Hedonic and Eudaimonic Experiences among Wellness Tourists: An exploratory enquiry

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Abstract
This paper contends that recent developments in the field of positive psychology, particularly in the area of psychological well-being, in combination with Stebbins’s framework of casual versus serious leisure, may provide a new perspective for the understanding of tourism experiences. Based on the experience accounts of three different groups of wellness tourists (i.e., visitors to beauty spas, lifestyle resorts, and spiritual retreats), the aim of this paper is to explore whether tourism experiences can be classified into hedonic or eudaimonic experiences. Aggregated experience accounts were collected through individual, semi-structured interviews with 27 wellness tourists. Thematic analysis deductively applied Stebbins’s characteristics of casual/hedonic and serious/eudaimonic experiences to the data. The results found that the three wellness tourism experiences can be placed along a continuum between hedonic and eudaimonic end-points. Accordingly, beauty spa visitation was perceived as a purely hedonic tourism activity and spiritual retreat experiences were considered as almost purely eudaimonic. Lifestyle resort experiences were also seen predominantly as eudaimonic, however they sit more towards the middle of the continuum because hedonic outcomes can sometimes be recognised as important ‘by-products’ of eudaimonic experiences.

KEY WORDS: positive psychology, psychological well-being, hedonic well-being, eudaimonic well-being, wellness tourism, casual leisure, serious leisure

INTRODUCTION
There is a widely held belief that being on holiday enhances tourists’ well-being and contributes to their psychological health. Leisure, of which tourism is a subset, is regarded as one of the most ‘free’ contexts in people’s lives because people are generally able to determine what they would like to do and as a result can choose activities they find inherently interesting, enjoyable, and satisfying (Caldwell, 2005). In this sense, a vacation has the potential to lift one’s mood, or to provide a time of pleasure, fun, and relaxation. A vacation may also lead to personal growth, self-development, dramatic life changes, or the discovery of one’s ‘true self’. Surprisingly, however, academic research exploring the links between tourism and well-being has generally focused on tourism’s negative impacts on physical well-being, rather than on its potential positive relationship with psychological well-being (Hunter-Jones, 2003; Sönmez & Apostolopoulos, 2009).

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The field of ‘travel medicine’ has produced a plethora of articles and handbooks in which infections and non-infectious health hazards associated with travel (e.g., sunburn, jetlag, motion sickness, the spread of bird flu and SARS) are discussed (e.g., DeHart, 2003; McKendrick, 2003; Peattie, Clarke, & Peattie, 2005; Shickle, Evans, & Morgan, 2001; Wilks, Pendergast, & Leggat, 2006; Wilson, 1995), but there has been little evidence of an interest in more positive outcomes associated with tourism, and a lack of empirical research examining the relationship between tourism and well-being (Gilbert & Abdullah, 2002).

One exception is the small body of literature about the field of ‘wellness tourism’ which can be defined as the sum of all the relationships resulting from a journey by people whose primary motive is to maintain or promote their health and well-being and who stay at least one night at a facility that is specifically designed to enable and enhance people’s physical, psychological, spiritual, and/or social well-being (Voigt, 2008). Researchers have argued that wellness tourism deliberately contributes to tourists’ well-being (c.f. Smith & Kelly, 2006a; Smith & Puczkó, 2008), however there is little empirical evidence supporting this claim. Wellness tourism is an under-researched area of study (Bennet, King, & Milner, 2004; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006), although it has recently attracted a number of book publications devoted to this theme (Bushell & Sheldon, 2009; Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009; Smith & Puczkó, 2008).

Developments in the field of ‘positive psychology’ are consistent with the growing interest in wellness tourism. In 2000 Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi edited a special issue of the journal American Psychologist and started the positive psychology movement by recognising an imbalance in psychology where most research was focused on mental illnesses or negative human traits. Rather than examining the factors that caused psychological disorders, individual suffering, or asocial behaviours, positive psychologists strive to understand what makes life worth living and what fosters human well-being. Recently Pearce (2009) argued that tourism researchers and positive psychologists would benefit substantially by connecting their knowledge and ideas. Similarly Carruthers and Hood (2004) suggested that positive psychology is a unifying framework of major importance for the leisure discipline, particularly the field of therapeutic recreation. Within this framework the authors specifically referred to the concepts of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, which are also the two major concepts discussed in this study.

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