



Journeys of well-being: Women's travel narratives of transformation and self-discovery in Italy



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We explored the transformation of women as a result of their travel to Italy as a media trope.
- Non-fiction travel books were analysed as sources of travel imaginings, using well-being as a theoretical framework.
- Findings supported the extension of existing theoretical models of well-being.
- The search for identity, both existential and constructed, was important.
- The study has implications for destination promotion and marketing tourism as an avenue for well-being.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 18 August 2016
Received in revised form
15 April 2017
Accepted 16 April 2017

Keywords:
Transformation
Narrative
Trope
Tourist experience
Hedonia
Eudaimonia
Well-being
Identity

ABSTRACT

Travel narratives can shape tourist imaginings about places, and are a useful tool for understanding tourist experiences. One long-standing media trope is the transformative potential of travel to Italy, especially for women. In this qualitative phenomenological study, contemporary non-fiction books written by women about their travel experiences in Italy were analysed, using well-being as a theoretical framework. Six well-being dimensions were found to be present in these narratives, with the first five reflecting the dimensions of the DRAMMA model of triggers promoting well-being in leisure, alongside an additional dimension drawn from the PERMA model of well-being. Both hedonic and eudaimonic forms of well-being were mentioned. Identity, in terms of self-discovery and reinventing oneself, underpinned a number of these dimensions. The study extends work on travel imaginings beyond the fictional literary or film context and has practical implications for the promotion of destinations and marketing tourism as an avenue towards well-being.

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1. Introduction

In *Roman Holiday* (1953), Princess Ann (Audrey Hepburn) undertakes a royal visit to Rome. One night she escapes the palace and spends a day wandering around Rome like an ordinary tourist. Eventually she realises that she has a duty to her country and returns to the palace, however, her holiday in Rome has transformed her. She has experienced the delights of independence and will no longer let her entourage dictate her every move. *Roman Holiday* is an example of how the media may construct Italian

journeys as opportunities for liminal romantic experiences and feminine self-actualisation.

This idea of media narratives presenting tourism as *transformative* is under-studied. Research has concentrated on the influence of reading books and watching films on visits to attractions or destinations, with less focus placed on the ways in which these narratives might frame our imaginings of travel and the tourist experience. Several exceptions stand out. Frost's (2010) work on Outback films suggests that cinema can play a part in creating fantasies associated with the potential for life-changing experiences as a tourist, while Laing and Frost (2012) focus on novels as an influence on travel imaginings. Reijnders (2011) identifies *places of the imagination* as 'physical locations which serve as a collective anchor for a society's collective imagination' (p. 234). He uses the example of Dracula, arguing that gothic novels and horror films

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conjure up an attractive image of the cultural landscape of Transylvania. These narratives encourage fans to want to get closer to and become more intimate with the story and characters through visiting the places where they are set.

More recent work has gone beyond fictional literature and film to consider the ways in which *non-fiction* travel books might also contribute to tourist imaginings. [McClinchey \(2015\)](#) examines non-fiction written about Paris and its role in representing place and place experience and observes that 'non-fiction narratives are indeed someone's story, someone's experience worthy of interpretation. There is a collective, socio-cultural construction of place and its meaning that needs more attention' (p. 716).

The theoretical contribution of this article is to extend this nascent body of work on travel imaginings beyond the fictional literary or film context, and away from a concentration on the representations of place. It also sheds light on the trope of transformative travel in a contemporary context and connects it to the literature on well-being. This has important management as well as theoretical implications for the promotion of destinations and understanding tourism as a mechanism for achieving positive change.

The study utilised a qualitative approach, appropriate for a rich exploration of travel experiences, with a phenomenological methodology to study the lived experience of women travelling in Italy. Nine books were purposively chosen to inform our understanding of the phenomenon. The reason for this focus is three-fold. First, this trope of well-being appears to be intrinsically linked to women's Italian travel experiences, based on previous literary works. It is thus useful to explore what this may reveal about the power of tourism as a sphere for feminine well-being. Second, it is important to recognise that gender may play a role in the tourist experience. Many texts written by and about women's tourist experiences construct and present narratives of identity and personal growth ([Bassnett, 2002](#); [Hall & Kinnaird, 1994](#)). This stands in contrast to the tropes of exploration, conquest, challenge and adventure, which underpin many male tourist narratives ([Elsrud, 2001](#)). Third, research to date has tended to focus on the *constraints* women face while travelling and largely overlooks the positive role that tourism has played in many women's lives and its influence on feminine emancipation and autonomy ([Aitchison, 1999](#); [Harris & Wilson, 2007](#)). It is this latter phenomenon which is studied here.

