





Happiness experiences during older adults' recreational sojourns: A fsQCA configuration analysis

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2025.101362> 

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Abstract

While many studies have linked tourism with happiness, they have overlooked the true value of happiness. Following the rapid development of tourism for older adults, recreational sojourns with low investment and multifrequency characteristics have gained widespread attention. For many older individuals who live at home, these sojourns have extended their leisure life and hold great significance for their active ageing. This research draws upon the positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment theory of positive psychology to explore the happiness experienced during recreational sojourns. Based on a casual examination using fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis, this study identifies configurational pathways through which positive happiness experiences extend their benefits to home life. These findings not only expand the scope for research into happiness experiences in tourism, but also offer practical insights for recreational sojourn destinations to enhance the well-being of older travellers and help them foster deeper emotional connections to their home life.

Introduction

Tourism has become an important avenue for people to achieve their personal goals with extraordinary significance for older adults' spiritual development, emotional improvement, and insight acquisition (Moal-Ulvoas & Taylor, 2014). However, there is no consensus about what constitutes happiness experiences in tourism, although many scholars have attempted to promote a universal understanding of happiness in tourism (Nawijn, 2016; Smith & Diekmann, 2017). Current research on happiness experiences in tourism primarily relies on concepts from other disciplines, such as subjective well-being (SWB) and psychological well-being. However, these concepts themselves are much debated and discussed, including distinctions such as 'hedonic' versus 'eudaimonic' and 'subjective' versus 'objective', reflecting differences in the understanding of 'happiness' across various perspectives. In the field of positive psychology, Seligman (2011) contended that happiness should not be reduced to mere life satisfaction. Instead, he proposed that the true benchmark of happiness is a 'flourishing life'. To capture this holistic vision, Seligman (2011) introduced the PERMA (i.e., positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment) model, which integrates key well-being dimensions and moves beyond the traditional dichotomy between hedonic pleasure and eudaimonic fulfilment. The PERMA model has now been applied effectively in tourism research, including studies focusing on older adults (Câmara et al., 2024; Mendes et al., 2022).

Currently, the tourist well-being literature remains predominantly focused on perceptions of happiness during travel experiences, with relatively few scholars examining the value of tourism well-being for home life. The current literature on tourists' happiness focuses on the correlation between the tourism experience and happiness based on psychological or gerontological frameworks to quantify tourists' perceptions of happiness. The results of these analyses not only confirm the positive links between tourism experiences and improvements in quality of life (QoL) and SWB, among other representations of happiness, but also the significance of happiness in the tourism experience (Gilbert & Abdullah, 2004; Kim et al., 2021; Smith & Diekmann, 2017). However, there is still scepticism in the tourism literature regarding the value of happiness in tourism. Nawijn (2011, 2016) suggested that tourism activities also encompass various experiences, such as dark tourism, and that the hedonic happiness derived from travel tends to lack durability. In response, Nawijn and Filep (2016) suggested that the underlying meaning of tourism activities should be explored further to extend our understanding of tourism beyond positive emotions to illuminate its relevance to home life.

Following the ageing population's increasing size and continuous growth in consumption power, a large and influential group of senior tourists has formed globally, among whom an increasing number of older adults from developing countries have become important contributors to the 'silver economy' (Hsu et al., 2007; Li & Chan, 2021). In 2022, there were 3.246 billion domestic tourism trips in China, with senior tourists accounting for more than 20% of these trips (China tourism academy, 2023). Moreover, older adults' demands and modes of travel are becoming increasingly diverse with equally rich differences in motivation and behaviour (Otoo et al., 2021). This pattern first appeared in developed countries, where an increasing number of older adults

began pursuing independent travel options instead of purchasing package tours. Older adults are now focusing more on the social, health, and self-realization benefits of travelling. Older tourists not only travel in seasonal migratory patterns to enjoy nomadic excursions and pursue extraordinary adventures, but also choose to take recreational and relaxing sojourns (Balderas-Cejudo, 2019; Bauer, 2012; Viallon, 2012). This travel trend is currently spreading to developing countries, such as China (Chen & Bao, 2020; Liu et al., 2021; Lu et al., 2016).

This paper focuses on an emerging form of tourism among older Chinese adults, which some Chinese scholars refer to as 'recreational sojourns'. Compared with the rapidly paced excursions experienced during traditional sightseeing tours, recreational sojourns can reduce trip fatigue, which meets the needs of older adults who prefer comfortable travel experiences. Furthermore, recreational sojourns involve rich daily life experiences that cannot be found in ordinary vacations (Liu et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022). This model offers a comfortable alternative to traditional sightseeing tours for the >90% of older Chinese adults who receive home-based care in China (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the PRC, 2023). Older Chinese adults choose to take recreational sojourns because this mode of travel is less constrained by economic conditions and time availability. Many international scholars suggest that senior tourism represents a brand-new type of retirement that involves more free time and fewer constraints on consumption (Fleischer & Pizam, 2002). However, older Chinese adults have relatively limited retirement incomes, which generally only meet the basic needs of home life. Furthermore, many older Chinese must take care of their more elderly parents and also help care for their grandchildren as part of their family responsibilities; hence, their available time for tourism is often constrained (Hsu et al., 2007).

Indeed, as recreational sojourns are closely intertwined with home life, they serve as a meaningful extension and enrichment of older adults' daily leisure experiences. Therefore, it is important to explore their value in improving older adults' home lives. Considering that recreational sojourns are a newly popularized form of leisure travel for older adults, no reliable studies have explored the value of happiness in home life following recreational sojourns. Accordingly, the first goal of this study is to explore older adults' happiness experiences in relation to the positive effects of recreational sojourns by analysing the connotations of happiness experiences during these recreational sojourns. Second, this study will analyse the value of these happiness experiences in how positive experiences during recreational sojourns can be transferred to older adults' home lives. This study makes a theoretical contribution to promoting an integrated perspective of the impact of tourism well-being on daily life to encourage more people to focus on the horizontal transfer of happiness between travel experiences and everyday living.

Section snippets

Recreational sojourns

To sojourn originally meant leaving one's hometown to live in another place or a foreign country. To highlight the characteristics of 'residence+tourism' in particular modes of mobility in tourism activities and distinguish them from general mobility in sightseeing tourism, some Chinese scholars associate this tourism activity with the Chinese word 'lvju' (旅居) (Wang & Su, 2021; Zhou et al., 2023). In particular, recreational sojourns are one of the more popular and mass-friendly forms of ...

Research ideas and methods

Considering the advantages of older adults' recreational sojourns and findings described in the tourism well-being literature, this study adopts the PERMA framework to interpret the happiness experiences derived from older adults' recreational sojourns. In addition, the impact of these experiences on older adults' home life is explored from a causal perspective (Fig. 1). Methodologically, we employ a configurational analysis approach – specifically, qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) – ...

Results

To form specific causal conditions, the results for happiness experiences were first downscaled via principal component analysis (PCA) and then transformed into happiness experience conditions. A QCA was then conducted to explore the process of value realization. Considering that the data mainly reflect differences in degree, fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) was used, which corresponds to multi-value and crisp-set QCA. ...

Conclusions

This study analyses the causal relationships between the happiness experiences during older adults' recreational sojourns and the utility results and explores the qualitative explanation of these results. The main conclusions are as follows (Fig. 3).

Recreational sojourns for older adults can produce happiness experiences. These experiences can be further subdivided into AE, SE, IEE, and AEE, which is consistent with the reality of older individuals. Health, psychological and social problems are ...

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Bin Liu: Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Ying Sun:** Data curation. ...

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China under Grant number 42301247. ...

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