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Tourism development and happiness: A residents' perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the empirical relationship between tourism development and happiness from the perspective of locals in a small island destination. The study provides insights into how residents assess their own happiness and how those assessments depart from traditional well-being indicators by examining the mediating relationships among both income and non-income factors, i.e. quality of life and comparisons of life situations. The results reveal that tourism development and happiness are positively correlated but the association between these variables is slim and not exclusive. Furthermore, the structural equation model reveals that the large impact of non-income factors, such as social comparisons, matters to happiness.

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1. Introduction

This study investigates the relationship between tourism development and happiness from the perspective of residents. Happiness is an important aspect of life and happy people are more likely to adopt activities and behaviors that benefit societies (Diener, 2000). Happiness reveals an individual's assessment of overall life aspects and conditions, and how much an individual likes the life they live (Veenhoven, 2005; Diener & Seligman, 2004). Central to the concept of happiness is the subjective evaluation of one's life, or satisfaction with life, thereby referring to a more deep-seated emotional satisfaction with life (a sense of contentment). This mental state is revealed through feelings and emotions as well as judgment (Diener, Scollon, & Lucas, 2009). An individual may feel fine but may have failed in achieving their aspirations, or may have met their aspirations but feels miserable. Which dimension has the upper hand is an empirical question and hinges upon conditions for happiness (Layard, 2005). As such, happiness may be impacted by a number of personal, demographic and contextual factors, such as physical, social, economic and political environments.

Past tourism studies have mainly focused on the concept of happiness as a component of subjective well-being. Subjective well-being has been premised on the standard assumption in consumer theory that people's experience is independently defined without

regard to the context of other people's presence and interaction (Andereck & Nyaupane, 2011; Andereck, Valentine, Knopf, & Vogt, 2005; Croes, 2012; Dyer, Gursoy, Sharma, & Carter, 2007; Gursoy, Jurowski, & Uysal, 2002; Kim, Uysal & Sirgy, 2013; McGehee & Andereck, 2004; Nawijn & Mitas, 2012; Wang & Pfister, 2008). However, the perception of an individual's life experience is also related to the situation of others (Frank, 2007; Kahneman & Deaton, 2010; Sen, 1999). The role of social interaction is nevertheless largely ignored in tourism studies assessing subjective well-being as defined by happiness (Van Rekom & Go, 2006). This study contributes to the ongoing research on subjective well-being by broadening the information base of happiness and includes social comparison as an important condition for happiness.

This study claims that conditions at a destination caused by tourism development (i.e. the economy, the environment, and cultural identity) may be incompletely correlated with human perception. Intervening variables may influence the relationship between tourism development and the conditions of the destination, and human perception. Intervening elements result from differing human aspirations, expectations, and capabilities (Diener, 1984; Sen, 1999), as well as social comparison (Graham & Lora, 2010), and/or adaptation. Therefore, the study considers the potential influence of life situations, the role of income and quality of life as mediators between tourism development and subjective happiness.

The study addresses four questions that have received little attention in the literature. The first research question aims at determining whether tourism development impacts the subjective happiness of residents. The next question relates to whether objective measures of

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well-being mediate the impact of tourism development on the subjective happiness of residents. The study then investigates whether quality of life mediates the subjective happiness of residents. Lastly, the study models whether comparison of life situations mediates the impact of tourism on the subjective happiness of residents. In the next section we review the literature and state the research hypotheses to test the proposed research questions.

2. Conceptual background and hypotheses development

2.1. The evolving concept of well-being

The evolving meaning of well-being can be found in mainstream tourism literature, developing in two phases. The first defined the unit of analysis as the community, and studies have focused on the impacts of tourism on well-being from the perspective of host communities. For example, [Andereck et al. \(2005\)](#), [Dyer et al. \(2007\)](#), [Gursoy et al. \(2002\)](#), [McGehee and Andereck \(2004\)](#), [Wang and Pfister \(2008\)](#) examined the perceptions of individuals regarding the impact of tourism on a community.

The second phase shifted toward a new unit of analysis: the impact of tourism on individuals, whether tourists or residents. Self-assessment of feelings regarding life domains and sub-domains, such as education, environment, economics, recreation opportunities, health access, social inclusion, and cultural identity became the basic dependent variables ([Andereck & Nyaupane, 2011](#); [Corvo, 2011](#); [de Bloom, Geurts, & Kompier, 2012](#); [Gilbert & Abdullah, 2004](#); [Michalko, Ratz, & Bakucz, 2010](#); [Nawijn & Mitas, 2012](#); [Steyn, Saayman, & Nienaber, 2004](#); [UysalPerdue, & Sirgy, 2012](#)). However, most of these studies focused only on tourists. Very little attention was given to the life experience of the local resident ([Benckendorff et al. 2009](#); [Kerstetter & Bricker, 2012](#); [Kim et al., 2013](#); [Van Rekom & Go, 2006](#)). Moreover, while most of these studies claimed to focus their study on the impact of tourism on the well-being of the individual, they still worked at the level of the host community instead of the individual. In other words, the unit of analysis of their investigation was restricted ([Diedrich & García-Buades, 2009](#); [Uysal et al., 2012](#); [Yang & Li, 2012](#)).

