

THE MODERATING EFFECT OF COPING ON STUDENT SATISFACTION WITH A SHORT STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

Study abroad programs typically offer a balance of academic content along with a number of cultural activities to its students. Their structure and conduct represent a substantial investment on the part of both the university and the students participating in them. This study investigates the impact of student's perceived active coping skills on overall satisfaction as well as on individual components of a study abroad program. Two sets of questionnaires were collected from students during this study abroad program to measure their coping skills and also their levels of satisfaction prior to the trip and after the completion of the study abroad program. The results of the study indicated that coping is a moderator between expectations prior to the trip and post level satisfaction. Apparently, the ability to employ active coping skills allows students to seek out and process information differently from students with low coping skills. Implications for managers and educators are presented to help them better prepare students for an international experience and address concerns over coping behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Eager to learn about different countries and cultures and acquire global skills, U.S. students are studying abroad in record numbers. According to an *Open Doors* report, published annually by the Institute of International Education, the number of American students receiving academic credit for their study abroad has increased 150% in the past decade alone. Much of this growth stems from students participating in their universities short-term study abroad programs.

Under the guidance of faculty and staff, these programs are typically designed to offer a balance of academic content with a number of cultural activities. Their structure and conduct represent a substantial investment both in terms of money and time on the part of both the university and the students participating in them. If successfully carried out, students earn credit hours in an academic class while gaining experience and understanding of another culture. Hopefully, it stimulates their interest and love of learning for years to come. However, while exciting and seemingly vacation like, these programs often are very stressful for students. This study investigates the impact of student's perceived active coping skills on overall satisfaction with their study abroad experience as well as on individual components of the study abroad program. It is important to note here that this study, as opposed to previous research on coping, examines the level of intensity of coping behavior as opposed to the various dimensions of coping behavior.

CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

Sources of Stress

A study abroad program serves many purposes including academic credit, personal growth, and exposure to another culture. As a part of the academic credit earned the student must attend class, take exams, quizzes, participate in discussions and/or complete projects or assignments. Also when students are in a foreign country they are typically given a great deal of freedom. While this freedom is a valuable part of the learning experience, there are also a number of associated issues. For example, students may become involved in romantic entanglements, get lost, lose their wallet/tickets/passport, engage in risky behavior such as going out alone at night, overindulge in alcohol with negative consequences, become involved with group or interpersonal conflict, overspend, and/or perform poorly in the academic component of the program. Some students are overwhelmed by any free time and retreat to the safety of their hotel rooms. At the end of the trip they are disappointed that they didn't have the opportunity to visit more sites. Other less controllable issues also may arise. For example, the student may become physically or emotionally ill, there may be heightened security risks due to terrorism, or an international incident may occur leading to heightened anti-American sentiments. Potentially, there are an unlimited number of events that could lead to negative outcomes. In turn, the student may be left dissatisfied with the entire program and the University.

Typically, Universities and the faculty and staff planning and conducting such programs have developed policies that they hope will prevent or mitigate any negative aspects of the trip. Such policies may include pre-trip orientations, detailed outlines of student responsibilities with expected deportment, and signed agreements concerning repercussions if students violate any policies. Thus, it is not surprising that a majority of students report a high degree of anxiety and stress before leaving on a tour (Koernig 2007). An ability to cope allows students to lessen the influence of many of these negative stressors and in turn experience greater satisfaction with the program.

Coping

Coping is generally considered to be a process by which an individual attempts to minimize the negative emotions that arise from the experience of negative events. It has been extensively studied in a number of contexts including among others sales performance (Belschak, Verbeke, and Bagozzi 2006; Nonis and Sager 2003), consumption (Duhachek 2005; Duhachek and Iacobucci 2005), school-related stress (Pritchard and McIntosh 2003; Wrzesniewski and Chylinska 2007), marital satisfaction (Hoekstra-Weebers, Jaspers, Kamps, and Klip 1998), and aggressive customer behaviors (Ben-Zur and Yagil 2005). These studies and others have identified a number of different coping strategies including active coping, planning, positive reframing, acceptance, humor, religion, seeking emotional social support, seeking instrumental social support, self-distraction, denial, venting, substance use, behavioral disengagement, and self-blame.

