

Exploring tourist adaptability across the travel process: Insights from content analysis of tourists' experiences

Wen-Shiung Huang (National Taiwan Ocean University, Taiwan)

Yung-Sen Lin (Ling Tung University, Taiwan)

Chih-Ming Cheng (Ling Tung University, Taiwan)

INTRODUCTION

In the post-pandemic era, global international tourism has shown a sustained recovery (UNWTO, 2025). Meanwhile, under pandemic-related uncertainty, tourists may adjust their travel behavior and plans (Scholtz & De Ridder, 2021). Travel environments can still be shaped by disruptions and shifting mobility patterns, which may trigger behavioral adjustments during trips (Yuan et al., 2024). However, prior research has largely emphasized cross-cultural adaptation and tourist resilience, while “tourist adaptability” remains underexplored, particularly in terms of stage-specific adaptive behaviors and psychological changes across the travel process. Accordingly, this study adopts a travel process perspective and conducts qualitative interviews with experienced travelers to examine their adjustment trajectories amid environmental change and uncertainty, and to develop an initial conceptual framework of tourist adaptability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Adaptability involves appropriate adjustment in response to change, novelty, and uncertainty, enabling individuals to recalibrate their cognition, emotions, and actions as situational demands evolve (Martin et al., 2012). It is also linked to adaptive performance, defined as an individual's ability to change behavior to meet the demands of new environments (Charbonnier-Voirin & Roussel, 2012). In Scholtz and De Ridder (2021), respondents indicated they would adapt their travel behavior under pandemic-related uncertainty, for example by adjusting plans toward mostly national/local travel.

Tourist adaptability refers to tourists' psychological and behavioral capacity to adjust constructively to uncertainty across the pre-travel, in-travel, and post-travel stages. It involves regulating emotions, building local understanding, and modifying coping actions to maintain travel continuity and experience quality.

Recent studies have increasingly conceptualized the tourism journey as a multi-stage process to capture variations in tourists' motivations, behaviors, and experiences over time. Chen et al. (2023) identified three core stages of the tourism journey: pre-travel planning and psychological preparation, on-site activities and experiences, and post-travel reflection and evaluation. This framework highlights tourism as a holistic process extending from pre-travel planning to post-travel reflection, rather than a single on-site experience.

METHOD

The study adopted a qualitative content analysis framework informed by prior tourism and adaptability research. An interview guide and preliminary coding directions were developed to support the analysis. Systematic coding and thematic categorization were used to capture adaptive responses across travel stages.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 experienced international travelers using the Critical Incident Technique. Participants recalled challenging incidents across the pre-travel, in-travel, and post-travel stages, and interview transcripts were analyzed as the primary data source to examine how tourists adapted to these challenges.

Qualitative content analysis was conducted through repeated transcript reading, open coding, and iterative theme development. Themes were compared across the pre-travel, in-travel, and post-travel stages to capture stage-specific and dynamic patterns of tourist adaptability.



FINDINGS

Among the 10 respondents, 7 were female and 3 were male. 7 respondents were in their 20s. 6 respondents travel abroad over 3 times every year. The in-depth interviews generated a total of 484 coded instances, providing a rich dataset for analysis.

Qualitative analysis indicates that tourist adaptability can be characterized by four dimensions: Psychological Flexibility, Locality Awareness, Tourism Practice Competence, and Tourism Action Adjustment, and that its manifestations vary across the travel process stages. Across all coded instances ($n = 484$), the in-travel stage accounted for the largest share (246, 50.83%), followed by the pre-travel stage (153, 31.61%) and the post-travel stage (85, 17.56%), suggesting that tourist adaptability is most salient while tourists are actively navigating unfolding situations during travel.

For analytic approach, using qualitative content analysis, each coded instance was assigned to one travel stage (pre-/in-/post-travel) and one adaptability category. The coding scheme comprised four main-level dimensions with multiple sub-level codes capturing specific adaptive strategies; frequencies and percentages were calculated based on all coded instances ($n = 484$). In overall distribution, psychological Flexibility was most frequent overall (159, 32.85%), followed by Tourism Action Adjustment (124, 25.83%) and Tourism Practice Competence (112, 24.17%), while Locality Awareness was least prominent (89, 18.39%). In stage patterns, Pre-travel adaptation was dominated by Tourism Practice Competence (87, 18.80%), indicating preparation-oriented efforts (e.g., information acquisition and resource mobilization). In-travel adaptation centered on Tourism Action Adjustment (88, 18.39%) and Psychological Flexibility (81, 16.74%), reflecting real-time itinerary changes, problem solving, and emotion regulation. Post-travel adaptation was mainly characterized by Psychological Flexibility (47, 9.71%), suggesting a stronger focus on emotional recovery and meaning-making.

Table 1. Distribution of Tourist Adaptation Dimensions Across Travel Stages

	Psychological Flexibility	Locality Awareness	Tourism Practice Competence	Tourism Action Adjustment	Total
Pre-travel	31 (6.40%)	17 (3.51%)	87 (18.80%)	18 (3.72%)	153 (31.61%)
In-travel	81 (16.74%)	61 (12.60%)	16 (3.51%)	88 (18.39%)	246 (50.83%)
Post-travel	47 (9.71%)	11 (2.27%)	9 (1.86%)	18 (3.72%)	85 (17.56%)
Total	159 (32.85%)	89 (18.39%)	112 (24.17%)	124 (25.83%)	484 (100%)

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Adopting a travel process perspective, this study conceptualizes tourist adaptability as a four-dimensional construct—Psychological Flexibility, Locality Awareness, Tourism Practice Competence, and Tourism Action Adjustment—and demonstrates that its manifestations vary across the pre-travel, in-travel, and post-travel stages. Based on 484 coded instances, the findings show that adaptability is most salient during the in-travel stage, when tourists actively respond to unfolding uncertainties through real-time problem solving, itinerary modification, and emotion regulation. Pre-travel adaptation is primarily preparation-oriented, emphasizing information gathering and resource mobilization, whereas post-travel adaptation focuses more on emotional recovery and reflective meaning-making. By identifying stage-specific patterns, this study extends prior research on resilience and cross-cultural adaptation and provides process-based indicators for future scale development.

In practical terms, tourism stakeholders may design stage-sensitive support strategies. Enhancing flexible and transparent information during the pre-travel stage can strengthen tourists' preparation competence, while real-time guidance and responsive services during the in-travel stage can facilitate effective action adjustment. In addition, encouraging reflective engagement after travel may help consolidate positive experiences. Overall, placing greater emphasis on preparing tourists for uncertainty

and supporting adaptive responses throughout the travel process can contribute to more stable and satisfying travel outcomes in an increasingly uncertain environment.

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