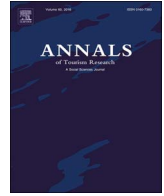


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# From sad to happy to happier: Emotion regulation strategies used during a vacation



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## ABSTRACT

Emotion regulation is a psychological intervention tourists use to maximize the positive outcomes of their travel experiences. Tourists either down-regulate negative emotions (e.g., from sad to happy) or up-regulate positive emotions (e.g., from happy to happier). The construct of emotion regulation was used as a guiding framework to uncover which emotion regulation strategies tourists used during their vacations. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Study findings revealed tourists used three phases of emotion regulation strategies—interpersonal, situational, and intrapersonal—during their vacations. These findings not only contribute to tourism research by documenting the transient, dynamic and variable nature of emotions, but also provide a glimpse into how tourism and hospitality professionals should modify programs/experiences in response to tourists' emotions.

## Introduction

Many within the tourism industry believe that traveling provides people with positive outcomes such as the ability to problem solve, renewed energy, positive emotions, and more (Gilbert & Abdullah, 2004; Gnoth, Zins, Lenmueller, & Boshoff, 2000; Mitas, Yarnal, Adams, & Ram, 2012). These positive outcomes have been linked to increased satisfaction, a modified destination image, positive word-of-mouth, repeat travel, even improved well-being (Gao, Kerstetter, Mowen, & Hickerson, 2017; Hosany & Gilbert, 2010). One positive outcome—emotions—arguably plays a pivotal role in shaping tourists experiences as well as their satisfaction with and future intention to revisit a destination (Bigne & Andreu, 2004). Numerous researchers have explored the role of emotions in the travel context (Hosany & Gilbert, 2010; Kim & Fesenmaier, 2015; Nawijn, Mitas, Lin, & Kerstetter, 2013), but in doing so have adopted the underlying belief that emotions are static at each point-in-time during vacation. This static perspective captures the horizontal fluctuation and changes of emotions over vacation, yet ignores the subjective, fluid, and qualitative nature of emotions (Dubé & Morgan, 1998; Gibson, 1986). It also ignores the fact that emotions change, evolve, and can be regulated (Gross & Barrett, 2011) during their vertical, generative process at each point in time during vacation. By accounting for the variances of an emotional response's generative process and the regulatory nature of emotions, this study introduces a dynamic perspective to studying emotions in the tourism context (Fig. 1). Within seconds or minutes of generating an emotional response during the vertical process, individuals may use various strategies to regulate their emotion (Gross, 1998, 2001).

The rationale for this study was largely based on the belief that understanding tourists' emotions will enable industry professionals to create experiences that allow for optimal physical, mental and cognitive performance, leading to meaningful and memorable travel experiences (Hogertz, 2010). It built upon emotion regulation theory, which highlights the process of regulating

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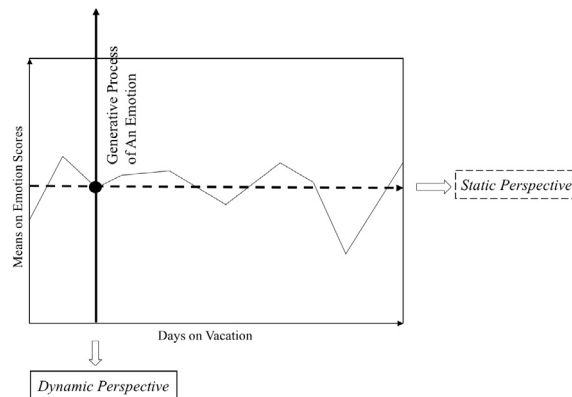


Fig. 1. The dynamic perspective of emotion regulation.

emotions that involve initiating, inhibiting or modulating one's state of mind (Gross & John, 2003). Gross (2013) suggested that emotion regulation requires individuals to utilize their cognitive resources to appraise stimuli that trigger an emotion and use regulation strategies to up-regulate (i.e., increase positive emotions) or down-regulate (i.e., decrease negative emotions) either the magnitude or duration of the emotional response. In the travel context, tourists step out of their comfort zone and fall into new, temporary environments in which they have invested time, effort, money and more (Lehto, O'Leary, & Morrison, 2004), in order to achieve their goals of having positive and relaxing experiences (Gnoth et al., 2000). Given the disconfirmation that can occur between tourists' investments, expectations and actual experiences, it is expected that they will experience greater emotional variance during the travel experience than in other contexts. Their emotions will be short-lived (Beedie, Terry, & Lane, 2005), and regulated cognitively (Gross, 2013) during the generative process; thus, tourists will likely use emotion regulation strategies (ERSs; Gross & John, 2003) to (a) increase the intensity of their positive emotions to maximize their happiness on vacation; and/or (b) cope with their negative or less positive emotional responses to the travel experience. In spite of the significance of this dynamic perspective, we have little knowledge about how tourists manage their emotions in the temporary, fluid travel and tourism context.

It is valuable to study emotion regulation in the travel and tourism context for a number of reasons. First, many studies on emotion regulation have been conducted by psychologists in their lab (Gross & John, 2003; Heiy & Cheavens, 2014) rather than in the field where participants experience greater emotional variance and regulate their emotions in response to real-life situations. In this study the variances of tourists' emotional responses and their regulatory response strategies are addressed while they are on vacation. Second, introducing emotion regulation to the travel and tourism field brings a new perspective to the study of emotions. This is important because many tourism scholars have failed to account for the dynamic nature of emotions, leaving the validity of their findings in question, and their studies have been limited in scope, ignoring tourists' regulation of their emotions and/or the potentially positive outcomes of their regulation. Regulation strategies have been shown to lead to positive outcomes such as enhanced psychological well-being and good social relationships (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010; Gross & John, 2003), which have been associated with the travel experience (Gilbert & Abdullah, 2004).

Using emotion regulation as a guiding theoretical framework, the purpose of this study was to reveal emotion regulation strategies tourists used during their vacations. To our knowledge, this interdisciplinary study is the first to link emotion regulation to the travel context, which is important for a number of reasons. First, utilizing the construct of emotion regulation as a guiding theoretical framework not only challenges the existing static approach to studying emotions (i.e., treating emotions as a static response), but also proposes a new dynamic perspective by accounting for the emotional generative process. Second, in the novel social structure that accompanies pleasure travel, tourists live in a new, temporary social community, which appears to increase individuals' reappraisal of their emotions. On the other hand, tourists might also suppress their negative emotions for the purpose of maximizing their positive travel experiences. Given the fact that emotions can be regulated along the timeline of an unfolding emotional response and corresponding strategies (Gross, 1998), it is important to document how tourists regulate emotions and what strategies they use in the travel context. Third, focusing on individuals' emotion regulation in the field, i.e., during a vacation, will not only contribute to existing literature about emotion regulation, but practically help tourism professionals to modify their programs/products in response to tourists' emotion regulation strategies (Malone, McKechnie, & Tynan, 2017).

## Literature review

### Defining emotions in tourism

There are three primary perspectives on emotions: the naturalistic perspective, the social constructionist perspective, and the cognitive appraisal perspective. The naturalistic perspective maintains that emotions are products of natural processes such as hormones, neuro-muscular feedback from facial expressions, and genetic mechanisms, which are independent of social norms and conscious interpretation (Ratner, 1989). Emotions are also "innate, invariant, and universal programs" that occur before they are expressed in interactions (Boiger & Mesquita, 2012, p. 222). In this view, emotions are similar in nature to other neurobiological

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