Two general coping strategies have been distinguished: problem-solving strategies which are direct attempts to change the conditions that are the perceived source of stress (Duhachek and Iacobucci 2005), and emotion-focused coping which involves efforts to regulate the emotional price of stressful or potentially stressful events (Ben-Zur, Gilbar and Lev 2001). Prior research indicates that people may rely on both problem focused and emotion-focused coping strategies to combat most stressful events (Folkman and Lazarus 1980; Luce 1998; Luce, Bettman, and Payne 2001; Mick and Fournier 1998; Sujana et al. 1999). However, the prevalence of one type of strategy over another is thought to be a result of the combination of personal traits and the situation producing the stress. Problem-focused or active coping is logically more associated with potentially controllable issues such as school or work related problems whereas emotional-focused coping is more frequently associated with less controllable issues such as physical health problems or weather.

For purposes of this study and as an initial investigation into the effects on student satisfaction with the study abroad experience, this study decided to focus on active or

problem-focused coping. Many of the stress inducing factors associated with study abroad are very controllable (i.e., getting lost, performing well in class, getting along with classmates, etc.) and thus an investigation into the impact of active coping on satisfaction is appropriate. As mentioned previously this type of coping generally refers to the individual's tendency to try to change the conditions that are the perceived source of stress (Duhachek and Iacobucci 2005). To manage the stress that stems from getting lost in a foreign city, for example, a student might proactively study a map of the city and other readily available materials and use this information to learn more about the public transportation system, city and culture. (As an aside, one of the authors once got lost in Moscow using the public transportation system – what a memorable adventure it turned out to be, trying to communicate with everyday Russian citizens, museum guards, shop clerks, and studying subway maps).

RESEARCH QUESTION

The basic research question addressed by this study was does the coping skills of students moderate the relationship between post level satisfaction and expectations prior to the trip? This study anticipates that students with high coping skills will use those skills to mitigate the effect of negative events during the study abroad program resulting in higher post level satisfaction when compared to those students with lower coping abilities. A model of this relationship is presented in Figure 1. Furthermore, this study believes that this will hold true not only for overall satisfaction but for satisfaction with all aspects of the program. Thus the research question is as follows:

Research Question 1: The effect of expectations prior to the trip on the satisfaction after the trip is stronger for students with high coping skills than for students with low coping skills. This will hold true with respect for each of the following components:

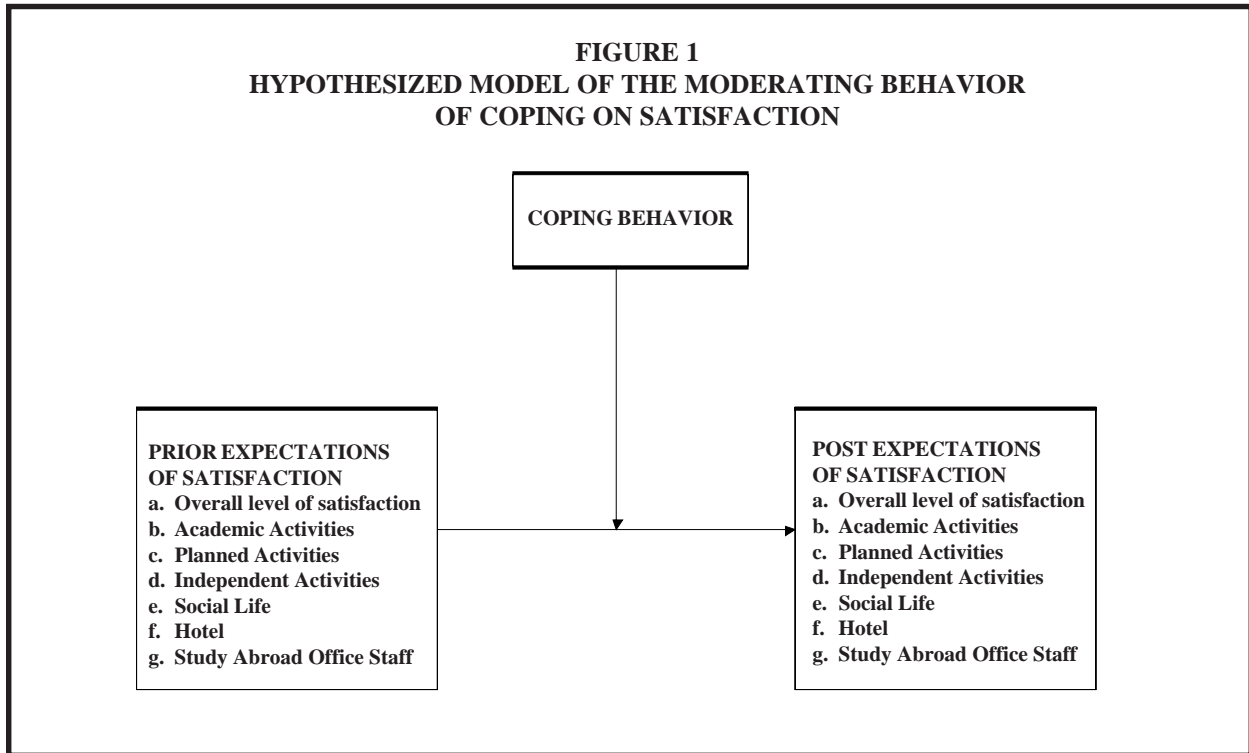
- a. overall level of satisfaction,
- b. academic activities,
- c. planned activities,
- d. independent activities,
- e. social life,
- f. hotel,
- g. Study Abroad Office staff.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

