



## Disappointment in tourism: Perspectives on tourism destination management



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### ABSTRACT

The range of components involved in the construction of tourist expectations and the influence these expectations generate on consumer satisfaction have been analyzed by tourism and marketing researchers. However, the causes and consequences of negative emotions such as disappointment seem to be neglected. Tourists' high expectations should be met not only by the services sector, but also by the tourism destination itself. Service insufficiency, or the failure of the travel experience, along with other risk factors may lead to tourists' dissatisfaction. This paper aims to create a better understanding of negative emotional attributes related to tourism destinations by investigating the causes, factors, and consequences of tourists' disappointment by developing a model of the phenomenon. This paper offers practical implications for destination managers and discusses how the causes of disappointment might be eliminated, or minimized, and that tourists can be compensated for disappointing experiences.

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### 1. Introduction

"Let's go to Pécs!" was the slogan used by the marketing organization of the Hungarian Southern-Transdanubian Regional Centre, Pécs, to advertise itself as a European Cultural Capital, beginning in January 2010. A well-traveled tourist, unaware of the everyday problems of the Pécs megaproject, set out one day for the Hungarian city with preconceived and idealized images of a European Cultural Capital in mind. Her positive attitude towards the trip was quickly soured by a variety of factors: the significant delay of the InterCity train; the disarray of the railway station covered by scaffolding; the lack of loudspeaker announcements proclaiming "Welcome to Pécs, the European Cultural Capital"; and a dearth of informational maps or signs about visitor attractions and their locations. The tourist was taken aback by the extensive paving works in the main square and the main pedestrian street, by the shabby condition of the Zsolnai Cultural District, and by the city's skyline, which was dominated by cranes and scaffolding. The tourist felt she had been invited but not expected. She arrived too early. Obviously, several months later she listened attentively to her acquaintances' exuberant accounts of Pécs, but her friends' positive views could not change the experience etched into her mind and memory. She was irrevocably disappointed.

Much of the disappointment felt by the tourist before the completion of renovations of the European Cultural Capital could have been avoided or at least significantly reduced if destination management had efficiently informed visitors, carefully directed their movements, and compensated them for what was lacking in their experience. Managers were aware of tourists' expectations, because the European Cultural Capital brand, in general, guarantees rich cultural programs throughout the year (Rátz, 2006). Visitors' disappointment with tourism destinations can be alleviated, but the strategy depends on the preparedness of the destination management organization (DMO).

While the tourist described above was fictional, the conditions described in Pécs were real. Recognition of these critical issues in marketing Pécs has led to the need to examine the causes and factors of tourist disappointment. The negative implications of tourism have already been examined at length from economic, social, and environmental perspectives (Kim, Uysal, & Sirgy, 2013; Rátz & Puczko, 2002; Witt, 1987), but far less is known about the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors generated by a journey that missed the mark of a visitor's expectations (Cousins, Evans, & Sadler, 2009; Gatrell & Collins-Kreiner, 2006). The aim of this paper, therefore, is to highlight the consequences of negative emotions, such as disappointment, in relation to travel destinations.

In tourism contexts, disappointment can be generated by aggrandized illusions created in relation to places and services. Expectations and illusions are generated by personal experience, media hype, advertising campaigns, and the experiences of others. However, when these expectations do not meet reality on the ground, regret can set in (Bonifield & Cole, 2007). Illusions are enhanced by emotions and the

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perceived value of a destination, which might influence behavioral intention. Tourists raise their expectations of destinations and service suppliers. Excellent hotel or restaurant service or facilities are only part of the chimera that tourists construct in their minds about a destination. The review of literature that follows is based on different paradigms so far applied in the research on consumer satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

In hospitality and the service environment, undesired incidents are known to happen, and these must be handled immediately (Brunner-Sperdin & Peters, 2009; Brunner-Sperdin, Peters, & Strobl, 2012; Mattila & Ro, 2008). To keep and increase a destination's competitiveness, the effects and consequences of unpleasant incidents must be understood by service suppliers and destination managers. It is far easier to prevent disappointment than to remedy unsatisfactory situations (Anderson, 2006; Rittichainuwat, 2013)—a concept germane to tourism entrepreneurs and destination managers. In the age of smartphones and social media, tourists' sources of disappointment can be spread throughout the world instantaneously. Within minutes, millions of fellow travelers can see photos and read negative or positive comments about a destination or service provider on sites such as [booking.com](http://www.booking.com) and TripAdvisor (Pesonen & Horster, 2012) or their personal blogs and Facebook or Twitter. Ways of foreseeing how disappointment can be generated by tourism entrepreneurs should be identified and minimized by destination managers.

This paper focuses on the role of destination management in avoiding visitors' dissatisfaction, highlighting the relatively new concept of managing disappointment, which falls under the broader purview of emotion management (Hochschild, 1990; Kemp, Bui, & Chapa, 2012). Following this introduction, a review of relevant literature related to the causes, sources and factors of disappointment are delineated. In the next part of the study the process and consequences of tourist disappointment related to a destination are considered. The novelty of this paper is the concept of disappointment management. The managerial implications of diminishing and compensating for disappointment are discussed in the conclusion. The paper goes beyond the service-related theoretical framework of tourist satisfaction and dissatisfaction to contribute to the advancement of knowledge as regards the factors related to tourists' disappointment in a destination.

