

Happiness in a Tourism Context

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This paper introduces an empirical research project on tourists' happiness focusing on short term emotions ("golden moments"). The aim is pointing a path to a better understanding of the psychological effects of holiday travel. Some preliminary results are presented and discussed with respect to further research activities as well as to possible practical implications.

Why Happiness and Tourism?

Happiness is a basic concept and goal of the modern Bhutan society and tourism is an important source of national income in Bhutan. Thus, the search for the link between tourism and happiness seems to be a must for Bhutan.

Of course, as the term "Gross *National* Happiness" makes clear, the happiness of the *national* population is in the focus of the political and administrative activities striving to reach this desirable objective. But what about non-national people spending some time in Bhutan to explore this beautiful country on their vacations? Can they expect to find happiness here? In the promotional material for tourists to Bhutan, a claim says "Happiness is a place". In addition, offering positive feelings as well to the guests seems to be in line with a Buddhist attitude.

In Western societies, people tend to find positive feelings mainly during their leisure time, including their holiday travel. Other areas like work, religion, family, seem to be less important in this respect.

Happiness for tourists can be regarded as one of the customer values of holiday travel. Other customer values may be e.g. recreation, better health, learning a language, deeper affiliation in relationship, etc. These values are part of the holiday motivations and expectations, and, once fulfilled, turn into an outcome of the travel activity. It is this

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latter aspect, the psychological effects of holiday trips, which we plan examining more closely in this project.

Psychological Effects of Holiday Trips and the Multi-faceted Concept of Happiness

Holiday trips are supposed to have beneficial effects for the travelers. These effects may be longer lasting like *recreation, improved health, knowledge*, or more short term on a “here & now” base like *thrill* or *fun*. Short term benefits may lead to or facilitate longer lasting effects later.

Happiness is a broad construct referring to different levels, diverse mental states and different psychological concepts. Within GNH, empirically, happiness is assessed as an *attitude*, i.e. a cognitive-affective evaluation of an object (like – dislike). Here, the “object” is a detail of the perceived personal situation, which is measured like *satisfaction*, e. g. life satisfaction (“are you happy with....?”). In other studies happiness is regarded as an indicator of overall subjective well-being and refers to experiencing frequent joy and infrequent negative emotions (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013; Diener, 2000), thus a sort of average feeling over a period of time.

Regarding happiness as an enduring spiritual state (harmony, peace...) is a conceptual approach focusing more on *personality* states and traits, perhaps best described as *contentment*.

Here, we are looking on happiness as an *emotion*. As an emotion happiness is rather short term, an actual personal feeling. Cognitive components are, if at all present, only in the background. The feeling does not refer to an external object, however may be initially triggered by external objects or events. We refer to these emotions as “golden moments” during holidays.

Golden Moments during Holiday Trips – The Project

In our empirical research in order to better understand the phenomenon of happiness as an emotion (“golden moments”) during holiday trips, we combine quantitative and qualitative approaches. The methodological approach is based on earlier works of the authors on psychological effects of recreational times from work breaks over leisure activities up to vacation trips (e.g. Lohmann, 1996; De Bloom et al., 2013).

The central research question in the quantitative study is aiming here at knowing incidents and structure: “Do holiday tourists experience golden moments of happiness during their trips?”, and, if yes, how many tourists and associated with which travel characteristics or socio-demographic factors?

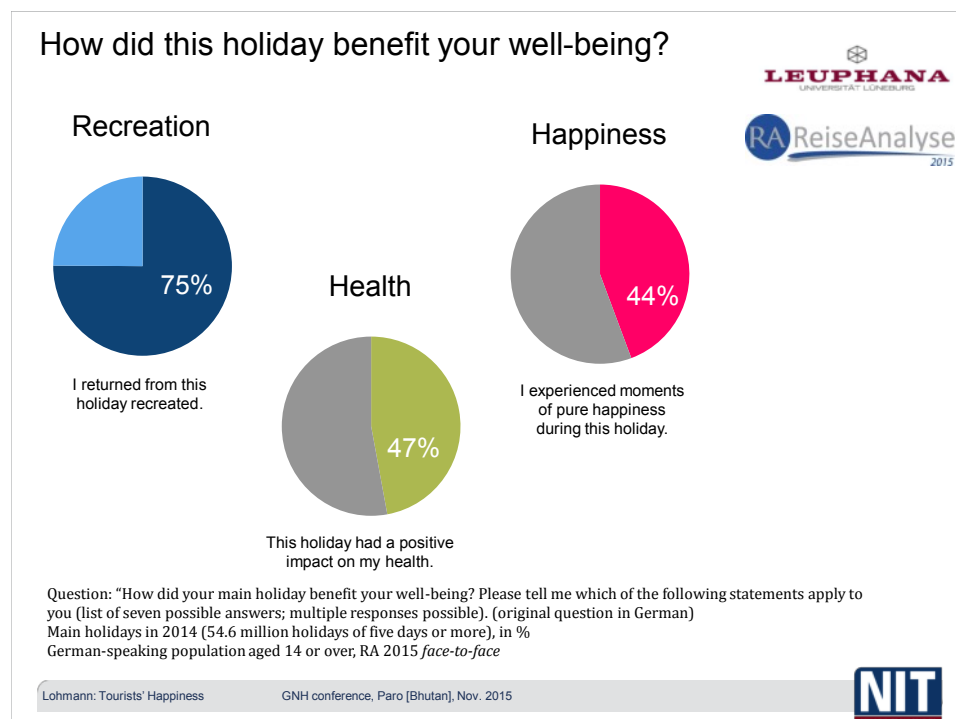
The quantitative survey was done in Germany as a source market study. Germany is one of the most important generating countries for international tourism with some 70 million holiday trips p.a. plus some 80 million short breaks (FUR, 2015; Lohmann et al., 2014). During their holidays Germans travel to destinations all around the globe (domestic: 30%; Mediterranean: 36%; long-haul: 8%). What are the effects of these trips on personal factors of well-being?