To investigate this research question, permission was secured from a private mid-sized university in the Midwest offering a two-week study abroad program in January interim to survey their students. Every year about 140 students take part in this study abroad experience. For this study 10 different courses were offered as a part of the

**FIGURE 1
HYPOTHESIZED MODEL OF THE MODERATING BEHAVIOR
OF COPING ON SATISFACTION**



study abroad experience. This study abroad program is designed around an academic part (three credit hour class), class activities including sightseeing, museum visits or visits of London based companies, and an important social cultural aspect.

Students were given two questionnaires, one before their departure from the U.S. and one after their arrival home. We received 108 full sets of questionnaires which is about 71 percent of all participants. The questionnaires were coded with a number assigned to each respondent so that answers could be matched. The respondents were promised complete confidentiality. The first set of questionnaires was given out on the night of the student orientation and was collected on the first day following their arrival to the foreign city. The second questionnaire was passed out on the plane returning to the U.S. and was collected at the study abroad office for up to two weeks after their return.

The 108 full sets of questionnaires included responses from 22 males and 86 females ranging in age from 20 to 22 years old with the majority being 21 and having the class standing of juniors. Thirty-one different majors were represented.

Measurement

Based on prior experience with the program, it was divided into six individual components that covers the entire spectrum of the study abroad experience: academic, planned activities with the class, independent activities

outside of class (i.e., independent sightseeing, shopping, clubbing), social life, hotel, and the Study Abroad Office Staff (Program Director and his assistants). Among other questions, students were asked how satisfied they expected to be overall with the study abroad program and its various components using a 7-point scale (from 1 Very dissatisfied to 7 Very Satisfied). The same set of questions asking the students to rate their actual satisfaction was included in the last questionnaire. To measure active coping, a seven-item scale adapted from the COPE measurement instrument was used (Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub 1989).

Data Analysis

First, a reliability analysis was performed for the coping measure. Next, the scale was factor analyzed. Two items with weak loadings were dropped with the resulting scale being unidimensional. A coping measure consisting of five items was used in the current research. The reliability of this scale was 0.77.

The moderating effects of individual differences among respondents were tested by subgroup analysis (cf., Arnold 1982). The sample first was sorted in ascending order of a hypothesized moderator (e.g., coping skills). Next, consistent with standard econometric conventions (e.g., Goldfeld and Quandt 1965), the top and bottom 35 percent of the cases were selected so as to obtain two subgroups reflecting low and high scores of the moderator (Kohli 1989). The middle 30 percent of the cases were omitted to improve the contrast between the subgroups

and hence the power of the subsequent statistical tests. For a detailed discussion of this procedure see Johnston (1972, p. 219).

