



## Mindful tourist experiences: A Buddhist perspective



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### ABSTRACT

This paper distinguishes between the concepts of socio-cognitive mindfulness applied in a number of tourism studies and meditative mindfulness derived from a Buddhist philosophy. An operational definition of meditative mindful tourist experiences is proposed based on forty-three semi-structured interviews involving 77 episodes of meditative mindful experiences. The paper also proposes a framework of meditative mindfulness in tourism. The framework identifies a number of antecedents to meditative mindful experience episodes and reveals several psychological and physical benefits including mental ease and response flexibility. This is the first paper to examine meditative mindful tourist experiences in tourism contexts and to explore their antecedents and consequences.

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### Introduction

The concept of mindfulness denotes a mental state that facilitates learning and where the experience tends to be positive (Langer, 2000). Moscardo (1996) used Langer's theories (Langer, 1992) in the design of interpretative material and a number of tourism authors have built on her work (Murphy, Benckendorff, Moscardo, & Pearce, 2011; Van Winkle & Backman, 2009). Langer's theories are based on socio-cognitive mindfulness (SCM) from social psychology (Pirson, Langer, Bodner, & Zilcha, 2012). A separate literature from clinical psychology and interdisciplinary studies (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Weick & Putnam, 2006), only recently applied in tourism research (Pearce, 2016) adopts a Buddhist philosophical perspective (Chen, Scott, & Benckendorff, 2014).

This study uses the Buddhist interpretation of 'meditative mindfulness' (MM) as the theoretical foundation for understanding how certain kinds of tourism experiences can result in psychological benefits such as cultivating improved mental health and wellbeing (Kabat-Zinn, 1991, 2002; Siegel, 2009; Wallace & Shapiro, 2006). In therapeutic settings, MM training assists individuals in becoming aware of their present moment experience (Bishop et al., 2004) resulting in positive psychological outcomes (Siegel, 2009; Wallace & Shapiro, 2006). MM is derived from Buddhist philosophy and practices, in particular meditation (Hanh, 1976). While clinical psychologists use formal MM training for stress reduction (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, MBSR) and cognitive therapy (Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, MBCT) (Kabat-Zinn, 2003), MM has received limited research attention in informal settings such as tourism, despite reports of meditative-like states and therapeutic benefits as a result of visiting natural settings (Chen, Scott, & Benckendorff, 2015).

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Informal MM episodes can play an important role in many everyday situations. For example, Gehart (2012) suggests that daily activities such as stopping to smell a flower, feeling the breeze, listening to sounds outside, taking a sip of water, or touching a fabric can be introduced as a form of therapy for time-stressed individuals who have no time for more formal practices. These simple activities involve being fully present and mindfully aware of daily experiences and induce an immediate sense of calm and a more focused mind (Gehart, 2012). Carruthers and Hood (2011) propose that leisure can serve as an optimal context for contemplative or informal MM practices; however, few studies have explored the antecedents of informal MM practices within a tourism context (Lea, 2008).

SCM and MM reflect different theoretical frameworks (Mikulas, 2011). SCM is based on a dual information-processing model which contrasts opposing mental states of mindfulness or mindlessness (Langer, 1992). While SCM focuses on how to learn to switch cognition modes to active thinking, MM focuses on non-judgmental awareness (Weick & Putnam, 2006). MM training avoids associative thinking, allowing an individual to be aware of their inner experiences, thoughts and emotions (Kabat-Zinn, 2002; Weick & Putnam, 2006). Both concepts are related to awareness and attention; however, they differ in the process of engagement in the present moment experience they describe. MM offers insight into the inner experiences and psychological changes of a visitor who is profoundly engaged with their surroundings.

Tourism offers the opportunity to study MM outside formal therapeutic settings. Travel is sometimes described as a liminal experience that allows individuals to escape from the structure and stress of their ordinary, everyday lives, and can result in restoration and wellbeing (Gehart, 1989). Unstructured natural settings provide meaningful and engaging experiences (Van Matre, 1990) that direct attention away from the self, and towards nature (Shiota, Keltner, & Mossman, 2007). Howell, Dopko, Passmore, and Buro (2011) suggests that the experience of 'nature connectedness' is implicitly associated with mindfulness. Similarly, sensory stimuli (taste of local food or the smell of fresh air) can attract one's attention, thereby facilitating positive engaging experiences (Agapito, Valle, & Mendes, 2014). While it has been established that predesigned communicative cues may trigger SCM, empirical research examining the concept of MM and its therapeutic benefits in informal tourism contexts is limited.

This paper explores how and why informal tourism activities, settings, or other contributing factors facilitate MM experiences known to produce therapeutic benefits. The study identifies and explores the antecedents, episodes and consequences of MM to answer three questions: (1) Do MM episodes occur during tourist experiences? (2) What are the antecedents of MM episodes? (3) What are the experiential benefits of MM episodes? In doing so, the discussion differentiates MM from SCM and proposes a definition and conceptual framework of MM experiences.

## Literature review

This section discusses the concepts of 'meditative mindfulness' and 'socio-cognitive mindfulness'. While there are some similarities between these two concepts, they are associated with different types of positive experiences and involve subtly distinct types of awareness associated with separate mental processing modes (Teasdale, 1999).

### *Engagement in present moment experiences*

The definition of experience has received attention from a number of different disciplines. In psychology, experience is a characteristic of consciousness that is ever-present in human life. Chalmers (1996) identifies experience as a process of exploring consciousness and how this consciousness interacts with the world. That is, experience is perceiving a phenomenon (e.g., object, thought, and emotion) and being consciously aware of it. This continuous and fluid process involves psychological and neurological phenomena and creates an active interaction between oneself and attention to bodily senses and perception (Morse, 2014), leading to remembering, reflecting and having memories (Curtin, 2006). In the tourism and leisure fields, experiences are 'mental, spiritual and physiological outcomes resulting from on-site recreation engagements' (Schänzel & McIntosh, 2000, p. 37). In leisure studies, an experience is seen as "the desired psychological result which motivates a person to participate in a recreational engagement" (Stein & Lee, 1995, p. 53). However, these definitions of tourism experiences are based on a SCM perspective rather than a MM perspective.

### *Buddhist perspectives of meditative mindfulness*

Mindfulness has a long history in Buddhist spiritual traditions (Hanh, 1976) and healing philosophy (Kabat-Zinn, 2002). The oldest written reference to mindfulness can be traced to the Buddhist term *sati* which translates as 'awareness' or 'discernment' (Bodhi, 2011), and is described as "being aware of awareness" (Reid, 2011) or "an awareness of being aware" (Hirst, 2003). Buddhist mindfulness is popular as a means of cultivating positive mental health through formal practices such as meditation, yoga, breathing exercises, body scanning and mindful walks (Levine, 2011). Formal mindfulness practice or meditative training helps people find happiness and fulfilment in everyday activities, as well as realise spiritual freedom and enlightenment in life (Kang & Whittingham, 2010).

Kabat-Zinn (2003, p. 145) defines MM as "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience, moment to moment", thus highlighting three important attributes. The first is paying attention to the present-moment, where practitioners attend to somatic (sensations—sight,

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