Learned Helplessness among Visually Impaired Tourists and Their Sighted Travel Companions
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Abstract: The majority of disabled tourists travel with a companion. Little is known about the effects of the interaction between visually impaired tourists and their travel companions with regards to their travel intentions when viewing a photo of a destination. Building from the theory of learned helplessness and findings from Lee, Agarwal, and Kim (2012), we conducted three focus group discussions (total of 25 participants) using the photo-elicitation method. Our results reveal that photo-images provoke a sense of helplessness and fear among them, especially for destinations with poor security and safety, and are disabled unfriendly and overcrowded. We propose tourist destinations not only provide more products and facilities that enhance the travel experience for visually impaired tourists (e.g. models, miniatures and related souvenirs, for them to touch and feel), but also consider the important role played by their travel companions in shaping travel motivation and visit intention.

Keywords: learned helplessness, visually impaired, tourism, photo-elicitation method

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Introduction

The interactions between visually impaired tourists and their sighted travel companions is a dynamic one and greatly influences their travel behaviour. Previous studies on disabled tourists have mainly focused on identification, categorization and negotiation of travel constraints when studying traveling intention. These studies indicate that the ability to categorize and negotiate is the main factor that contributes towards travel intention (Alexandris et al., 2007). However, studies in learning and development from social-psychology literature argue that prolonged exposure to failure in doing certain tasks creates a sense of helplessness within an individual. The learned-helplessness theory states that individuals who are subjected to an uncontrollable outcome learn that the outcome is independent of any voluntary response (Barber & Winefield, 1986; Miller & Seligman, 1975). Within the context of tourism, disabled tourists learned such helplessness (i.e. not wanting to visit anymore) after many unsuccessful participatory attempts in the destinations that they had visited (Lee et al., 2012). Importantly, learned helplessness is greatly enhanced by negative tourism experiences resulting in more cautious future engagements (Specht et al., 2002).

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One common way for a disabled tourist to negotiate travel constraints is through the assistance of their travelling companions. Travel companions are integral in promoting participation and enjoyment of disabled tourists (Yau et al., 2004). This is especially critical for visually-impaired tourists who are eager to participate in the destinations that they plan to visit. Some studies argue that empowerment may give rise to better tourism participation, yet most destinations are still lacking in providing facilities for physically-challenged tourists (Marzuki et al., 2012; Richards et al., 2010). Thus, this study aims to examine how interpersonal interaction between visually-impaired tourists and their sighted travel companions elicit learned helplessness. In order to illuminate this interaction, we adopt the photo-elicitation method which originates from anthropology and sociology studies (Harper, 2002). The method enables us to gain more information on how travel companions describe a photo to elicit understanding and emotions of visually-impaired tourists that can either provoke or lessen a sense of helplessness in them (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2003). This study aims to use this method to identify what type of tourist-attraction photos provoke or reduce learned helplessness and to determine how the travel companions transfer their sense of helplessness to the visually-impaired partner by either increasing or reducing an intention to travel.

**Literature Review**

Travel begins with an active information gathering of destination photos from available media (mass or personal). Through these photos, visually-impaired tourists and their travel companions assess their opportunity to travel (Daniels et al., 2005). Together they anticipate accessibility and issues such as overcrowding, safety, security and other tourists’ attitudes towards them. They will also consider issues in transportation, facilities, environment, geography, and their financial capacities (Taylor & Józefowicz, 2012). From destination photos, both may establish and reconfirm perceptions about the destination of interest (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015). Yet, a state of learned helplessness arises when they conclude the absence of desired benefits for their participation (Abramson et al., 1978). The sense of helplessness is further heightened following several previous failed attempts, which eventually leads to a loss of confidence, lack of control, and helplessness with regards to a destination (Allen & Badcock, 2003; Lee et al., 2012).

The conception of the learned helplessness theory delves into understanding the “complexity, subjectivity and inter-subject variability in the appraisal of helplessness by humans” (Hamburg, 1998; p.386). The theory explains how failure to achieve a desired outcome of a certain task creates a sense of helplessness, which in turn hinders the attempt to initiate other participation in a similar task in the future (Alloy & Seligman, 1979). It is a psychological state of an individual’s recognition that one cannot alter the outcomes of a situation despite one’s own interventions (Miller & Seligman, 1975).

The state of learned helplessness is associated with fear and avoidance for the individual and is affected by three factors, namely motivation, cognition and emotion (Miller & Seligman, 1975). Individuals with learned helplessness conclude that there is no desired benefit for their participation, therefore high exposure to situational helplessness could transform into a habitual helplessness (Abramson et al., 1978). The expectation of the outcome reduces the motivation to control an outcome. It also interferes with learning from one’s response to a situation that controls the outcome, which in turn will reduce the motivation to respond, undermining the cognitive ability to perceive the success of overcoming the constraint and instead develop a negative emotional response (Maier & Seligman, 1976).