2. Representations of Italy and the transformative journey

2.1. The 18th and 19th centuries

Italy as a destination for transformative female travel is an enduring narrative reaching back to the days of the Grand Tour, when women travelled to the Continent in order to complete their education prior to marriage and acquire grace and refinement ([Chard, 1999](#); [Foster, 1990](#)). Some women started to write their own accounts of what they saw and experienced, such as [Starke's Travels in Italy \(1802\)](#), as well as novels like [de Staël's Corinne ou l'Italie \(1807\)](#) and [Jameson's The Diary of an Ennuyée \(1836\)](#). These in turn inspired other women to embark on the same journey. Travel to Italy, in particular, was 'heavily subject ... to literary mediation' ([Chard, 1999](#), p. 21) and was often depicted as a destination that was open to feminine emancipation and self-actualisation.

It was a popular setting for romantic adventures of this period, which may reflect its identification in narrative with profusion and fertility ([Chard, 1999](#)). A number of nineteenth century books written about young females, such as [Little Women \(Alcott, 1868\)](#) and [What Katy Did Next \(Coolidge, 1886\)](#), describe the path to love

through visits to Italy. Female characters are proposed to in picturesque locations such as the Italian Lakes and Venice. Conversely, for women with broken hearts, it was viewed as a place of respite and recovery ([Ascari, 2001](#)). These nineteenth century journeys to Italy were associated with a restoration of health, both physical and spiritual ([Foster, 1990](#)) and the travel narrative assists in this process 'as a means of self-expression' ([Ascari, 2001](#), p. 41).

2.2. The 20th and 21st centuries

[A Room With A View \(1908\)](#) illustrates a later generation of women in Italy, who visited the cities of Europe, Baedeker guide in hand, for art, culture, and self-discovery. Forster's heroine, Lucy Honeychurch, visits Tuscany and experiences the breaking down of the narrow boundaries of her English world and a love affair with a working-class Englishman. Similarly, [The Enchanted April \(von Arnim, 1922\)](#) describes the repair of marriages and female self-worth during a holiday at an Umbrian castle. Films were also based on this trope, such as [Roman Holiday \(1953\)](#), [Three Coins in the Fountain \(1954\)](#), [Only You \(1994\)](#) and [When in Rome \(2010\)](#), with the young female leads experiencing love and a freedom from restrictions back home. In literary fiction, the narrative emphasises emancipation from disappointing love lives, illustrated by novels such as [The Evening of the Holiday \(Hazzard, 1966\)](#). In this study, we focus on more contemporary non-fiction narratives to explore this trope as to how women have been changed, transformed and empowered by their sojourns in Italy and what it might tell us about tourism as a conduit for well-being.

3. Well-being

3.1. Defining well-being

There is no single universally acknowledged definition of well-being in the literature ([Dodge, Daly, Huyton, & Sanders, 2012](#)). This is because the way that 'the concept of well-being is understood varies according to different disciplines such as philosophy, theology, sociology and economics' ([Voigt, 2017](#), p. 106). Definitions that have been advanced include [Dodge et al. \(2012\)](#)'s focus on the need for equilibrium: 'In essence, stable well-being is when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge' (p. 230). This definition conceptualises well-being as akin to *flow*, where the skills possessed by the individual and the challenges posed by the activity are finely balanced, leading to an intense sense of enjoyment and pleasure ([Csikszentmihalyi, 1990](#)). Well-being is often conceptualised as either *hedonic* or *eudaimonic* ([Huta & Waterman, 2014](#); [Ryan & Deci, 2001](#)) and can be assessed at the global, experiential/activity and motivational level ([Voigt, 2017](#)). In this study, we mainly focus on well-being at the *experiential* level, in terms of the tourist experience as articulated in the accounts of women writers, but will refer to *motivations*, where they are articulated.

[Gilbert and Abdullah \(2004\)](#), in their study of holidaytaking, use the construct of *subjective well-being* (SWB). They note that 'there are several other adjectives used to label it, including happiness, quality of life and life satisfaction' (p. 105). [Diener \(1984\)](#) had previously conceptualised SWB as a function of high life satisfaction, high positive feelings and low negative feelings, but also understood SWB and happiness as largely synonymous. There is conjecture as to whether subjective well-being is part of either hedonia or eudaimonia ([Huta & Waterman, 2014](#)); concepts which are discussed below. The link between happiness and SWB has been discounted more recently by some academics (e.g. [Filep, 2014](#);

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