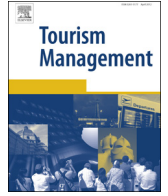




Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

Tourism Management

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tourman



Progress in Tourism Management

Risk-tourism, risk-taking and subjective well-being: A review and synthesis



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Conceptualizes relationship between risk-taking in tourism and subjective well-being.
- Reviews literature on subjective well-being, risk-taking in tourism and risk-tourism.
- Identifies methodological limitations of existing risk-tourism and well-being studies.
- Proposes new lines of enquiry integrating risk-tourism and subjective well-being.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 September 2016
 Received in revised form
 28 March 2017
 Accepted 2 June 2017

Keywords:

Tourism
 Risk
 Risk-tourism
 Subjective well-being
 Edgework
 Leisure

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to conceptualize the potential relationship between subjective well-being and risk-taking within 'risk-tourism' i.e. specific activities that involve the potential for physical injury and death and require participants to develop competencies with which to overcome the risks associated with those activities. Literature is reviewed in three fields of inquiry: subjective well-being, with specific reference to the interactions between wellbeing and tourism behavior, risk-taking in tourism and risk-tourism. The areas of interaction between risk-tourism and subjective well-being, emerging critical questions and potential areas of future inquiry are subsequently examined.

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1. Introduction

There is growing interest among scholars in risk-taking within tourism and leisure consumption (Berdychevsky & Gibson, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c; Lepp & Gibson, 2008; Uriely & Belhassen, 2006). This body of work sought to explore tourists' conceptions of risk,

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their motivations for risk-taking as well as their management of risk(s). It is possible to argue that risk is inherently part of all tourism experiences (see e.g. [Elsrud, 2001](#); [Larsen & Brun, 2011](#)); however, with extreme forms of tourism, which we refer to as 'risk-tourism', involving thrill seeking, physical exertion and the possibility for physical harm, risk-taking is a core aspect of the tourism experience and a key reason for participation ([Allman, Mittelstaedt, Martin, & Goldenberg, 2009](#); [Lipscombe, 1999](#)). Risk tourism has arguably evolved into its own niche of special interest tourism as it has become a widely recognized activity in the 21st century across multiple destinations ([Allman et al., 2009](#); [Buckley, 2012](#); [Hallin & Mykletun, 2006](#)). The current paper contributes to contemporary debates on risk by conceptualizing the link between risk-tourism and one particular outcome for participants – subjective well-being (SWB).

To date, limited research has associated SWB with risk-taking within risk-tourism (as a distinct type of activity), and the emphasis has been on psychological wellbeing during peak experiences rather than as a longer-term impact or state of being (cf. [Csikszentmihályi, 2000](#)). Importantly, the concepts of risk-taking in risk-tourism activities and SWB are frequently found in two separate domains of literature. In an attempt to connect the concepts, the purpose of this review and synthesis is two-fold: (1) to offer a critical overview of the literature on conceptualizations of risk and SWB, with particular reference to risk-tourism and leisure behavior; and (2) to uncover whether or not common attributes exist between the concepts of risk and SWB in a tourism context. The rationale behind conducting this review and synthesis is to provide a conceptual reference point to inform future empirical and theoretical research to determine tourists' level of SWB after having partaken in risky activities while on vacation. Additionally, the present research aims to shed light on key short and long-term outcomes of tourism-related risk-taking, which may also help to uncover the motivations for engaging in risk activities and to conceptualize how the notions of risk are conceived and/or managed by 'risk tourists' (e.g. consumers engaged in high-risk tourism-activities).

The review is based on a purposive sample of the literature from three subject areas: 1) subjective well-being; 2) risk/edgework; and 3) special interest tourism, specifically 'risk-tourism'. Various researchers agree that risk-tourism is a sub-niche of adventure tourism, which is itself considered a type of special interest tourism (SIT) ([Allman et al., 2009](#); [Bentley & Page, 2001](#); [Trauer, 2006](#)). The primary source of literature was EBSCO's Hospitality and Tourism Complete (HTC) online database. Additional references were also extracted through EBSCO's Business Source Premier, ABI/Inform (ProQuest) and Google Scholar. However, HTC was chosen above other platforms for two reasons: (1) it is better focused on tourism and leisure literature than wider social science, psychology or business databases; (2) the HTC database indexes a wider range of journals that may contain tourism-related topics, including the leisure field, than other premium databases such as Scopus or Thomson Reuters' Web of Knowledge.

