

Linking Tourist Satisfaction to Happiness and Quality of Life

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Abstract

Dominant tourist satisfaction measures, typically tied to service quality, have recently received much criticism by senior tourism academics (Ryan, 1995; Kozak, 2001; Pearce, 2005). These prominent tourism scholars commonly refer to very similar problems of these measures: the unnecessary and inappropriate focus on expectations as a major influence on tourist satisfaction; the inability of service quality scales to adequately measure gaps between service expectations and performance; the lack of attention to immediate conscious satisfaction; the inability of the approaches to shed light on travel meaning; and the inability to explain the emotional dimension of tourist satisfaction.

The purpose here is to present a fresh tourist satisfaction approach which does not have these problems. Instead of service quality, this fresh approach views satisfaction in terms of happiness and quality of life. Overall happiness is said to depend much on satisfaction in different life domains (Glatzer, 2000), one of which is leisure travel.

A prominent psychologist, Martin Seligman, and his colleagues collected and reviewed the literature on happiness from Buddhism, the human potential movement of the 1960s, the pioneering works of Fordyce (1988) and the self-improvement industry of the 1990s with at least 100 interventions claiming to increase happiness (Seligman, Steen, Park and Peterson, 2005). Their analysis points to three core elements of human happiness:

- positive emotions (experiencing and savouring pleasures);
- engagement (losing the self in engaging activities); and
- meaning (participating in meaningful activities).

The happiness approach is not based on expectations. It is understood that expectations can change and be ambiguous (Ryan, 1995) and that tourists may inflate their expectations (Babakus and Boller, 1992). The methods from the happiness approach could also be used to evaluate satisfaction based on immediate conscious processes as well as post hoc satisfaction. This approach further allows for an examination of meaningful travel experiences. Both cognitive and emotional dimensions of satisfaction can be assessed via the happiness methods.

Positive emotions, engagement and meaning are all measurable and buildable. According to Fredrickson (2001), there are four core positive emotions: joy, which sparks the urge to play;

interest, which sparks the urge to explore; contentment, which sparks the urge to savour and integrate; and love that sparks a recurring cycle of each of these urges within safe, close relationships (Fredrickson, 2001). These emotions can be assessed qualitatively. For joy, evidence of playing, pushing the limits and being creative can be sought in tourists' travel narratives or conversations. For interest, descriptions of urges to explore, take in new information and new experiences and expand the self could be investigated. For contentment, descriptions of sitting back and savouring current life circumstances can be analysed. Finally, evidence of experiencing the above three emotions in close relationships could uncover the love emotion. Using these guidelines proposed by Fredrickson, the four emotions may give a significant indication of tourist satisfaction through analyses of holiday descriptions. Additionally, the positive emotions could be assessed quantitatively through a set of positive emotion scales (Fredrickson and Branigan, 2001).

The engagement element closely resembles Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) concept of flow and can therefore be investigated through flow state methods. Duckworth, Steen and Seligman point out that "flow is the experience associated with engaging one's highest strengths and talents to meet just-doable challenges (2005, p. 638)." This engaging state can be assessed through the Experience Sampling Method (ESM) (Schimmack, 2003), Dispositional Flow State Scale (DFS) and Flow State Scale (FSS) (Jackson and Eklund, 2004) and Flow in-depth Interviews (Jackson, 1992). ESM can be used for assessing immediate conscious satisfaction and the scales for evaluating flow experiences within a particular event and the dispositional tendency for flow. The flow interviews could be used to explore engagement in a reflective manner (Jackson, 1992).

Meaning can be studied through long, in-depth interviews and written narratives about significant life events, life transitions or periods of struggle of which travel is often part of (Noy, 2004). These studies of meaning could uncover personal growth and self-development themes. Additionally, travel meaning can be studied through an adaptation of the seminal Purpose in Life Test (Crumbaugh and Maholick, 1969). This test is a unidimensional measure of how meaningful a person perceives his or her life to be. Further, there is Peterson, Park and Seligman's (2005) Orientations to Happiness questionnaire which asks the respondents to respond to a series of questions on meaning, in addition to positive emotions and engagement.

A detailed analysis of the measures of positive emotions, engagement and meaning is beyond the scope of this abstract. Further information on the methods can be found by referring to the original works from the reference list.

The happiness model for tourist satisfaction also neatly links to the quality of life concept. Sociologist and social-psychologist, emeritus professor Rust Veenhoven, has dedicated his long research career to understanding quality of life issues (Ruut Veenhoven home page, 2008). The

term quality-of-life can be thought of as a catchword for various notions of the good life (Veenhoven, 2004). He argues that quality of life refers to multiple qualities which can be ordered on the basis of two distinctions. The first distinction is between opportunities for a good life and the outcomes of life (life chances and life results). The second distinction is between external and inner qualities of life. The external quality relates to the environment and the internal to the individual. It is the individual quality that Veenhoven links with psychological concepts such as autonomy, reality control, creativity, inner synergy of traits, strivings as well as with subjective well being, life satisfaction and happiness. Meaning, engagement and positive emotions clearly fit into these internal classifications as important building blocks of individual happiness.

A clear link therefore emerges between tourist satisfaction, happiness and quality of life. Pearce (2007) argues that tourism is arguably the largest self-initiated commercial intervention for creating happiness on the planet. Additionally, the tourism industry is currently talking about the happiness business as “the next big thing” (Travel Impact Newswire, 2007). As a generator of happiness, tourism could be viewed as an important tool for advancing tourists’ quality of life and as a creator of highly fulfilling, positive experiences.

The research on engagement, meaning and positive emotions does not propose a miracle formula for human happiness (Snyder and Lopez, 2002). It does, however, suggest that happiness can be measured adequately by self reports and defined in terms of engagement, meaning and positive emotions. Several standard measures have been shown to be quite valid and reasonably reliable, although not always very precise (Diener, 1995). Happiness is a conscious state of mind that people can talk or write about, and an imperfect measurement is better than no measurement at all (Veenhoven, 2003).

The happiness research has been criticised for providing self-evident answers. Seligman (2007), however, points out that much of the current happiness research in psychology is not self-evident. There are now studies that link engagement, meaning and positive emotions directly to physical health (Hershberger, 2005; Seligman, 2007). These are new findings. Findings such as these may have further implications for the way tourist satisfaction is conceptualised and measured in the future. The happiness model remains to be tested in tourism. At this early stage, it seems that the engagement – positive emotions – meaning approach is a viable alternative to service quality models and that it has potential to embellish and advance satisfaction approaches in tourism.

Word length: 1222 words (excluding the reference list and the title page)

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