

Well-being in Cultural Tourism: An Explorative Study on Tourists' Experiences

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Abstract

A review on literature of well-being of tourists indicates that despite the recent proliferation of the research on well-being in tourism, there is still need for attention on tourists' experiences from scholars. The effect of leisure, in a broader concept and specifically vacations on the sense of well-being is demonstrated by some major studies by bringing the question of if subjective well-being of tourists differs in various types of tourism activities into the agenda. From this point of view, in this study, we aim to investigate the sense of well-being in cultural tourism in relation to tourists' experiences. The study is designed to explore whether tourists' wellbeing differs according to the touristic activity experienced within participating in cultural tourism. The data give a hint that cultural tourism experience triggers different effects on tourists comparing with other touristic activities. Results showed that cultural assets impress visitors quite strongly and positively associated with their wellbeing. Also, findings are further discussed.

Keywords: Wellbeing, Tourists' experience, Happiness, Cultural tourism

Introduction and Literature Review

History of arguments and thoughts on ‘being happy’ dates back to ancient times and as a phenomenon, it takes considerable attention and frequently questioned by scholars. Two major perspectives are referred to conceptualize happiness; hedonism stands for taking pleasure in life and eudaimonia is to explain happiness by the individual’s own potential. These two concepts also constitute the basis for wellbeing that is relatively a new concept in the literature (Deci and Ryan, 2008, Kashdan, Biswas-Diener, and King, 2008). While hedonism is used conceptually as a synonym for happiness³ and stands for subjective wellbeing; eudaimonia is referred for the psychological wellbeing of individuals. Subjective wellbeing is found to have two dimensions as cognitive (satisfaction with life) and affective (positive or negative affect) (Diener, Emmons, Larsen and Griffin, 1985). Individuals make a judgment on the satisfaction level with the life and on positive or negative affect felt. Thus the judgment points the level of individual’s wellbeing or happiness.

Studies on wellbeing in the research areas of gerontology and public health could be seen in recent decades parallel with the movement of positive psychology. Wellbeing is also studied with touristic activities and with the effects of these activities but there are only a handful of researches in tourism (Uysal, Sirgy, Woo, and Kim, 2016). A review on literature points that wellbeing is studied in two major divisions in tourism. First party of the researches concentrate on the wellbeing of tourists together with the variables that could affect tourists wellbeing (Sirgy, Kruger, Lee, and Yu, 2011; Woo, Kim, and Uysal, 2014) and the second questions wellbeing of local people and other stakeholders at a destination (Allen, Long, Perdue, and Kieselbach, 1988; Andereck, and Nyaupane, 2011). Studies examining tourists showed that holiday taking is positively associated with wellbeing (de Bloom, Geurts, Sonnentag, Taris, Weerth and Kompier, 2011; Hunter-Jones, 2003). In addition holidays or vacations have positive impact on personal health, personal identity and regaining freedom (Gilbert, and Abdullah, 2004). Not only taking holidays but also variables such as duration of stay (Neal, Uysal, and Sirgy, 2007) are found be influent in the literature. Despite the mentioned findings, studies on holiday taking could hardly be found. Traditionally, while leisure and recreation is generally accepted to contribute to people’s wellbeing, vacations are ignored (Dolnicar, Lazarevski, and Yanamandram, 2013). Thus the study area of individuals’ wellbeing in relation with vacations in its infancy that requires further exploration and contribution.

Vacations include various types of tourism together with several activities that highlights the importance of examining different types of tourists’ experiences (Uysal et al., 2016) while studying wellbeing. Participants’ wellbeing who experienced winter tourism (de Bloom et al., 2011), social tourism (McCabe, and Johnson, 2013), and nature tourism (Kim, Lee, Uysal, Kim and Ahn, 2015) is found to be positively affected by the touristic activity.

The studies on different tourism types point that is possible to develop a broader understanding on tourists' wellbeing by examining different tourist activities. Additionally, researchers also argue that the long term objective of sustaining well-being in tourism is to both protect cultural and natural resources and provide quality touristic experiences (Uysal et al., 2016). From this point, with this study, we aimed to investigate the sense of well-being in cultural tourism in relation to tourists' experiences.