The top and bottom of the subgroup in the sample is labeled as “students with high level of coping skills” and “students with low level of coping skills” respectively. Some of the characteristics of students with high levels of coping ability include the need for independence; an aggressive approach toward seeking information to help solve problems; the ability to take on new challenges, etc. Although, majority of the sample were females, the percentage of students with high coping skills were disproportionately skewed toward females (84%) in comparison to males (16%). In this study, it was found that students with high levels of coping skills enjoyed their sightseeing experience along with visiting the local bars/pubs. They also felt that they learned more from the study abroad experience as opposed to the traditional in-class experience in the U.S.

Overall, post-level satisfaction was next regressed on prior expectations of overall satisfaction using all cases in the two subgroups (restricted run). A second regression was performed, this time allowing the regression coefficient estimates to take on different values across the different subgroups (unrestricted run). The difference in the sums of squared residuals from the restricted and unrestricted regression runs was incorporated in the Chow test (Chow 1960), to assess the statistical significance of the difference in the regression coefficients of prior expectations of overall satisfaction across the high or low subgroups. Results from the analyses are reported in Table 1.

The same procedure was then used by regressing the different components (attributes) of post-level satisfaction such as the academic component, the planned activities, the independent activities, social life, the hotel and finally the study abroad staff on the expectations prior to the trip using all cases in the two subgroups (restricted run). A second regression was performed, this time allowing the regression coefficient estimates to take on different values across the different subgroups (unrestricted run). The difference in the sums of squared residuals from the restricted and unrestricted regression runs was incorporated in the Chow test (Chow 1960) to assess the statistical significance of the difference in the regression coefficients of the different components of satisfaction across the high or low subgroups.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the results of the current study. As can be seen, all the research questions received strong empirical support. Overall these findings support the central thesis of the study that the level of coping skills among students leads them to respond differently to the different components (attributes) of satisfaction both in

terms of expectations prior to the trip and post-trip of satisfaction.

The difference in the regression coefficients across the two subgroups reflecting low and high levels of coping skills were statistically significant (refer to Table 1). This finding supports the prior notion that the student’s level of coping skills moderates the effect of expectations prior to the trip on the post level satisfaction for the different components of satisfaction measured in the study.

The regression coefficient for the expectations prior to the trip in both the low and high coping skills subgroup are presented in table 1. This finding suggests that a unit change in coping skills has a stronger impact on the post level satisfaction with high level coping skills than that of students with low levels of coping skills. This result supports the research question that the expectation that consumers with low levels of coping skills are more sensitive to variations in post level satisfaction.

DISCUSSION

Coping has been found to be a moderator between expectations prior to the trip and post trip satisfaction. Students with high coping skills tend to perceive the information or attributes of satisfaction differently from students with low coping skills. If students with low coping skills are not familiar with the various attributes or cannot comprehend the information that is communicated as a part of the study abroad learning experience, they may either end up ignoring the information or misrepresenting the information. Similarly, the students with high levels of coping skills will process the information with more vigor or “with a fine tooth comb” as a result they may perceive the information and the whole study abroad experience more positively or negatively. Students who have high coping skills may be comfortable with what to expect and with the end result of the perceived performance of satisfaction. This may be because they have the inherent ability to handle or tackle the situation that they are presented with. On the other hand, those with low coping skills may not be sure about what to expect (this may be due to a variety of reasons: the way they have been brought up, the family values, the formal education received at high school or just the way they have been taught in school/college). Hence, as a consequence they may feel more comfortable with a structured and safe environment and would rather let others take the lead in dealing with difficult situations.

