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Positive Tourist Experience: The PERMA Approach for Understanding the Well-Being of Young Tourists

Abstract

Despite a rise in studies applying the PERMA framework (Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment) to tourist well-being, few studies explore how the five elements within the PERMA framework interconnect to contribute to the well-being of young tourists. This study employed a qualitative research approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews guided by the PERMA framework to investigate young tourists' perceptions of well-being. Findings were analyzed using thematic analysis, revealing that the young tourists' well-being is believed to encompass two key components: enjoyment, representing hedonic well-being, and meaning, representing eudaimonic well-being. Enjoyment may stem from tourist activities or social interactions, while meaning could be derived from actualizing core values or fulfilling travel purposes. Theoretically, the study advances the PERMA framework by strategically aligning its elements in direct response to various tourist experiences. This provides a novel perspective for future researchers, suggesting the potential use of the PERMA framework as an alternative approach for understanding young tourists' well-being. Practically, the study offers insights for individuals to craft improved tourism plans, leveraging their travel experiences to enhance well-being. For example, individuals could benefit from being more mindful in designing and executing their travels, ensuring a positive tourist experience.

Keywords: well-being, tourist experience, PERMA, positive psychology, enjoyment, meaning

1. Introduction

Well-being stands as a positive outcome that is meaningful for people. There are two distinct views of well-being: hedonic and eudaimonic. The hedonic view focuses on enjoyment or pleasure attainment (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The eudaimonic view defines well-being as meaning and self-realization (Waterman, 1993). In the tourism literature, well-being has been chiefly linked to tourist experiences (Su et al., 2021). Tourist well-being has been defined as integrated well-being encompassing both hedonic and eudaimonic elements (Kay Smith & Diekmann, 2017; Filep et al., 2022). Various theoretical frameworks of well-being have been applied to tourist well-being studies, among which frameworks from positive psychology are the most used (Vada et al., 2020). For example, the PERMA framework (Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment) is an emerging approach to well-being studies (Seligman, 2011). Current research is expected to adopt the PERMA framework to investigate tourist well-being. For example, the well-being of both snow-sport tourists and island-visiting tourists was examined using the PERMA-Profiler (Mirehie & Gibson, 2020; Mendes et al., 2022). Several qualitative studies have yielded meaningful theoretical implications of the PERMA framework within the contexts of yoga tourism (Dillette et al., 2018) and traditional Chinese hanfu-wearing tourism (Zhang et al., 2023).

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Despite an increasing volume of research dedicated to applying the PERMA framework to tourist well-being, a notable gap persists in exploring the collaborative potential of the five elements in unravelling well-being among tourists, especially considering the moderately high correlation among these elements (Seligman, 2018). The study of Xiang and Qiao (2022) has suggested a cause-and-effect relationship among the PERMA elements, hinting at a novel perspective for understanding senior tourists' well-being. Still, research addressing this gap remains limited, with scant data available specifically on young tourists. The overarching goal of this study was to develop a conceptual framework to enhance the understanding of applying the PERMA framework in young tourists' well-being research. Consequently, a qualitative study was conducted to explore the nuanced interconnectedness of the elements within the PERMA framework, shaped by tourist experiences. The findings from the thematic analysis indicate that for young tourists, the components of enjoyment and meaning constitute integral aspects of their hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, contributing to a positive tourist experience.

2. Well-being explained by PERMA

Positive emotion remains the backbone of Seligman's well-being theory. Fredrickson (2001) argued that positive emotions are not just happy feelings; they have many functions, such as driving actions, nurturing social connections, and promoting resilience. Engagement concerns the degree of concentration one experiences. Frequently, engagement is interpreted by flowlike experiences (Seligman, 2011). Csikszentmihalyi (2009) defined flow as a pleasurable state of mind. Social relationships are the most enduring predictor of subjective well-being (Diener & Seligman, 2002). Recent research has shown that more quality social interactions are associated with greater well-being (Sun et al., 2020). Meaning reflects the characteristics of eudaimonia (Huta, 2016). It refers to the feeling that one does is worthwhile (Krok, 2014). Accomplishment manifests in pursuing success and achieving goals (Forgeard et al., 2011).

