



Measuring customer experience *in situ*: The link between appraisals, emotions and overall assessments



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ABSTRACT

Customer experience is frequently researched using one-off recall studies, missing the opportunity to assess the momentary fluctuations associated with consumption in real time. To address this gap, this study investigates how specific experience appraisals of an event affect emotions at different points in time, as well as determining how these appraisals contribute to overall satisfaction, recommendation, and repeat visitation. Fifty-one event goers report their experiences on four occasions (three during and one post event). Results show appraisals of having fun predict feelings of joy at each of the three sampling periods, whereas appraisals of sensory experience predict feelings of inspiration. Overall, sensory appraisals at Time-2 and appraisals of fun at Time-3 are associated with higher ratings of recommendation and repeat visitation. This research extends the understanding of customer experience by demonstrating the differential role of appraisals and emotions in real time and the flow-on effects to post experience assessments.

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1. Introduction

Customer experience is the internal and subjective response a person has when encountering a company's offerings (Meyer and Schwager, 2007) and is a major factor for service industries' success, with strong links to important variables such as satisfaction and loyalty (Hosany and Witham, 2009). Customer experience is complex in nature, as it depends on the individual, the situation, and the service offerings. Experiences are also likely to be varied, with multiple benefits (e.g., Verleye, 2015). Some customer experience benefits are cognitive in nature, such as discovering new things or learning new knowledge, whereas other experiences are more hedonic, such as having fun, and still others are more sensory or social in orientation. The expected benefits from an individual's experience may differ markedly depending on the consumption situation. For example, benefits of a cognitive kind are more likely to be sought in a situation such as attending a seminar, whereas hedonic benefits are more likely sought when catching up with friends at a bar.

Appraisal theory (e.g., Roseman et al., 1990; Smith and Ellsworth, 1985) proposes that customers' appraisals of their experiences are highly subjective and likely to be based on the match between the

type of experiences the individual expects, their goals, and what the individual encounters in a natural consumption context (hereafter referred to as *in situ*) (Hormuth, 1986). Within appraisal theory, this match is known as goal congruence (Roseman et al., 1990). Furthermore, appraisal theory proposes that customers' appraisals are the determinants of different emotional experiences and explain, for example, why two individuals with different appraisals of the same event will have different emotional responses (Roseman et al., 1990). Importantly, customers' appraisals of their experiences are also likely to be correlated with overall assessments, such as satisfaction and loyalty (e.g., Mosteller et al., 2014; Soscia, 2007). In addition, individuals' positive or negative emotions have been found to change throughout the experience journey (e.g., Lin et al., 2014). However, the literature contains few empirical studies investigating customer appraisals and emotions at different points in the customer's journey.

To provide empirical evidence on the relationship between customer appraisals and emotions in real time and fill in the gap in customer experience research, the current study employs an experience-based sampling method to examine the association between appraisals and emotions during the attendance at a food and wine event, as well as a post-experience overall assessment of satisfaction, intention to recommend, and intention to make a repeat visit. The overarching research questions guiding this study are: (1) What is the relationship between appraisals of experience dimensions and associated emotional responses across time? (2)

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Do appraisals of experience dimensions across time contribute to variance in satisfaction, recommendation, and/or repeat visitation? (3) How do emotions customers feel at an event vary across time?

This research makes the following contributions. First, the study draws on the principles of appraisal theory, to empirically examine the relationship between appraisals and associated emotional responses. Second, by using experience-based sampling, the study captures fluctuations in customers' appraisals and emotions across time so as to provide new insights into people's lived experiences at a level that is more micro and momentary level than is common in past research. Third, by adopting a broad perspective, this study investigates the relationship between appraisals and overall evaluation variables. Finally, the research demonstrates how the use of apps presents a reliable, user-friendly, cost-effective, and efficient solution for data collection in experience sampling studies. The results of the current study could significantly assist event companies to more effectively allocate their resources when designing and planning event programs to enhance event attendees' experiences.

2. Literature review

2.1. Appraisal of customer experience and associated emotions

Customer experience is multidimensional (e.g., Gentile et al., 2007; Palmer, 2010; Verhoef et al., 2009). Gentile et al. (2007) propose that customer experience can include spiritual, sensorial, physical, rational, and emotional dimensions. Verleye (2015) extends the literature by developing a multidimensional experience scale to measure overall experience, including hedonic, cognitive, social, personal, pragmatic, and economic experience dimensions. Their results suggest that customers appraise experience dimensions differently on the basis of what types of experiences they expect and then evaluate overall experience depending on congruence between what they encounter *in situ* and expected experience dimensions. That is, a higher congruence level between real-time experiences and individuals' expected experience dimensions positively impacts their overall assessment, whereas lower congruence level implies a negative impact on overall experience.

