

Tour guide playfulness climate and tourists' well-being

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INTRODUCTION

Tour guide playfulness is a vital professional trait defined by a guide's ability to integrate humor, enthusiasm, sociability, and creativity into their leadership role to evoke travel interest and joy among tour members (Cheng & Lien, 2024). By using engaging explanations, rich body language, and a cheerful demeanor, playful tour conductors act like stage performers, transforming standard itineraries into highly engaging, interactive experiences. This playful approach is essential for breaking the ice, fostering harmonious interpersonal interactions, and building strong emotional bonds between the guide and the tourists (Cheng et al., 2024). However, little research has focused on how playfulness influences tourists' experiences. While playfulness has been extensively studied in educational and traditional workplace settings, its specific impact on tourism outcomes, such as generating tourist delight, enhancing interaction quality, and fostering destination loyalty, has been overlooked in group package tour studies.

When individual playfulness permeates the entire travel group, it cultivates a Group Package Tour Playfulness Climate (GPT-PC) (Cheng et al., 2024), a shared perception of a playful, cohesive, and enjoyable state among all tour members. Within this playful climate, tourists actively engage in information sharing, participate in group games, and support one another, ultimately leading to a "perception of consonance" where the group builds shared memories and a unique common language. Establishing this positive, harmonious climate serves as a vital social lubricant, ensuring the tour's smooth operation and significantly elevating tourists' overall perceived value and positive emotional experiences.

The concept of a playful climate and its direct influence on tourist experiences remains largely unexplored in tourism literature. Previous research has overwhelmingly emphasized individual playfulness traits, such as a tour conductor's work attitude or a single tourist's internal sense of playfulness during an activity (Kuo et al., 2016). While these studies provide valuable insight into individual behaviors, they fail to capture the collective group dynamics and shared perceptions that are unique to group package tours. Consequently, tour group climates have rarely been investigated from the perspective of a shared playfulness climate. The extent to which a playful group climate practically affects the psychological and behavioral outcomes of tour members, and ultimately shapes their overall tourist experience, is a critical area warranting further academic exploration.

Tourist well-being has been studied through the lens of hedonic well-being, which emphasizes immediate sensory pleasure, happiness, relaxation, and the avoidance of negative emotions (Huang et al., 2023). However, current perspectives recognize that well-being in tourism is a multidimensional construct that fundamentally relies on eudaimonia, a meaning-related aspect focused on self-actualization, personal growth, and human flourishing (Su et al., 2020). While hedonic well-being is often derived from passive enjoyment, comfort, and restorative activities, eudaimonic well-being is typically achieved through more effortful, physically or cognitively engaging experiences, such as challenging adventure tourism, volunteer work, or deep cultural immersion (Filep et al., 2022). Despite their differences, these two dimensions are interconnected and mutually reinforcing; for example, achieving eudaimonia often results in secondary hedonic pleasure, and experiencing both creates the highest level of optimal functioning and overall well-being.

The study examines how these playful experiences influence tourist well-being through two interconnected lenses: hedonic and eudaimonic. While hedonic well-being focuses on immediate sensory pleasure, relaxation, and happiness, eudaimonic well-being is rooted in self-actualization, personal growth, and human flourishing. Hence, the study posits that experiencing both dimensions in

a playful climate may result in the highest level of optimal functioning and well-being for the tourist. Please see Figure 1 for the conceptual framework.

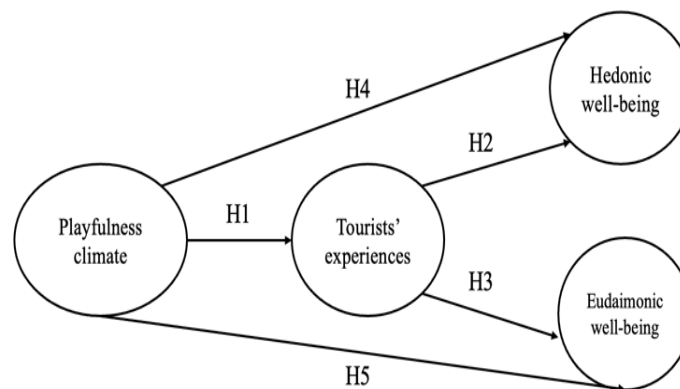


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework.