3. Methods

A qualitative research approach was implemented to address the research goal. Eight participants, whose profile is shown in Table 1, were purposefully chosen to represent diverse demographics and travel experiences. By implementing this strategy, a level of representativeness can be achieved among young tourists aged between 20 and 30. This enhances confidence in generalizing findings to the broader population under study (Maxwell, 2009), aligning with the research focus. Ethical approval was obtained before interviews took place. Interviews were conducted via phone call in July 2020. Each interview lasted about 1 hour. A semi-structured interview format was used. The interview guide was formulated by contextualizing travel experiences within the PERMA framework, providing flexibility for participants' narratives and allowing the interviewer to probe deeper into the nuanced interconnectedness between the elements shaped by participants' travel experiences (Horton et al., 2004). With a small sample size, examining and actively seeking salient ideas was more relevant and productive for achieving the research goal (Weller et al., 2018). For example, after asking, 'What were the most unforgettable moments that stood out to you during your recent trip (pre-coronavirus)?' the interviewer followed up by asking, 'How did they change the way you see travel?'. The first question aimed to grasp how positive emotions manifest in participants' travel experiences. However, it revealed intricate links between positive emotions and engagement in social interactions and tourist activities. This prompted the interviewer to delve deeper, generating a preliminary understanding of participants' perspectives on the meaning of travel.

The interviews were recorded upon permission and transcribed by the primary researcher. The transcripts were sent back to participants to check accuracy. The intention was to ensure that certain conditions of trustworthiness were met (Gunawan, 2015). The researchers used standard thematic analysis methods (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This analytical approach facilitated the achievement of the research goal by its flexibility in interpreting patterns of meaning within the findings (Clarke & Braun, 2016). The steps involved in the process were as

follows: 1) after closely observing the data, a set of initial codes was generated. Specifically, codes derived from questions related to each element of the PERMA framework were organized into a table; 2) Convergences and divergences across the initial codes within each table were identified and classified into themes; 3) Emerging themes from the five tables were collectively analyzed, aiming to uncover connections between the five elements to account for well-being outcomes collaboratively; 4) Through this analysis, two main themes and four subthemes emerged, providing explanatory insights into the data; 5) finally, a report was produced, highlighting participants' critical statements and summarizing the findings. Inherent to the analysis process is the recognition of potential researcher bias. For instance, the inclination towards simplifying complex phenomena (i.e., well-being) may have influenced the interpretation of the data. To mitigate this bias, reflexivity and peer debriefing were incorporated to enhance the credibility of the findings (Nobel & Smith, 2015).

Table 1
Participants' profiles

Name (pseudonyms)	Gender	Age	Nationality	Place of visit
Jia	F	28	Chinese	Japan and Switzerland
Rong	M	30	Chinese	Slovakia
Rose	F	26	British	The Netherlands
Xiu	F	22	Vietnamese	Canada and U.S.A
Sam	M	24	French	Canada
Mark	M	24	French	Europe
Madelyn	F	25	French	South Korea
Xin	M	29	Chinese	Morocco

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Enjoyment (hedonic well-being)

4.1.1. Activity enjoyment

The predominant role of pleasure and enjoyment in individuals' hedonic well-being has been identified by Ryan and Deci (2001). The first subtheme under enjoyment (hedonic well-being) is activity enjoyment. Enjoyment here is a proxy for the association of positive emotion and engagement. All participants reported having experienced positive emotions and engagement concerning various tourist activities, including visiting attractions, roaming and tasting local food. For instance, Madelyn articulated: "I enjoyed every single moment of my trip to South Korea, especially the food". Rose referenced her visit to Rotterdam as light-hearted: "I had a wonderful time throughout; I did a lot of different activities and did things at my own pace".

Furthermore, Jia, Xin, and Rong emphasized that spending time in nature contributes to their flow-like experiences. It is noted that positive emotions and engagement seem to be mentioned simultaneously when participants speak about their experiences of undertaking tourist activities. This may be because the two constructs of well-being are closely associated (Seligman, 2011). For example, approach behavior theory suggests positive affect induces activity engagement (Fredrickson, 2001). Flow theory proposes that one will derive enjoyment from being engaged in the activity one is doing (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009).

4.1.2. Social enjoyment

The second subtheme under enjoyment (hedonic well-being) is social enjoyment. A recent study suggested that the relationship element can be expressed through social interaction in tourism contexts (Zhang et al., 2023). The following quote demonstrates how positive emotions and engagement are evoked in social interactions.