Appraisal theory recognizes that individuals can have different emotional responses to an event owing to an individual's subjective evaluations of the event and proposes a range of dimensions as determinants of emotions, such as goal relevance, goal congruence, coping potential and future expectancy (Roseman et al., 1990). The current study only focuses on one key appraisal dimension – goal congruence – relevant in differentiating between positive and negative emotions. Goal congruence, which is the match between an individual's goals and real-time experiences, is an important underlying contributor to emotions (Roseman et al., 1990). According to Smith and Ellsworth (1985), the appraisal of congruence determines the valence of emotional responses. That is, events appraised at a higher congruence level are associated with positive emotions, whereas events appraised at a lower congruence level create more negative emotions.

Building upon the principles of appraisal theory, some researchers (e.g., Soscia, 2007) have investigated the relationship between goal congruence and positive/negative emotions. For instance, Nyer (1997) demonstrates that appraisals determine positive/negative emotions such as joy and anger. In another study, Hosany (2011) examines the determinants of tourists' emotional responses in the context of tourist destinations. The results demonstrate that goal congruence is a key determinant of emotions such as joy and inspiration. However, most previous research (e.g., Hosany, 2011) regards goal congruence as a unidimensional construct. Nevertheless, it can be argued that experience comprises many facets

and people tend to evaluate their overall experience depending on the congruence between the multiple experiences encountered *in situ* and any associated personal goals (Verleye, 2015). Therefore, the congruence appraisals of different experience dimensions (such as cognitive, sensory, social) may vary in predictive power for emotional responses. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1. The greater the congruence between the customer's experience appraisal dimensions and the person's goals, the stronger the person's positive emotional responses.

Hypothesis 1a. The less the congruence between the customer's experience appraisal dimensions and the person's goals, the stronger the person's negative emotional responses.

Hypothesis 2. Customer experience appraisal dimensions will differentially predict positive emotional responses.

Hypothesis 2a. Customer experience appraisal dimensions will differentially predict negative emotional responses.

2.2. Appraisal of customer experience and overall assessment

The customer experience literature (e.g., Kim et al., 2010; Wijaya et al., 2013) recognizes the importance of key outcome variables such as customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions (e.g., intention to recommend and intention for repeat visit). Thus, our research also adopts these variables as an overall assessment of consumer sentiment and behaviors. As emotional responses influence customer satisfaction and various customer behaviors (e.g., Dalakas, 2006; Hosany and Prayag, 2013), understanding the relationship between appraisals of different experience dimensions and associated emotional responses along the experience journey is very important. Given that emotions have been shown by prior studies (e.g., Hosany and Prayag, 2013) to have a significant influence on customer satisfaction and various consumer behaviors, it is not surprising that the ratings of satisfaction and consumer behaviors are likely to be related to goal congruence appraisals. However, few empirical studies have examined the relationship between appraisals and customer satisfaction and customer behaviors. Nyer (1997) demonstrates that appraisals determine satisfaction and also affect post-consumption behaviors such as word-of-mouth intention. Soscia (2007) further establishes that congruence appraisals predict word of mouth and repurchase intention. However, most studies (e.g., Soscia, 2007) use an overall evaluation measure that may overlook the different predictive power of specific experience appraisal dimensions. Therefore, it is proposed:

Hypothesis 3. As customer experience appraisal dimensions increase in congruence with the person's goals, the ratings of customer satisfaction, intention to recommend, and intention for repeat visit will be higher.

Hypothesis 3a. Customer experience appraisal dimensions will differentially predict customer satisfaction, intention to recommend, and intention for repeat visit.

2.3. Measuring appraisals and emotions in real time

As customer experience is subjective, varies over time (Cutler et al., 2014; Hormuth, 1986), and connects closely to goal congruence (Kuppens et al., 2012), real-time capture of all changes in appraisals and emotions is essential. Nearly all of the previous appraisal research (e.g., Hosany, 2011) relies on retrospective techniques such as surveys – an approach that has limitations in capturing the dynamic aspects of a customer's cognitive evaluations throughout the experience. Further, emotions are transitory,

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