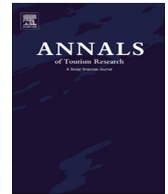




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Positive emotions and spirituality in older travelers



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the potential of travel to generate self-transcendent positive emotions and contribute to the spirituality of travelers. Senior travelers are chosen as the target group for this research as spirituality and focus on emotions are salient characteristics of older adults. Sixteen depth interviews are conducted with experienced travelers aged 60–85. Content analysis reveals that travelling generates three categories of self-transcendent positive emotions including awe of natural beauty and Man's harmonious relationship with nature, awe of manmade heritage and artistic beauty, admiration of other people and appreciation of kindness. Respondents also describe how travelling positively influences their spirituality by giving a positive meaning to their lives and nurturing their reflection on the meaning of life.

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Introduction

Research investigating the relationships between leisure travel and overall life satisfaction is emerging in tourism research. Recent studies demonstrate that holiday taking contributes to well-being (Guilbert & Abdullah, 2004; McCabe & Johnson, 2013) and quality of life (Dolnicar, Yanamandram, & Cliff, 2012). For the purpose of understanding the links between leisure travel and life satisfaction, the incorporation of principles from positive psychology has been recommended (Filep, 2012). Positive psychology is a recent stream in psychology which focuses on “*positive subjective experiences, positive individual traits and positive institutions promises to improve quality of life and prevent the pathologies that arise when life is barren and meaningless*” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014, p. 279). Positive emotions and spirituality are two central concepts in positive psychology. Early results in tourism and quality-of-life research show that leisure travel is a substantial source of positive emotions and has the potential to foster well-being outcomes (Mitas, Yarnal, Adams, and Ram, 2012; Coghlan, 2015). The beneficial impact of positive emotions experienced during leisure travel can be expected in the leisure domain itself but also, indirectly, in other domains of life including spiritual life (Sirgy, 2010). Saroglou, Buxant, and Tilquin (2008) suggest that self-transcendent emotions, a specific type of positive emotions, lead to spirituality.

Previous research has investigated the link between leisure tourism and spirituality. Outside religious tourism, which is obviously a form of tourism closely associated with spirituality, it has been suggested that in secular societies, tourism can be considered as a source of spiritual meaning. Some specific forms of tourism such as rural tourism can even be considered as spiritual experiences by travelers (Sharpley & Jepson, 2011). For specific groups of travelers such as senior tourists, spirituality has been identified as a determinant of travel motivations (Moal-Ulvoas, 2014), and travel identified as an activity which, while taking place outside the spiritual domain, generates spiritual benefits for older travelers (Moal-Ulvoas & Taylor, 2014). The present research investigates the potential offered by leisure travel to generate self-transcendent positive emotions and to act as a catalyst for the spiritual development of travelers. Older travelers aged 60 and beyond are chosen as the

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study group for this research as spirituality (Fowler, 1981) and the focus on positive emotions (Carstensen, 1993) are two salient characteristics of the elderly. Next, as a more vulnerable category of tourists, they deserve specific attention and the choice of a quality-of-life research approach relying on positive psychology is relevant to better understand the benefits they can derive from travelling. Last but not least, they represent a third of the world tourism industry in the current context of population aging. As a strategic target for tourism professionals, they are the focus of increasing attention in the design of travel experiences tailored to their specific needs, for which the understanding of the role of emotions in their travel experience is a key element.

The first section of this paper presents theoretical elements related to the spirituality of older adults, the role of self-transcendent positive emotions in spirituality, and the link between spirituality and tourism. Methodological perspectives follow. Next, the results of sixteen depth interviews with senior travelers aged 60–85 are presented, revealing three categories of self-transcendent positive emotions experienced by the respondents: awe of natural beauty and Man's harmonious relationship with nature, awe of manmade heritage and artistic beauty, admiration of other people and appreciation of kindness, and what can be described as spiritual experiences by older adults. The paper ends with conclusions and suggestions for future research.

The spirituality of older adults

Spirituality has to do with the meaning of life. It can be defined as “the individual construction of the meaning of one's life, the dimensions of which are the inner self, alterity (other humans and nature) and the sacred” (Moal-Ulvoas, 2014). Spirituality appeals to each individual's ability for transcendence to interconnect the various dimensions of his/her spirituality to generate meaning, more specifically the meaning of his/her life. Spiritual development is a chronological process which spans over a lifetime (Fowler, 1981). The last quarter of life is a key period to finalize one's spiritual development and achieve spiritual maturity. Spirituality is thus a salient characteristic of older adults and the result of the combination of different factors. First, older adults are at a stage in life where they think more and more often about death and need to find a meaning to it. Indeed, the increasing number of their age peers who disappear before them creates an increasing consciousness of their own mortality. This can generate strong anxiety (Urie & Kilbourne, 2008), which spiritual growth can help reduce, as it involves finding the meaning of one's life and death and a reflection on after life (Ita, 1995). Second, older adults have to deal with the losses associated with ageing which include changes in physical well-being, mental sharpness, the frequency and the type of social interactions. It is also possible that the older adult experiences negative reactions from his environment related to his ageing, leading to the phenomenon of ageism (which is a negative consideration of a person related to his ageing). Such negative reactions are experienced as aggressions, which create a need for the older adult to defend himself against them. Spiritual development is thus a mechanism which enables older adults to cope with the losses associated with age and to defend themselves against age related aggressions (Atchley, 1997; Mattes, 2005; McFadden, 1996). Third, older adults enjoy a greater capacity to integrate cognitive and emotional perspectives (Labouvie-Vief, DeVoe, & Bulka, 1989) and a greater personal autonomy and sensitivity to context and relativism (Fowler, 1981). This, associated with maturity, contributes to their spiritual development and leads to the observation of advanced stages of spiritual development at old age. According to Tornstam (2005), the spirituality of older adults stems as much from their cognitive maturity as from their ability for gerotranscendence which he describes as a “*shift from a rational and materialist perspective to an increasingly cosmic and transcendent one*”. Gerotranscendence is the ultimate stage towards maturity and wisdom. It relies on the older adult's predisposition for the integration of life's cosmic or transcendent dimension, the link between life and death and the mystery of life. Finally, older adults have completed their parental duties and the education of their children. They are therefore more available to look inside themselves and at the world which surrounds them, so as to lead the quest for their more spiritual dimension (Jung, 1943, 1964).

Older adults are therefore characterized by either advanced stages of spiritual development or intense spiritual growth. Spiritual growth results in spiritual maturity and spiritual well-being. Spiritual maturity is associated with finding the meaning and the aim of one's life and is associated with a certain number of benefits. The first one is the ability to appreciate and benefit from the gains associated with ageing, as the spiritually mature adult is able to open himself more deeply to his inner self and the beauty of the environment he lives in, the latter becoming a source of intense joy. Ageing cannot be perceived negatively at that stage, since it leads to inner peace and a greater intensity in the relationships with alterity, in both its human and natural dimensions (Bergeron, 1999). The second benefit comes from the fact that spiritual maturity enables older adults to better accept the changes associated with ageing and to find some meaning to illness when it occurs. This contributes to reducing the stress associated with sickness and ageing as the older adult who enjoys inner peace is able to better accept the limits of the environment he lives in and will not try to influence its balance.

In other words, self-determined peace establishes a stable human environment that is well suited to the older adult. Spiritual maturity gives older adults the meaning of life, especially its last years. Spirituality thus provides a framework for the analysis of the meaning of the last years of life, which involves accepting one's life as a whole. The last years can take a positive meaning, of time used to enjoy what one has accomplished earlier and to reconcile with the events and the people which require it.

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