## 2. Disappointment and tourism

Research interest in tourist satisfaction and dissatisfaction derives from the longstanding contributions of psychology to mainstream tourism studies (Pearce & Packer, 2013; Xin, Tribe, & Chambers, 2013). One result of this interest is perceived value and its implications for tourism marketing. Culturally-determined perceived values change in place and in time, and are influenced by several factors during the purchase process (Michalkó, Kiss, Kovács, & Sulyok, 2009; Sánchez, Callarisa, Rodríguez, & Moliner, 2006). Value-oriented perceptions can be analyzed from different perspectives because the emotional and rational behavioral intentions vary according to the consumption of culture (De Rojas & Camarero, 2008), sport (Hutchinson, Lai, & Wang, 2009) or wellness-based (Howat & Assaker, 2013) tourism products.

Strongly related to these aspects is research on consumer behavior, which sees the tourist as a decision-making individual caught in a dichotomous middle between emotions and rationality (Del Bosque & San Martín, 2008). The “expectation–experience–satisfaction–loyalty” paradigm has been generally accepted in the tourism literature (Baker & Crompton, 2000). A wide range of methods based on statistical models contributes to a better understanding of the link between perceived value and behavioral intention (Brown, Venkatesh, Kuruzovich, & Massey, 2008; Song & Li, 2012; Wirtz & Bateson, 1999). The application of these methods plays a key role in tourism research because the symbiosis between the quality of the product and its perceived value, and emotions shows a strong correlation (Chen & Tsai, 2007).

Beesley (2005): 263 argued that the term ‘emotion’ refers to ‘fairly brief but intense experiences that have a more specific focus’. For the purpose of this paper ‘emotion’ is understood to incorporate the often overlapping terms ‘affect’ and ‘mood’. Affective variables strongly influence behavioral intentions (e.g. loyalty, word-of-mouth, willingness to pay more, intention to return), and minimizing negative emotions is pivotal for the success of a destination (Bigné & Andreu, 2004). Moreover, destination managers deal explicitly with visitors' perceptions of destination quality, experience satisfaction, and their resulting behaviors (Žabkar, Makovec Brenčič, & Dmitrović, 2010). Maintaining a high level of consumer satisfaction can be prolonged through time without causing disadvantages in destination competitiveness. However, not recognizing dissatisfaction might cause serious difficulties in the long term for service providers and destinations (Alegre & Garau, 2010; Sánchez-García & Currás-Pérez, 2011). Empirical research shows that service suppliers and destination managers are able to influence tourists' emotional behavior (Beesley, 2005; Weiermair & Fuchs, 1999). At an airport, on a cruise or in a museum it is more difficult to moderate emotions, which suggests that the smaller and the more space-restricted a tourist place is, the greater the challenge for unperceived and efficient control (Adey, 2008; Sirakaya, Petrick, & Choi, 2004).

Boosterist advertising influences consumer demand for certain products and services. In particular, boosterist marketing communication often exaggerates product qualities they lack in reality (Bramwell, 1998; Molina & Esteban, 2006). In this case, if a product that is hyped in marketing fails to meet consumers' expectations it will likely result in disappointment (Bramwell, 1998; Kotler & Armstrong, 2009).

Consumption-related negative emotional states are one of the most common sources of disappointment (Maunier & Camelis, 2013; Oliver, 1993; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2004; Zeelenberg et al., 1998). As Maunier and Camelis (2013) note, it is challenging for service managers to understand what satisfactory and unsatisfactory elements of the travel experience will most affect post-consumption behavior. It is worth noting that consumptive behavior is part of personal identity and can be a source of everyday pleasure, or in some cases, self-actualization (Caldwell & Freire, 2004). Therefore, users attempt to adjust their expectations to their possibilities to reduce disappointment (Bowen & Clarke, 2002; Chua, Gonzalez, Taylor, Welsh, & Liberzon, 2009; Dijk, Zeelenberg, & Pligt, 2003; Lien & Wang, 2006; Papp-Váry, 2009; Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007).

Travel is a unique aspect of consumption, as consumers have relatively limited opportunities to obtain preliminary information about product quality (Bowen & Clarke, 2002). Caldwell and Freire (2004) pointed out that destination brands have two dimensions. The first is representational and is related to the individual's self-expression, while the second dimension is functional and based on the utilitarian aspects of a destination. The more distant the destination is and the greater the cultural differences are, the fewer opportunities there are to form expectations and understand the place before departure (Gran, 2010; Pearce & Moscardo, 1986), despite the proliferation of on-line information sources. Although many travelers try to collect as much information as possible about destination services, the complexity of tourism experiences and influential variables makes it almost impossible to eliminate all sources of disappointment. Since most pleasure travelers desire their dreams to come true, the possibility of disappointment is an innate consequence of tourism.

### 2.1. Sources of tourist disappointment

Disappointment is a negative emotional state resulting when perceived expectations do not compare to reality (Smith, Fredrickson, Loftus, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2003). In fact, anything can spark disappointment: objects, people, institutions, mishaps and even the transcendental world. In short, disappointment reflects unfulfilled expectations. The extent of one's reaction to disappointment depends on one's so-called ‘frustration tolerance’. People are all different; personality traits, life

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