McKercher and du Cros (2005:212) defined cultural tourism (McKercher and du Cros, 2005) as "a form of tourism that relies on a destination's cultural heritage assets and transforms them into products that can be consumed by tourists". By the definition cultural heritage assets are referred as the building blocks of this form of tourism. Thus there is need for further investigation of what is conceptualized as cultural heritage. UNESCO firstly differentiates between tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The built fabric of a community that embodies its cultural values such as archeological sites, museum collections, streetscapes, buildings, ruins etc. are grouped as tangible assets of culture. Recently intangible cultural heritage takes considerable attention, too. The 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage defines intangible culture as traditions and living expressions of culture such as the practices, representations, expressions, as well as the knowledge and skills that communities, groups recognize as part of their cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003).

Cultural tourism attracts scholars' and practitioners' considerable attention. It requires both the tourists' and local residents' needs to be met by preserving the heritage for the present and for future generations that forms a basis for sustainability. At that point, emotions and feelings evoked by cultural tourism experiences and tourists' potential well-being linked to those experiences could be promising for further studies.

Methods

This study aimed to illuminate the links between cultural tourism experiences with tourists' well-being. For this aim, an open-ended question form is designed to make respondents describe their specific cultural tourism experience in detail and their feelings, emotions, and views related to this activity to understand if their experience enhances their sense of well-being. The question form also included demographic variables of gender, age, nationality, city of residence and occupation. Respondents are also asked about the aim of their visit, how they decided to stay in Old Town, and the meaning attributed to the vacation in Antalya.

The question form is designed by researchers and submitted to two experts on qualitative studies for their opinions and revised according to their suggestions. The form then

translated to German by a bilingual scholar and the translation is also checked by two other experts. The study is conducted in English and German languages.

The research area is decided to be Old Town of Antalya as the cultural tourism center of the city that hosts millions of foreign visitors each year. Old town (Kaleiçi in Turkish) had been chosen specifically since its history dates back to second century BC and has ruins and historical structures of Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Seljuk, Ottoman eras (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2016). It is a protected area surrounded with historic city walls which hosts registered historical structures. Old Town has also a particular importance that has not only historical ruins but also is a living place in its present situation with its hotels, pensions, cafes, and bars that attracts both tourists and local residents for entertainment within a historical atmosphere. Additionally Old Town is in the center of the city which eases the access to many other historical and cultural attractions.

Hence foreign tourists who chose Old Town to stay, already were having a cultural tourism experience, were decided to constitute the sample for this study. To receive the much broader data and not to cause time limit for the respondents, it is decided to deliver the forms to the guests while their stay in Old Town and ask them to hand the form to the reception at the time of their check out. Four boutique hotels were contacted to conduct the research and three of them accepted to participate. Hotel personnel were informed about the design of the study and are requested to receive the completed forms from respondents. Data was collected during March to April 2016. Respondents were foreign tourists who are willing to participate and they also received a small gift (an evil eye and a free drink) for their participation.

Data Analysis and Findings

Data set that composed of question forms handwritten by the participants is analyzed by following the principles of qualitative data processing and analyzing. All factors that could have links with tourists' wellbeing are tried to analyze with a holistic approach. The patterns between affectivity evoked with the experience, the value attributed to the specific experience and tourists' wellbeing are aimed to explore through tourists' expressions.

The study included six females and seven males of 13 participants who are all foreign tourists visiting Antalya. The ages of the participants varied from 31 to 74. Their countries of origin are Belgium, Denmark, England, and Germany from different occupation groups but all having cultural tourism experience in Antalya.

The participants who are asked the meaning of vacation to them used the following expressions to explain; *"relaxing", "silent", "free period away from my office", "take stresses and slain of normal life away being by the sea", "exploring the old town", "eating*

good food good", "excursion possibilities", "friendly people", "beautiful city and landscape", "nice weather". They are also asked why they have chosen Old Town to stay and the findings indicated that not only the cultural tourism assets but also the geography and climate of Antalya and pricing policy of the area at the time of the study conducted are compelling.

The tourists are requested to explain the activities experienced during their vacations and their feelings, emotions, and views evoked by the experience. By the analysis of findings, participants' wellbeing differs when the activity experienced involves cultural heritage. The primary reason for the distinctness of cultural tourism activities is uniqueness of the experience. Cultural assets of society, which could also be experienced by visitors, have their historical, traditional, distinctive features, which cannot be replicated so easily. Thus the study findings point that cultural tourism experience trigger different affects on tourists comparing with other touristic activities. Tourists' experience of other culture could be claimed to relate with individuals' wellbeing. To illustrate, our data analysis showed that cultural assets impresses visitors quite strongly and positively associated with their wellbeing. One participant of the study quoted below explains the experience as;

"With a Turkish friend I visited the museum. We entered at 15:00 and the museum was closed at 17:00. We started our tour quite slowly and were surprised about all the things we saw more or less at the end of the time we had left. I was very much impressed by all the treasure we saw. Really impressed us and to be honest for me unexpected. Never expected to see so much cultural treasures. I could have spent one hour and half longer. As I came more or less for the sun to Antalya this was very nice experience and made me realize the rich culture of Antalya, and in general Turkey."