In a survey in January 2015 [“Reiseanalyse 2015” (= travel analysis), yearly survey since 1970, random sample with n = 7,500 face-to-face interviews, more information on www.reiseanalyse.de] we have studied German tourists’ trips and the perceived effects of these trips in different dimensions, covering e.g. recreation, health, and happiness (cf. fig. 1).

A considerable number of tourists report having experienced happy golden moments. We find such happiness in all demographic groups and in all tourist behavior segments. But not everybody experiences happy golden moments (“only” 44%). Preliminary results point out that the incidence of golden moments varies with personal factors (e.g. age) and trip characteristics (e.g. distance). When we look at destinations the share of tourists experiencing golden moments during their holidays is higher with long-haul travel, i.e. trips with destinations in Asia, Africa or the Americas and Australia/Oceania.

In general, the more activities a tourist uses, the longer she/he travels, the higher the probability of golden moments. The probability seems to raise further with an inspiring travel companion.

Figure 1: Reported Psychological Effects of Holiday Travel



Further analyses of the quantitative data will show in more detail personal factors (who is experiencing happiness during holidays?) and tourism product features (which kind of travel – timing, destination, companionship, spending patterns etc.) related to the experience of happiness.

In addition to the quantitative approach, we try to get deeper insights into the role of happiness (or other potential benefits) for holiday tourists with the help of small exploratory, qualitative studies (semi-structured interviews) in Germany and other European countries. The central research questions in these qualitative parts of the project aim at understanding golden moments: What is the nature of these golden moments experienced? In which moments/situations do tourists experience happiness? What is specific for this experience (what is happiness? What is the difference between someone being happy and another one not happy?). What are the drivers for such benefits? What do travelers really do in order to gain such benefits? What are the triggers in the social or natural environment? What happens before and after a golden moment? Results will offer ideas on what constitutes happy moments (phenomenology), the feelings associated, and the situations in which happiness occurs.

First insights from this approach show that - after some initial hesitation - in the in-depth interviews tourists can describe “golden moments” of happiness. The golden moments reported are different, in a way personal and subjective but as well depending on the features of the respective destination.

Preliminary categories of golden moments of happiness include emotions related to among others

- Success (self-esteem based e.g. on an unusual activity [“Self-effectiveness”])
- Remembering (including finding a new perspective based on the combination of memories and the actual situation, sort of reframing)
- New experiences (including spiritual experiences, but as well admiring nature)
- Freedom, ease (“Self-determination”)
- Togetherness (friends, family)

Golden moments often arise in rather specific situations, e.g. when admiring natural beauty (maybe a waterfall), but there is no fixed relationship (not everybody experiences happiness at the waterfall, and not every time). Thus, there must be additional factors. We assume that in addition to the trigger and its time and place the social environment and personal factors like readiness play an important role.

Discussion and Outlook

Apparently, the quantitative data needs additional and deeper analysis as well as the qualitative approach. We plan to continue both the empirical research (additional qualitative studies) and the analytical work together with a stronger relation to the state of knowledge in this field. The expected results will be helpful to better understand the psychological processes underlying happiness as well as relevant for planning better products and/or a more customer oriented communication in tourism.

Nevertheless, even now some evidence and insights may be derived from the present state of the project. We have evidence that

- Experiencing golden Moments is a personal thing, depending on stimulus, situative context factors (e.g. physical, social), and personal factors.
- Golden moments are a pleasant experience and of subjective value, even when not followed by a positive effect on another dimension.
- Golden moments may create a basis for longer lasting effects of holidays.

One may argue, however, that it is not the holiday or the holiday travel leading directly to emotions of happiness. But during holiday trips the conditions for experiencing happiness are quite good. While on vacation, the probability of running into emotional triggers is higher and the traveler meets these triggers with a greater readiness and responsiveness (open-mindedness). Happiness trigger may be simple things like physical stimuli through e.g. sun, wind, or rain, activating our psycho-physiological system. Feeling embedded in positive social relations may be a condition and resource for happiness as are fresh air and physical exercise. All this applies to holiday tourists: They spend a lot of time outside and meet more different physical stimuli compared to everyday life. Social contacts are self-selected and more in-depth as during the daily routines at home.

Generally, the tourism industry and academics should pay more attention to the effects of holiday travel, as these effects determine the final customer value of the tourist product. For a holiday destination country like Bhutan a better understanding of customer values and expected effects of a holiday can help with product development and marketing communication in tourism. Like in other service industries, one may claim, at least to some extent, a responsibility of the supplier for the outcome of the service interaction: More happy tourists and/or happier tourists as a result of product design, segmentation, and communication. The means to generate happiness for tourists, probably different from those for residents, should be examined more closely.

Keywords: Consumer benefits in tourism; tourism demand; happiness, tourism psychology, Germany

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Jessica de Bloom was born 1983 in Lingen (Germany). She studied Psychology in the Netherlands at the Twente University. Jessica obtained a Doctoral degree in 2012 at the Radboud University, Nijmegen (Netherlands).

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