In the tourism literature, a study reveals that helplessness mediates the relationship between tourism constraints and intention to travel (Lee et al., 2012). It explains why tourists with disabilities do not engage in tourism activities despite the reduction of travel-related constraints. The repeated prevention from participation eventually leads the disabled tourist to perceive that it is beyond their control, thus behaving helplessly irrespective of restoration of the situation (Saxena & Shah, 2008). Such negative tourism experiences further diminish their participation in future tourism activities (Specht et al., 2002), resulting in more cautious future engagements in tourism activities. This eventually leads to the feeling of a loss of confidence, a lack of control, and helplessness.
with regards to traveling (Lee et al., 2012).

Breaking away from this vicious state of helplessness is difficult but not impossible. Many studies view that travel companions may function as a catalyst to increase disabled tourists’ participation (Yau et al., 2004). Very often, sighted close relatives and friends become their reliable travel companions to provide a sense of security and connection to the destination of interest. A trip to a destination usually involves a lot of preparation especially looking at travel photos of other tourists’ social network sites (i.e. Facebook), and destination photos from websites and travel blogs. Photos can function as a way to elicit emotions, memories, and other information (Harper, 2002). By presenting photos to the travel companions, we can observe the exchange of intense emotions and attitudes between the travel companions and the visually-impaired tourists. This interpersonal interaction is unique because it involves two stages. First, the initial observation may begin with a unidirectional interaction from travel companions to the visually-impaired partner. This is expected because the sighted-travel companions initially provide an insight of the photos and simultaneously grant greater access to their self-construction (Croghan et al., 2008). Travel companions may impose learned helplessness to their visually-impaired partner. Cognitive psychologists have long established that vision itself may impose a strong constraint to one self, thus eliciting the perceivers to be helpless (Kim et al., 2018; Wagemans et al., 2012). In the next stage, we should expect a bidirectional and dyadic interaction between them. Such interdependency shows a general complementarity interaction to resolve an attitudinal or behavioural outcome (Hadden et al., 2015). The quality of such a dyadic relationship is depended on their interaction history (Neyer & Asendorpf, 2001). If this dyadic relationship is a long-term travelling arrangement, we can assume that both parties have the power to influence the learned helplessness of the visually-impaired partner.

**Methodology**

We contacted the Malaysia Association for the Blind (MAB) to provide a list of members who lived in Petaling Jaya. We successfully invited twelve visually-impaired participants and their respective travel companions. One visually-impaired participant brought along two travel companions, thus the total number of participating travel companions was thirteen. In total, \( n = 25 \) participants were involved in the photo-elicitation sessions. The participants age ranged from 18 to 55 years. Using the photo-elicitation method, sighted participants were shown 42 destination photos divided into five main categories based on different tourism products in six Asian-Pacific countries (Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, India and Australia), and taken from their official tourism websites (Dilley, 1986; Echtner & Ritchie, 2003; Loeffler, 2004; MacKay & Couldwell, 2004). These photos were categorised into; 1) man-made attractions (e.g. KLCC Tower, Taj Mahal), 2) religious attractions (e.g. temple, mosque), 3) nature attractions (e.g. beach, waterfall), 4) cultural attractions (e.g. celebrations, ethnic masks), and 5) tourist activities (e.g. surfing, scuba diving). The travel companions were instructed to describe the photos to the visually-impaired participants, following which, they were asked to explain elements within the photos which had negative effects and generated feelings of helplessness. The FGDs were recorded and transcribed into MSWORD, which was later analysed using NVIVO qualitative software. We cross-checked the coding, to minimise bias and increase reliability (Gibbs, 2007).

**Findings**

Destination photos of man-made structures elicited mundane responses from both visually-impaired participants and their travel companions. At the attraction, visually-impaired participants often search for miniature keychains. ‘I would rather buy the key chain instead of walking around KLCC. Touching the keychain allows me to imagine how the building looks like’ (Participant 5, B). Visually-impaired participants felt uneasy with heritage structures especially religious monuments and temples, ‘I am not interested to visit Borobudur because it is a temple’ (Participant 13, visually impaired; 23, visually impaired). Visually-impaired participants took great consideration of their travel companions, ‘… I do not want to go to places that scared my son, causing him to have nightmares.'
He is our guide, and crucial for our mobility. When he feels scared, we will not visit the place’ (Participant 13, visually impaired). When we displayed Langkawi Sky Bridge, most travel companions responded with fear of heights. In response, visually-impaired partners expressed their reluctance to visit the attraction.

In contrast to man-made structures, responses to natural attractions were more positive especially for beaches and waterfalls. If travel companions were available, visually-impaired tourists would be more inclined to visit such places, ‘I would really like to go to the beach, but it is not easy as I can’t see. It would be great if someone like my friends or family members accompany me. I will feel safe and not lose my balance. I will be able to feel the breeze and walk on the beach’ (Participant 7, visually impaired). However, travel companions were afraid that the visually-impaired tourists would drown in the sea or get lost in caves or the jungle. Immediately, most visually-impaired tourists agreed with their travel companions’ concerns.

