

IS TRAVEL HEALING? EVIDENCE FROM A LONGITUDINAL STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

Travel and tourism are commonly understood as a means for resting and recovering from the stresses and demands of everyday life (Chen et al., 2014). Compared with home and daily routines, tourism is an occasion for stress reduction, fantasy, happiness, and escapism (Light, 2010). Many tourists choose to take a vacation to improve their mental health and enhance their psychological well-being. It is not surprising that existing literature has found a positive relationship between tourism and well-being, with higher levels of happiness being recorded for people who engage in tourist activities (Bimonte & Faralla, 2012; Buckley, 2020; Carneiro & Eusébio, 2019; McCabe & Johnson, 2013).

Unfortunately, these views of traditional tourism experiences leading to healthier lives might be changing outdated with new evidence revealing that the reality of today's vacation environment does not always lead to positive effects. Combining the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic, inconsistent and unpredictable changes in quarantine measures, different reasons for travel disruptions, stresses at airports, worker shortages, long queues at theme parks and hotels, and overindulgence in food, leaves tourists needing another vacation after their vacation. As tourism becomes more popular, people may struggle to fund their vacation wishes as well as the post-vacation bills and these also induce stress and anxiety. While some researchers have argued vacations contribute positively to tourists' overall well-being and quality of life, there is an opposing argument linking tourism to decreased levels of well-being. de Bloom et al. (2010) found that pre, during, and post travel activities may lead to increase in mental stress. Tourists can be fearful of

unfamiliar places, and often worry about the outcome of future encounters at the destination (Wolff et al., 2019). When investigating of people with major depressive disorders, Levi et al. (2019) found that tourism did not significantly help reduce depressive symptom severity. Zhu et al. (2020) asserted that vacation is a double-edged sword, rather than a simple linear relationship either potentially promoting stresses and tensions or negating them. They found that tourists often encountered four types of stresses (i.e. service-provider related stress, traveler-related stress, travel-partner-related stress, and environment-related stress) at the destination, and claimed that vacations do not always foster happiness. Along the same lines, Christou and Simillidou (2020) argued that "tourism does not act as a panacea to melancholy" (p. 219). Even though tourism constitutes an opportunity to heal tourists' psychological states, the effects are very short-lived (Nawijn et al., 2013). These divergent viewpoints make it unclear whether tourism does in fact improve one's overall well-being and mental health. Therefore, there are still some gaps in the matrix of links between tourism and mental health.

Depression and happiness have long been recognized as key aspects in mental health studies. These two emotions differ in almost every respect. Those who are satisfied with their current state typically feel happy; those who are feeling sad, irritable, empty, or who have lost pleasure or interest in activities are depressed (World Health Organization, 2021). Given such sharp contrasts between happiness and depression, psychologists typically conceptualize the two emotions as polar opposites (Russell & Barrett, 1999; Schütz et al., 2013). While happiness has been studied extensively by tourism scholars and numerous textbooks and papers have been written on the topic over the past

few years (Buckley, 2020; Chen & Li, 2018; Huang et al., 2021), depression has received little attention within the tourism literature and few attempts have been made to clarify its role in relation to tourism (Christou & Simillidou, 2020; Levi et al., 2019). However, most past tourism research has simply focused on one side of either happiness or depression at a single point in time rather than seeking to access a change from state of depression through to state of happiness or vice versa. A vast amount of tourists' well-being and emotions are still unexplored, and depression and happiness are not examined together in a single study, which impairs the understanding and robustness of positive psychology in relation to tourism. Inspired by this, the current study considers it worthwhile to integrate these two different but related concepts into a single study.

To fill the gap of previous studies, two research questions need to be addressed. Does tourism make tourists significantly happier and improve their well-being? Does the well-being of tourists change over time as a result of vacations? Along with these two questions, the main purpose of this study is to explore the longitudinal effects of happiness-depression on tourists' well-being in tourism and hospitality contexts. More concisely, this study aims to survey Hong Kong tourists before and after they travelled abroad to determine whether there were any changes in tourists' well-being comparing before and after the vacation.

METHOD

This study adopts a longitudinal study design which will cover a time span of seven days before and after the vacation. Data collection will be undertaken between February and June 2023. Before the cycle of data collection starts, an invitation with an overview of the research and questions regarding the trip profile will be sent to Hong Kong tourists who have brought at least one outbound tourism product for the next six months via various online travel communities, such as Facebook groups and online forums. Respondents who agree to participate in the study will receive a questionnaire concerning their emotions seven days before departure for their vacation. The second questionnaire will be sent to participants seven days

after the completion of vacation. Both questionnaires for measuring tourists' emotions will adopt the Depression-Happiness Scale (DHS) (Joseph & Lewis, 1998). Therefore, the response of pre- and post- vacation will be compared for all participants. The DHS is chosen based on the following reasons. First, the current measurement scales fail to simultaneously evaluate both happiness and depression on an emotional valence continuum. Using the DHS, more information on the changes can be found along the depression–happiness continuum. Second, the DHS is an accepted scale for measuring well-being because it includes both hedonic and eudaimonic elements (Stănculescu, 2022). Third, the scale is made up of 25 items: 12 items are related to positive feelings and emotions while the remaining items ask about negative feelings and emotions. The DHS allows researchers to overcome the drawbacks of many of the previous well-being scales which were constrained by the ceiling and floor effects (Joseph et al., 2004). Following Joseph and Lewis (1998), each item will be measured on 4-point scale, where 0 = “never”, 1 = “rarely”, 2 = “sometimes”, and 3 = “often”.

IMPLICATIONS

The implications of the current study can be understood in four aspects. Firstly, the present study acts upon calls for further research to appreciate the nexus of tourism and positive psychology by combining measures of depression and happiness in a single study. Second, all of the studies reviewed here indicate that the relationship between tourism and tourists' psychological well-being has remained unclear. Despite evidence indicating that tourists feel happier after a vacation, there are many cases where vacation leads to unhappiness and stresses, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic. This study is expected to deliver further insights into what travel and tourism might offer. Drawing upon the longitudinal approach, rather than a cross-sectional study, it delivers a fresh perspective to understand whether changes in tourists' well-being are caused before and after vacations. With the adoption of the depression-happiness scale, the current research is able to conceptualise depression and happiness in tourism scholarship. Finally, with the COVID-19 pandemic coming to an

end, planning a vacation will become easier and many trips that had previously been delayed for pandemic-related reasons will finally be able to take place. However, little is known about how tourists perceive the psychological well-being associated with tourism in the post-pandemic era. Therefore, the present study should be of value to practitioners wishing to respond to tourists' psychological well-being by improving their services and modifying facilities.

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