, affect is an umbrella term comprising a broad range of human states including emotions, feelings, and moods.

Table 1. Differences between emotions, feelings, and moods.

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The main distinguishing characteristics are causes, intensity, duration, and outcomes. Emotions are usually caused by a specific stimulus like an event, a person, or an object and originate in the limbic system of the brain, while feelings are the product of the activity of mental areas of the brain, assigning a certain meaning and interpretation to precedent emotions. Therefore, emotions are quite immediate, intensive, and very brief in duration, while feelings are less intensive and need a longer time to emerge and disappear. In contrast, moods are less intense, less specific, last for several hours or days, and do not attributable to a specific object or stimuli. On the other hand, affect is the totality of different states, including emotions, feelings, and moods in tourism and hospitality research. Since emotions are momentary and accompanied by psychophysiological responses, the best way to measure them is by applying the moment-based methodology, including electrodental activity, electrocardiography, pupillometry, and event-related potentials. In contrast, feelings as cognitive interpretations of emotions, events, and sensations could be measured verbally by using self-report scales and interviews. Mood
changes can also be evaluated by using scales with consideration of the average level of mood and mood reactivity.

Tourism research and practice should acknowledge tourists’ emotions, feelings, and moods as important components of the tourist experience. The previous literature describes the relationships between positive emotional states and tourists’ perceptions, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions (e.g., Han & Jeong, 2013; Pestana et al., 2020; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). At the same time, negative emotions can also lead to positive tourist outcomes such as meaning-making or personal transformation (Nawijn & Biran, 2018; Tasci & Godovykh, 2021). Furthermore, tourists’ emotional states evoked before and after the trip also influence tourists’ decisions, attitudes, and behavioral outcomes (Godovykh & Tasci, 2020).

Future research needs to analyze the relationships between tourists’ emotions, feelings, and moods, as well their antecedents and outcomes. Different emotional states might be influenced by tourists’ specific responses to external stimuli, customers’ perceptions, cognitive evaluations of events, and other factors. Moreover, interrelations between emotions, feelings, and moods could work both ways. The emotions evoked by tourism experiences or external stimuli may cause subsequent cognitive evaluations and result in positive or negative feelings and moods, while thinking about some positive or negative events may cause emotional responses. Investigating these interrelations will help to distinguish these concepts and clarify their relative roles and influences on tourists’ attitudes and behavior. In addition, capturing the instant and dynamic nature of tourists’ emotions by using psychophysiological and momentary assessment techniques will bring important theoretical implications and contribute to practice by evaluating and designing better experiences.
References


