

Matching Negative Emotions to Recovery-Focused Tourism Destinations

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Abstract

Tourism has increasingly been recognized as a pathway for emotional recovery, as travelers seek destinations that support mental and psychological well-being. This study examines the relationship between negative emotions—specifically stress, burnout, anxiety, and loneliness—and tourists’ preferences for recovery-focused destinations. Using a descriptive quantitative research design, data were collected from 300 leisure travelers through a structured questionnaire assessing emotional experiences, destination features, and recovery-oriented preferences. The findings indicate that negative emotions significantly influence destination choices, with nature-based settings such as quiet beaches, mountain retreats, and wellness-oriented destinations being most preferred for emotional healing. Social interaction and environmental calmness were identified as key contributors to recovery, with preferences varying according to individual emotional needs. The study highlights the importance of aligning tourism experiences with travelers’ emotional states to enhance satisfaction and promote mental well-being. Practical implications include the development of emotion-based travel packages, integration of wellness services, and destination marketing strategies that emphasize emotional benefits. In the post-pandemic tourism landscape, travel emerges not only as a leisure activity but also as a means of emotional restoration and renewal.

Keywords: anxiety, emotional recovery, negative emotions, nature-based destinations, post-pandemic travel, tourist behavior, wellness tourism

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Introduction

Tourism is increasingly recognized as an important avenue for emotional recovery, allowing travelers to select destinations that align with their psychological and emotional needs. Negative emotions such as stress, burnout, anxiety, and loneliness significantly influence travel behavior, shaping destination choice and travel motivation (Kim et al., 2021). These emotional states often arise from workplace demands, family responsibilities, and broader social pressures, generating a desire for restorative travel experiences.

Attribution theory suggests that individuals interpret the sources of their negative emotions—whether personal, situational, or social—and these interpretations influence expectations and decision-making when selecting destinations (Zhang et al., 2021). Emotional experiences, including those perceived as negative, can result in positive psychological outcomes when managed through meaningful travel experiences. Research on emotionally intense tourism experiences demonstrates that reflection, emotional expression, and psychological release can contribute positively to well-being (Nawijn, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic further emphasized tourism's role in emotional healing. Extended periods of isolation, uncertainty, and anxiety reshaped how travelers evaluate safety, comfort, and emotional benefits when choosing destinations (Zhou et al., 2024). Travel experiences that align with the intensity of an individual's emotional state have been shown to facilitate more effective psychological recovery (Young et al., 2023).

Nature-based tourism, including visits to beaches, forests, and mountain retreats, has consistently been associated with improved mental well-being, reduced stress levels, and enhanced cognitive clarity (Cooper, 2021). Building on these insights, the present study investigates how specific negative emotions influence preferences for recovery-focused tourism destinations, offering guidance for tourism stakeholders seeking to design emotionally supportive and restorative experiences.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design to examine the relationship between negative emotions and preferences for recovery-focused tourism destinations. A structured questionnaire was used to collect numerical data related to emotional experiences, destination preferences, and perceived restorative attributes.

Participants and Sampling

The participants consisted of 300 leisure travelers who had previously traveled or intended to travel for emotional recovery purposes. Convenience sampling was utilized, with respondents recruited through travel agencies, online travel forums, and social media platforms. The sample represented diverse demographic characteristics, including age, gender, occupation, and travel frequency.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

The questionnaire comprised five sections: (1) demographic profile; (2) negative emotions experienced; (3) destination preferences; (4) destination attributes; and (5) recovery needs. Responses were measured using multiple-choice items and Likert-scale ratings to facilitate quantitative analysis.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by attribution theory (Zhang et al., 2021), the emotional recovery framework (Young et al., 2023), and cognitive appraisal theory (Zhou, Chen, & Li, 2024), which collectively explain how emotional states influence perceptions, evaluations, and travel decisions.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic characteristics and emotional experiences. Correlation and regression analyses examined relationships between negative emotions and destination preferences, while factor analysis identified key destination attributes contributing to emotional recovery.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained. Responses were anonymized and used solely for academic purposes. Limitations include reliance on self-reported data and the use of convenience sampling, which may limit generalizability.

Results and Discussion

The findings demonstrate a significant relationship between negative emotions and destination preferences. Respondents experiencing stress, burnout, and anxiety showed strong preferences for calm, nature-based environments such as beaches, forests, and mountain retreats. These findings are consistent with prior research highlighting the therapeutic benefits of natural environments (Cooper, 2021; Pritchard et al., 2021).

Preferences for social interaction varied depending on emotional state. Travelers experiencing loneliness valued destinations offering opportunities for social connection, while those experiencing stress prioritized solitude and tranquility. This variability underscores the importance of designing flexible tourism products that support both solitary and social recovery needs.

From a managerial perspective, tourism providers can enhance traveler well-being by emphasizing emotional benefits in destination marketing, developing wellness-oriented packages, and offering adaptable experiences that respond to diverse emotional needs.

Conclusion

This study confirms that negative emotions significantly influence tourists' preferences for recovery-focused destinations. Stress, burnout, anxiety, and loneliness shape the desire for calm, nature-based, and emotionally supportive environments. Destinations that integrate

serenity, natural beauty, and flexible social opportunities are highly valued for emotional restoration. These findings offer valuable insights for tourism planners and marketers seeking to design recovery-oriented travel experiences that promote mental well-being. Future research may explore longitudinal emotional outcomes and cross-cultural variations in recovery-focused travel preferences.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

The authors declare that generative AI tools were used solely for language refinement, clarity, and formatting assistance. All research design, data analysis, interpretations, and conclusions are the authors' original work, and full responsibility for the content rests with the authors.

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