The search utilized the terms: 'subjective well-being', 'well-being', 'risk', and 'risk tourist', in combination and as stand-alone terms. The search period was limited to between 1970 and 2016. The initial cut-off point of the 1970s was deemed appropriate because the original conceptualizations of subjective well-being emerged during that time. Concepts such as 'well-being' are increasingly being utilized by tourism researchers (see [Hartwell, Fyall, Willis, Page, Ladkin, & Hemingway, 2017](#)), and the term identified a wide and growing body of literature. Similarly, the term 'risk tourist' yielded several hundred results but the majority were not related to the foundational premise and scope of this study, as they covered areas such as risk assessments of destinations,

security, insurance, medical travel and travel safety (see e.g. [Page, 2009](#)). It was therefore important to use the combination of terms to reduce and order the data. This sorting and screening process yielded a final usable sample of 49 key articles, which underpin this review.

A review of the literature revealed that the concept of risk is abstract and widely deployed in tourism studies; but, more importantly, it highlighted that existing links between tourism and risk-taking remain under-conceptualized, despite a growing interest in the common attributes between the two domains. For purposes of this paper, a 'risk tourist' is an individual who partakes in extreme or high-consequence risk activities while on vacation ([Elsrud, 2001](#)). One example of a high-consequence risk activity would be BASE jumping, where failure to execute the activity correctly could result in injury or death ([Allman et al., 2009](#)).

Some researchers have associated risk-taking with negative outcomes. [Bentley and Page \(2001\)](#) and [Bentley, Page and Edwards, \(2008\)](#) argued that individuals who engaged in risk activities in a particular destination and were injured as a result of the activity, or were with someone who had died, also tended to have negative associations with the destination. Conversely, other scholars have found that the 'outcome' perceptions of risk tourism and risk activity to be entirely positive, as the activities that 'risk-inclined' individuals partake in cause positive emotional and/or cognitive states in those individuals ([Allman et al., 2009](#); [Han & Patterson, 2007](#); [Johnston, 1992](#); [Lipscombe, 1999](#); [Lupton & Tulloch, 2002](#); [Lyng, 1990](#)). However, as noted at the outset, research associating risk-behavior and positive states focused on the peak experience rather than the longer-term impacts of risk-taking behavior on SWB ([Csikszentmihályi, 2000, 2014](#)).

SWB can also be considered an abstract concept, but it has been widely researched in a variety of literature streams. In the tourism literature, the concept of SWB spun off from its parent concept, quality of life (QOL). In the past, QOL was considered an objective measureable outcome ([Michalkó & Rätz, 2010](#)); however, current literature has identified SWB as a subjective dimension of QOL ([Croes, 2016](#); [Michalkó & Rätz, 2010](#); [Moscardo, 2009](#); [Rivera, Croes, & Lee, 2016](#); [Vittersø, 2004](#)). Moreover, the definition of SWB as a concept remains ambiguous ([Michalkó & Rätz, 2010](#)). As a result, it has been challenging for scholars to measure SWB from subjects' perspective because individuals are frequently required to self-report/assess ([Shin & Johnson, 1978](#)), thereby resulting in a less objective assessment. Regardless of the measure used, the most common attributes of SWB have been identified as happiness and/or satisfaction with life ([Diener, 1994; 1996](#)).

The following section presents a holistic assessment of SWB, before considering the interactions between SWB and risk in tourism. Subsequent sections review the concept of risk as it relates to risk activity and risk tourism. The final section of this paper synthesizes the concepts and themes that emerged from the review of the literature in order to evaluate areas of congruity that may inform future inquiry.

2. Subjective well-being, tourism and leisure

One of the first scholars to examine life satisfaction was [Campbell \(1976\)](#). His research measured various characteristics that may influence life satisfaction (e.g. life cycle, occupation, religion, sex, etc.). Over time, SWB evolved out of Quality of Life (QOL) as a distinct concept, and became a subjective measurement of well-being (see e.g. [Eid & Larsen, 2008](#); [Emmons, 1986](#); [Ryff, 2014](#); [Tennant et al., 2007](#)). By definition, "QOL refers to one's satisfaction with life, and feelings of contentment or fulfillment with one's experience in the world" ([Andereck, Valentine, Vogt, & Knopf, 2007](#), p. 484). [Moscardo \(2009\)](#) defined QOL "as the notion of human

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