[Andereck and Nyaupane \(2011\)](#), [Nawijn and Mitas \(2012\)](#) and [Kim et al. \(2013\)](#) argue that it is more relevant to investigate how an individual internalizes the impacts of tourism and how this impact shapes his or her life. [Andereck and Nyaupane \(2011\)](#) investigated the self-reported assessment of well-being of Arizona residents. They found that the perceived personal benefit derived from tourism mediated the effect of the economic aspects of quality of life, contact with tourists, and employment in tourism on the perceptions of the role of tourism in the local economy. [Nawijn and Mitas \(2012\)](#) investigated the impact of tourism on the subjective well-being of the residents of Palma de Mallorca by considering affective and cognitive dimensions. Their findings showed that tourism impacted only upon the cognitive component of well-being for the host, rather than the affective component. [Kim et al. \(2013\)](#) examined how tourism impacted upon several domains of life satisfaction of residents in Virginia (USA) and found that various tourism dimensions influence residents' overall life satisfaction.

These three studies considered the subjective perspective of a person's well-being through the lens of life satisfaction and the evaluation of one's own past in isolation from others. Our study departs from these underlying premises, taking issue with how previous studies conceive of life satisfaction. While the concept of life satisfaction may denote an expectation someone that is met, the concept would not necessarily include a fulfilling or a meaningful life as defined by Aristotle's notion of *eudemonia*. In other words, subjective happiness is not only about a cognitive judgment about one's life, but it also captures the fit between human

nature and its contextual environments that may affect a fulfilling and meaningful life ([Sen, 1999](#)). [Lyubomirsky and Lepper \(1999\)](#) consider happiness to be one of the most salient and important human dispositions, and therefore an essential aspect of quality of life. The concept of happiness is thus regarded as an end to human activities as expressed in the American declaration of independence. Another concern with previous studies is that they neglected how a person ranks him or herself with regard to peers within a contextual condition of the society. These studies imply that the link between well-being and tourism development is not contextual but depends on the individual's perception of fulfillment of life in accordance to his/her absolute needs and experience. Happiness is also an outcome of comparison to others. Happiness stems from the interaction of two aspects of a person's life: the degree of fit between an individual's perception of the objective situation and fulfillment of needs from the assessment of one's own situation and rank within a group of peers ([Clark, Frijters, & Shields, 2008](#); [Layard, 2005](#)).

The changing meaning of happiness is also associated with a required informational space in capturing human behavior and corresponding outcomes of happiness. Sources of happiness have accordingly evolved from materialistic conceptions (money buys happiness) to satisfaction of desire to the fulfillment of one's capacities to do what one appreciates in life (Aristotle's *eudaimonia*). Although materialistic conceptions of happiness are held in popular culture, this conception is limited because income levels as outcomes of human behavior are inadequate measures of happiness ([Sen, 1999](#); [Stiglitz, 2010](#)). [Sen \(1999\)](#) argues that people habituate to wealth or deprivation, making them vulnerable to negative effects of material desires and possession. Consequently, new approaches, such as Sen's capability approach, broaden the informational base of happiness by including not only outcomes but also human agency and an individual's substantive opportunities ([Sen, 1999](#)). However, objective information about human behaviors may not coincide with individuals' own assessment of their situation. Therefore, subjective well-being posits that the best way to understand the relationship between happiness and income is by asking the individuals directly to evaluate their own situation ([Diener & Seligman, 2004](#)), which justifies self-assessment measurement of happiness in comparison to others within a society.

2.2. Tourism development

Tourism builds resources through investment and capital formation and may affect the allocation of resources and their use (thus linking to sustainability issues). Tourism may impact human capital (education, health, and quality of jobs), and shape social capital through social arrangements impacting distribution of costs and benefits, and social ranking. Framed from this perspective, tourism as a multiform concept has as its ultimate purpose the well-being of residents of a destination. Tourism development may have both positive and negative impacts on residents, such as tourism development generating economic benefits, which will consequently improve resident quality of life. However, tourism development may trigger a variety of economic, social-culture, and environmental effects on a destination. Although it is hoped that the myriad effects will be positive and enhance residents' lives, that is not always the case. For example, tourism development brings new facilities and leisure amenities and opportunities for residents to enjoy.

On the other hand, tourism can deteriorate the traditional local culture of host countries ([Ahmed & Krohn, 1993](#)) and increase traffic congestion ([Backman & Backman, 1997](#)). From an environmental impact standpoint, several studies have noted that residents believe that tourism improves the appearance of their community ([Perdue, Long, & Allen, 1987](#)) but also increases pollution ([Ahmed & Krohn, 1993](#)). Therefore, tourism development

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