These findings present very valuable insight for managers and practitioners of the travel/tourism industry as they plan these foreign vacations for their customers on a daily basis. They need to account for the coping skills of their travelers as some may be very satisfied with their planning of events prior to a trip and may find out the

**TABLE 1
REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS ACROSS LOW AND HIGH LEVELS OF MODERATOR VARIABLES (UNRESTRICTED RUN)**

Moderator Variable	Dependent Variable	R ²	? in R ²	Level	Moderator or Expectations prior to the trip (overall)	Independent Variables	Chow Test
Coping Skills	Post-trip Satisfaction Overall	0.012	0.030	-0.018	Low	High	16.03
						0.098	0.175
Coping Skills	Post-trip Satisfaction academic	0.000	0.070	-0.070	Low	High	23.10
						-0.008	0.331
Coping Skills	Post-trip Satisfaction Planned activities	0.122	0.000	0.122	Low	High	42.04
						0.411	0.003
Coping Skills	Post-trip Satisfaction Independent activities	0.137	0.029	0.108	Low	High	26.78
						0.315	-0.210
Coping Skills	Post-trip Satisfaction Social life	0.293	0.000	0.293	Low	High	47.66
						0.483	-0.026
Coping Skills	Post-trip Satisfaction hotel	0.054	0.102	-0.048	Low	High	14.89
						0.255	0.323
Coping Skills	Post-trip Satisfaction SAO	0.198	0.143	0.055	Low	High	51.80
						0.374	0.590

**** p < .001
*** p < .01
** p < .05
* p < .10

experience (post) to be very different from their prior expectations about the trip. This may generate some negative word-of-mouth for the travel agency or the vacation planners. It becomes important for these planners to advise their travelers appropriately perhaps even giving them pre-trip lessons and not to over promise on their offerings to their customers. If the trip involves drastically different culture and languages, it is imperative that competent, experienced tour leaders be present at all times.

It may also be advisable for schools/travel/sponsoring agencies to have a pre-screening of their customers/students (i.e., make them take a small test) to determine their coping levels. This would allow them to better address the concerns of the customers and also be better prepared for any extraneous circumstances. It is important to note that just providing pre-trip information/experience orientation will not necessarily improve satisfaction for those with low-levels of coping skills. It is important for these agencies to help develop the coping skills of their customers/clients in order to be a better facilitator of satisfaction. For example, instead of presenting students with a list of do's and don'ts for the trip, a more involved approach of developing their coping skills would be to have them participate in "mock situations" presenting them with activities that would simulate actual circumstances that they may face. Similar to self-defense classes, CPR training, and orienteering classes, these pre-trip skill-building exercises would develop their active coping skills. Thus if faced with getting lost or robbed, students are prepared to calmly think of what the next steps or actions (if they have practiced developing these skills) they need to take to overcome the stressful experience.

The results from the study also point out the necessity for taking into account those with high coping skills, as they will actually thrive on more free time and less planned or structured activities. It is imperative that those customers and students ready for highly unstructured experiences be allowed sufficient time to use their coping strategies, resulting in an actual appreciation of learning how to and actually handling "unexpected" situations. Clearly, one solution is to have both structured and unstructured "free" time available to both groups. However, trip

planners should always have a number of optional activities available during the "free time." These optional activities (such as sight-seeing, going to plays/musicals, etc.) could be highly structured and escorted by faculty or staff. Those with low coping abilities should be encouraged to participate in these. For example, by encouraging low coping ability students to be active and get outside the confines of their hotel room with a great deal of supervision should ultimately help them overcome some of the anxiety of doing things on their own. Such experiences may help reduce the level of stress for students with low coping skills enabling them to utilize their time optimally and, at the same time, maximize their experiences. In turn, both the sponsoring agency and the participant can reap the benefit of higher levels of satisfaction during the trip.

Finally, it may be important to separate those high coping skills from those with low coping skills as sometimes that may destroy the morale of the group and may result in unpleasant experiences. Our findings and implications could also be extended to the classrooms setting where students can be given an option of course structure of either a hands-on project experience or a very structured classroom method delivery.

LIMITATIONS/CONCLUSIONS/FUTURE RESEARCH

Our study was limited to findings from one private school; hence the results may not be generalizable over other populations. Besides, all the data for the study were gathered using self-report measures. Future research needs to look at collecting data from private and public schools and see if there are differences amongst students in different schools. Our study focused on the academic arena. It needs to be extended to other businesses to be able to get a better understanding of coping behavior. This will help in providing better coping strategies to managers and practitioners. Future research needs to explore differences in gender and see how coping behavior operates when situations of stress are presented. We believe that our study is a starting point for research in coping behavior in the academic setting and it is very important to continue the research on coping behavior in order to be able to address stressful situations in an appropriate manner.

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