I believe our night visit to the museum game caused me a brain orgasm. On the same night, I was drunk but felt so relaxed. I sent a video clip to my friend in which I was singing and dancing with others. My friend asked me if I was drunk. I said, 'No, we just had fun with some artists here [Laughter].' We sang in an artist's room, Edith Piaf's *Non, Je ne regrette rien* [Laughter] [Singing]. To me, it was an entirely spiritual relaxation and refilling of energy. (Rong)

Participants described their social encounters. 5 out of 8 participants had travelled with either friends or loved ones, while the other three had travelled alone. 7 out of 8 participants referenced the experience of social interactions as pleasant or engaging, with just one exception. Sam reflected on being a tourist: "I didn't find the people from where I visited having much time to talk". Despite not having many social encounters, he expressed the feeling of joy in response to travelling with his mother: "I went to Toronto to see my mom; she flew over from France; it was the first time in 6 months I saw her, and I felt so happy during that trip". The data from this study demonstrate that social interactions during travel may promote hedonic well-being by fostering positive emotions and engagement among individuals. The findings support the links between well-being and social connections (Diener & Seligman, 2002; Sun et al., 2020) in the context of tourism.

4.2. Meaning (eudaimonic well-being)

4.2.1. General meaning

Meaning is central to the modern interpretation of eudaimonia (Huta, 2016). The first subtheme under meaning (eudaimonic well-being) is the general meaning. From this perspective, travel is argued to reflect participants' deeply held values even though such values may not represent participants' highest priorities in life. The most references to this subtheme were experiencing a new culture (novelty), escaping from everyday life (freedom), and self-reflection (self-development). Mark commented on travel: "It (the meaning of travel) is to experience and witness different cultures and social codes; it is also meeting people and knowing how the world functions elsewhere". Madelyn perceived the meaning of travel as being able to evade everyday life: "I think travel creates opportunities for me to recuperate from life, introspect myself and find inner peace". Waterman (1993) argued that eudaimonia would result when one lives following one's daemon (core beliefs). Therefore, it is believed that if one perceives travel as reflecting one's core beliefs, one will derive eudaimonia from travel experiences.

4.2.2. Special meaning

The second subtheme under meaning (eudaimonic well-being) is a special meaning. This type of meaning is contingent upon a specific travel. From this perspective, meaning is argued to be substantiated by individual travel goals. The findings reveal that all participants had particular purposes for their travel, with developing new skills such as language and interpersonal skills being the most prevalent. Other purposes were identified, such as spending time with loved ones, tasting food and participating in events. The following quote shows the strength of the connection between travel goals and accomplishments.

My parents always believed that I was a little girl who needed to be taken care of. This trip proved that I could take care of myself and did it very well. Through this trip, I got to know myself better and improved my communication. (Xiu)

Sirgy's (2009) QOL theory of leisure travel satisfaction has spelt out the role of setting and fulfilling travel goals in enhancing tourists' QOL and well-being. For participants, having a clear purpose or goal for their travel helped them create opportunities to experience the joy of accomplishment, often leading to them deriving meaning from their travel. The data from this study raises the potential for special meaning to be created by achieving pre-set travel goals.

5. Conclusion

This study has shed light on the nuanced interplay of the five elements within the PERMA framework, responding to diverse tourist experiences and culminating in a concise conceptualization of young tourists' well-being. The findings indicate that young tourists' well-being primarily manifests through the combination of enjoyment, representing hedonic well-being, and meaning, representing eudaimonic well-being. Enjoyment often arises from engaging in tourist activities or social interactions, whereas meaning is found in actualizing core values or fulfilling the underlying purposes of travel. This conceptualization streamlines the elements of well-being proposed by the PERMA framework to two, each exhibiting variations. This study contributes theoretically and practically to understanding young tourists' well-being. Theoretically, it advances the PERMA framework by strategically aligning its elements in direct response to various tourist experiences. This provides a novel perspective for future researchers, suggesting the potential use of the PERMA framework as an alternative approach for understanding young tourists' well-being. Practically, the study offers insights for individuals to craft improved tourism plans, leveraging their travel experiences to enhance well-being. For example, individuals could benefit from being more mindful in designing and executing their travels, ensuring a positive tourist experience. However, the research sample is limited and does not represent young tourists with diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. To gain a comprehensive understanding, additional data, particularly from diverse backgrounds and a spectrum of tourist experiences, is essential to afford substantive insights into applying the PERMA framework to young tourists' well-being research.

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