A surprising finding to see is that participants tend to use stronger and more descriptive adjectives while explaining cultural activities. They describe cultural tourism activities by such expressions of *"impressive to see", "real pleasure to wander around", "very impressive"* rather than describing other activities by simple attributes such as *"nice", "good"*.

Another important finding to note that tourists' wellbeing is negatively affected by some features at a destination such as containing too much of advertisements, numbers of shops at a cultural site, and places that are overcrowded. Thus the negative effects on wellbeing could be discussed with the irony of cultural tourism arguments (McKercher and du Cros, 2012), which refers the tension between culture and tourism. While tourists want to see the real exotic ones, they also demand infrastructure, facilities, and "modern" services at a destination, which ultimately would make destinations similar to each other. In this study, findings also showed that the level of commercialization of a cultural tourism destination could cause negative feelings and negative effect on wellbeing. To illustrate, one of the

participants noted negative experiences of the vacation as *"too commercial and in your face selling"*. A second participant also mentioned commercialization as it deteriorates cultural atmosphere by following expressions; *"I liked the old town very much although you feel it's very touristic ... I love seeing shops but I don't like it that shop owners are a bit pushy for buying some of these stuff. On the other hand everybody is very friendly so that's very positive."*

While findings indicate that cultural tourism activities promise visitors valuable experiences with its unique features, data set also showed that cultural assets alone are not sufficient to attract visitors. Tourists' wellbeing could be related with the experience of original, preserved, authentic, and cultural embodiments but it is possible enhancement of visitors' wellbeing by some other complements. Participants' wellbeing is found to be associated negatively or positively with supplementary services and attributes of the destination, too. Together with the cultural elements, *satisfaction with the accommodation facility, transportation facilities, feeling safe at the destination, good communication with local people* were frequently mentioned in data set. All participants addressed *"friendly people"* by no exception as a premise how well they feel about their vacation, which could also be attributed to culture of the hosting society. Additionally *"food"* seems to be a significant feature for individuals' wellbeing.

Lastly findings also showed that natural landscape should be noticed as an important base for tourists' wellbeing. Participants referred *"sunny weather"*, *"being by the sea"* and *"spring flowers"* as a part of atmosphere of the cultural sites when explaining how well they feel by the experience.

The explorative design of the study allowed us to develop a holistic understanding on tourists' wellbeing by their vacation before they are leaving the destination. We encouraged participants to write down all of their thoughts and feelings about their vacation that provided us aspects of wellbeing evoked by holiday taking.

Conclusion and Discussion

Cultural heritage assets have specific characteristics that are not possible to replicate. The findings of the study indicated that the unique characteristics of cultural tourism might have links with tourists' wellbeing. However the findings also showed the importance of preserving original atmosphere of the cultural site, which could be, referred to the long lasting debates on the relations between tourism and cultural heritage management (McKercher and du Cros, 2012). Data collected in fieldwork and analysis of findings supported the warnings in the literature to balance between *tourism* as a commercial activity that is dominated by private sector for profit and *cultural heritage management*

aiming to conserve and preserve the heritage for future by public sector as non-profit. Participants are unhappy to see the cultural heritage sites too commercialized as having numerous shops around that stand for the need for governance of destinations to preserve its originality as well as having facilities and services for the ease of visitation.

The relationship between holiday taking and tourists' wellbeing is already asserted by major studies (Sirgy et al., 2011; Gilbert and Abdullah, 2004) and suggestions to further examine these relations by focusing on different types of tourism⁵ started to be addressed by researchers. This study is an initial attempt to explore the links of cultural tourism with tourists' wellbeing. The findings of the study showed that attending cultural tourism activities have a potential to enhance tourists' wellbeing. Findings also enabled to discuss the possibility to further increase wellbeing by preserving the uniqueness of cultural sites as well as providing touristic services in compliance with its originality.

From the resource base view tourism and cultural heritage management stands at the same side for cultural tourism. Inclusion of cultural heritage in tourism should not cause negative effects to provide unforgettable experiences to tourists that also serve for sustainability in the long run.

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