



Leisure travel outcomes and life satisfaction: An integrative look



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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study is to investigate the integral relationships among leisure travel outcomes, life satisfaction domains, and overall life satisfaction. Based on qualitative and quantitative analyses of young Chinese leisure travel outcomes, this study grounded its conceptual framework in the theory of social production function as providing heuristics. Young Chinese overall life satisfaction was found to be enhanced through three universal goals – physical satisfaction improved by leisure-travel-based comfort, novelty and escape stimulations, social satisfaction boosted by improved social recognition and affection through travel, and satisfaction in career development which proved to be the people's unique universal goal resulting from travel. Theoretical contributions and practical implications are discussed, providing suggestions to researchers, policymakers and tourism product developers.

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Introduction

Life satisfaction is considered to be important and has emerged as a new outcome paradigm, advocated by policymakers in many countries, especially the developed and newly industrialized countries. As people become more and more aware of the importance of well-being and quality of life, academic research about people's quality of life and life satisfaction has been growing rapidly.

In the context of tourism, previous research on tourist experience used to focus mainly on understanding visit motivations and satisfactions with travel outcomes (Crompton, 1979). It was only recently that tourism research has begun investigating the links between satisfactory outcomes and life satisfaction (e.g., Neal, Sirgy, & Uysal, 1999; Neal, Sirgy, & Uysal, 2004). Tourism research on life satisfaction has been mainly guided by goal theory (e.g., Neal, Uysal, & Sirgy 2007; Sirgy, 2010; Sirgy, Kruger, Lee, & Yu, 2011), based on the notion that tourists can experience a higher level of subjective well-being if they select leisure travel goals that have a high level of positive valence and expectancy, that tourists engage in certain actions to implement these goals and they engage in actions to experience goal attainment (Sirgy et al., 2011).

A review of the literature reveals several notions about tourism research on life satisfaction:

Firstly, more recent research as such has focused on specific market segments or people of different classes (e.g., social tourists). Neal et al. (1999) are among the forerunners to examine the effects of leisure travel as a life event on university employees' life satisfaction in the United States, whose research indicates that life satisfaction can be directly influenced by trip satisfaction. More recently, McCabe and Johnson (2013) measured changes in well-being among British social tourists who were unemployed and received financial support to access a holiday break; Pagan (2015) compared the impact of holiday trips on life satisfaction between disabled and nondisabled people in Germany, showing that taking part in holiday trips could increase the level of satisfaction for both nondisabled and disabled travelers. Other research has also focused on elderly

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tourists' life satisfaction (e.g., Milman, 1998). Given that each group's or social class needs and goals are unique and different from the other classes, it is argued that a study with a focus on a specific social group rather than a general population would be more informative and meaningful in terms of managerial implications for policy makers, tour organizers and travel destinations.

Secondly, vacations are extremely important and meaningful to people who work full time. Unlike the elderly or retired, full-time employees are often unable to recover sufficiently during short respites from work due to increasingly weak boundaries between work and home domains, long working hours, working overtime and prolonged physiological activation as a result of pre-occupation with work (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2005). Therefore, a long getaway may be needed for employees to recover from work. Vacations represent the longest period of temporary absence from work and may constitute a more powerful respite opportunity than a short break for employees (de Bloom, Geurts, & Kompier, 2013).

In addition, previous research on employees' well-being in tourism has typically involved studies with Western cohorts of respondents (e.g., de Bloom et al., 2010; de Bloom et al., 2013; Fritz & Sonnentag, 2005; Sonnentag, 2001; Westman, 2004) with typical individualistic culture. For example, the study of de Bloom et al. (2013) involved the workers in the Netherlands whose vacations are longer than 14 days, which investigated how health and well-being developed during and after a long summer vacation. In contrast, few studies have focused on employees' life satisfaction in the context of a collectivistic culture like China (Chen, Lehto, & Cai, 2013). Chen et al. investigated the effect of vacation on Chinese employees, subjective well-being and verified that taking vacations can enhance Chinese employees' subjective well-being. Yet, how the travel outcomes interplay with the goals and life satisfaction remains unspecified. China as an Eastern culture representation differs dramatically from Western cultures concerning life satisfaction (Diener & Oishi, 2004), and the results of studies on employees based on Western cultures may not be applicable to those based on the Chinese culture. Further exploring Chinese employees' travel outcome and life satisfaction would render us a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and knowledge about employees' travel experience.

Thirdly, review of the literature further shows that tourism researchers have tended to apply a complete list of life satisfaction domains in testing the relationships between travel outcomes and life satisfaction (e.g., Chen et al., 2013; Sirgy et al., 2011). For instance, Sirgy et al. (2011) used thirteen life domains and examined their connections with travel outcomes. The domains are: social life, leisure/recreation, family life, love life, arts and culture, work life, health and safety, financial life, spiritual life, intellectual life, self, culinary life and travel life. These domains cover a wide scope, involving almost all the different types of human life, which are not independent of each other; instead many of the concepts are mutually inter-related (e.g., leisure/recreation versus travel life, and love life versus family life). Given so many inter-related domains of life, Sirgy et al. (2011) chose to analyze each of the life domains separately. However, how the domains interrelate, and which domains contribute most to one's overall life satisfaction is unclear (Dolnicar, Yanamandram, & Cliff, 2012); also unknown is the practical significance as the interrelationships among these life domains were not specified.

Based on the above notions summarized from the literature, this study finds it interesting to focus on the fully-employed young Chinese in terms of their leisure travel outcomes and life satisfaction; in addition, what are the specific goals (or life domains) reflected by their travel outcomes and how they contribute to their overall life satisfaction. Unlike the previous studies, this study is designed to examine the interrelationships in an integrative approach based on the theory of social production function (SPF).

Literature review

Life satisfaction and leisure travel outcomes

Life satisfaction is defined as the 'degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of his life-as-a-whole favorably' (Veenhoven, 1991, p. 7). Another term with a close meaning of life satisfaction is subjective well-being. Subjective well-being is defined as an individual's appraisal of his/her overall life situation in terms of 'totality of pleasures and pain or quality of life' (Ormel et al., 1999, p. 61), which is comprised of three components: positive affect, negative affect and cognitive life satisfaction. The cognitive component of subjective well-being indicates the level of satisfaction with one's current and future life and satisfaction with others' views of one's life (Ormel et al., 1999). Life satisfaction is a cognitive, judgmental process, consisting of a global assessment of a person's quality of life according to the individual's chosen criteria together with hedonic aspects (Diener & Suh, 1997).

Therefore, life satisfaction is an outcome of an evaluative process that occurs after needs are met and goals are fulfilled. In other words, life satisfaction is a desired state toward which all activity is directed (Diener, 2000), whereas goals are connoted with the desired state, and are regarded as a forerunner to life satisfaction. Goal researchers regard the achievement of personally chosen goals as the source of life satisfaction (e.g., Austin & Vancouver, 1996), and agree that having important goals and pursuing them are reliable indicators of life satisfaction (Emmons, 1986). Goal theorists argue that individuals attain life satisfaction when they move toward an ideal state of accomplishing a valued aim; people who have important goals tend to be more energetic, experience more positive emotions, and feel that life is meaningful; and life satisfaction is mainly measured through inventories of satisfaction with life and positive functioning (Diener, 2000).

The effect of satisfaction with a specific consumption experience on overall life satisfaction used to be studied within the framework of the bottom-up spillover theory. This theory posits that life satisfaction is functionally related to satisfaction

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