METHOD

Study site

This study was conducted at Fushan Botanical Garden, which is located in Yuanshan Township, Yilan County, Taiwan. Fushan Botanical Garden is an ideal setting for this study, as tour groups are the primary form of visitation. The tour guides are also the drivers for the group tour. Hence, the tour group is an ideal option to observe how a tour guide's ability to integrate humor and creativity transforms a standard itinerary into an interactive experience.

Data collection

To collect data from tourists, data collection was conducted on-site at the botanical garden. Participants were selected from group package tours to ensure the sample reflected those who experienced the effects of a guide's playful leadership. The study ensures that the reported emotional bonds and perceptions of consonance are based on immediate, lived experiences.

Measurement

The questionnaires used in this study contain five parts to evaluate the proposed model. These include scales for the tour guide playfulness climate (4 dimensions, 23 items), which measure the shared perception of a cohesive, enjoyable state. Tourists' experiences (20 items) focus on social interaction and information sharing. Furthermore, the instrument measures two distinct dimensions of well-being: hedonic well-being (sensory pleasure and relaxation, 5 items) and eudaimonic well-being (personal growth and self-actualization, 6 items). The final section collects respondents' profiles to account for demographic variations in the sample.

Data analysis

To examine the relationships between the playfulness climate, tourist experience, and well-being, this study utilizes Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). SEM is well-suited to this research, as it allows testing hypotheses and measuring latent constructs. This analysis will determine how the playfulness climate influences experiences and how these experiences, in turn, influence both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being.

FINDINGS

The main findings show that the tour guide's playfulness climate positively influences tourists' experiences. Tourists' experiences positively influence their hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. Please see Figure 2 for the resultant model.

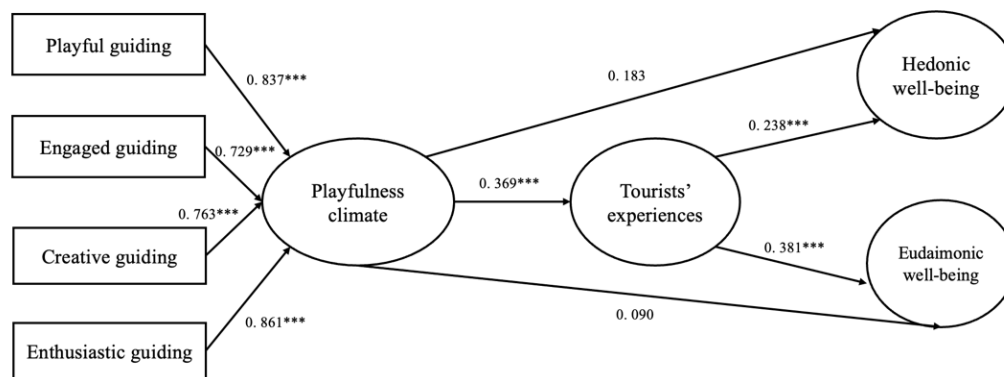


Figure 2. Resultant Model.

IMPLICATIONS

Tour operators should prioritize recruitment and training programs that emphasize "stage performance" and sociability, as enthusiastic, playful guiding is the strongest driver of a positive group climate. Since the playful climate acts as a vital social lubricant, managers should design itineraries for sites like Fushan Botanical Garden that include intentional icebreakers to foster a "perception of consonance" among strangers. Because the tourist experience serves as a critical mediator for eudaimonic well-being, management must move beyond passive sightseeing toward collaborative activities that promote personal flourishing. Therefore, by cultivating this shared playful atmosphere, companies can differentiate their services by offering travelers transformative emotional experiences rather than just standard travel itineraries.

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