Most participants expressed concerns regarding cultural photos. Visually-impaired participants raised issues of security and safety especially getting lost in a large crowd. ‘I fear that I won’t be able to find my travel companion if I separated from them’ (Participant 14, visually impaired). Similarly, travel companions were worried about visually-impaired participants’ safety too. ‘My friend is very hyper, there are few times when she walked off on her own, it took me a while to find her. I don’t think I want to take her to a place with many people’ (Participant 3, travel companions). In such situations, some visually-impaired participants said, they hold their visually-impaired partners’ hands tightly, to prevent separation (e.g. Participant 4, visually impaired). With regards to attending concerts, Participant 11 (visually impaired) expressed, ‘Preferably we could book the seat in advance rather than stand throughout the whole concert.

Some cultural activities elicited a stronger state of helplessness especially when balancing and height were involved. Visually-impaired participants expressed activities like yachting and hot air ballooning as pointless as they could not see the sight (Participant 5, visually impaired; 23, visually impaired). ‘The feeling is just like standing and feeling the winds’ (Participant 9, visually impaired). The fear of height and speed amongst travel companions was evidently transferred to the visually impaired participants. Thus, destination photos of physically-demanding activities such as water rafting, sand surfing, and skiing generated unfavourable visitation intentions for both. Interestingly, visually-impaired participants have a penchant for animals. Regardless of whether it was a photo of a safari or petting zoo, visually-impaired participants love to touch animals, and imagine their physical characteristics.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

We identify various destination photos which elicit feelings of helplessness among visually-impaired tourists. For some destination photos, both participants (visually impaired and their travel companions) reinforce the feelings of helplessness in each other. Among visually-impaired participants, helplessness is a complex collection of social environments, practices and attitudes which are imposed along with their impairment (Darcy & Buhalis, 2011; Small, Darcy, & Packer, 2012). The visually-impaired participants are quick at identifying what they can and cannot do when their travel companions describe the destination photos to them. Some photos even promote discussions between the partners who are both trying to influence each other on their abilities to negotiate the travel constraints. Based on those discussions, the learned helplessness of travel companions is found to greatly influence those of visually-impaired participants.

Consistent with Lee et al. (2012), destination photos which relate to culture and religion influence most the feeling of helplessness. Both participants are reluctant to experience others’ religious monuments, practices and rituals. The indigenous people photos are perceived to be aggressive. Moreover, instant negative emotional responses made by the travelling companions influence the visually impaired participants as they sense the negative emotion, thus reducing their intention to travel. Yet, photos of indigenous children are perceived to be less aggressive than those of adults.

Similarly, travel companions describe numerous environmental conditions such as slippery and uneven surfaces, and types of destinations such as caves, jungles, sandy beaches, waterfalls, and oceans to their visually impaired partners cautiously. Some travel companions immediately mention their fear of having their companions
hurt when seeing photos of waterfalls and forests. In addition, crowded festivals instantly increase fear among travelling companions as they are afraid that they might lose their visually-impaired partners and worry about their safety.

A unique finding reveals the dependency of visually-impaired parents on their sighted son, who usually assists with their travelling and mobility. They place great importance on the son’s interest and motivation, which determines their travel participation. The parents’ learned helplessness is reduced substantially because of their son’s optimism and interest in the pictures. The parents are quick to make judgements based on their child’s emotional response upon him seeing and describing a particular destination photo. In fact, there are instances where they even consider overcoming more challenges upon hearing their child’s enthusiasm on visiting the destination in the photo.

Undoubtedly, the photo elicitation method provides deep insights on how a photo of a destination can provoke or reduce a sense of helplessness in visually-impaired tourists. Photos with humans doing tourist activities tend to reduce a sense of helplessness for it allows the visually impaired and the companions to discuss how to negotiate the travel constraints. Furthermore, pictures of children also reduce the sense of helplessness for both types of participants.

It is vital to provide a holistic travel experience to both visually-impaired tourists and their travel companions. Travel agents do not usually provide reliable information and photos of destinations that are not friendly to disabled tourists (Mothersally et al., 2014). Most of the participants assert that photos with pavements or other facilities allows them to plan better how to negotiate with the travel constraints. These photos should also be easy to describe by their travelling companions. Similar to elderly tourists, visually-impaired tourists need quality accommodation, reliable services, easy access, minimum steps, and proximity to toilets (Schitko & Losekoot, 2012). More importantly, visually-impaired tourists need reliable travel companions as the relationships were found to be dyadic and complementary.

This study is limited to just studying the reaction of visually-impaired tourists and traveling companions to photos of destinations. It is also not generalisable due to the small sample. The photo elicitation method may affect accuracy, and consistency of the description. The judgement of learned helplessness was based on each different travel companion’s photo interpretation. Future research may use a moderator to describe the photo to the visually impaired participants, thus standardising the description of the photo to the tourists. However, perhaps travelling companions are the best people to explain to visually-impaired participants, as their relationship is complementing and established. Other future studies should explore service quality and satisfaction among visually-impaired tourists during their holiday.

References


