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# Social scarcity and tourist's life satisfaction: An empirical and theoretical analysis

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**Abstract**

This paper presents the results of an analysis that compared two types of tourists who hold a different view of and interact differently with their surrounding environment. It evidenced that more consumptive and consumer-oriented tourists are normally less happy than those practising more appreciative and sharing-oriented activities. To explain the differential, it offers a theoretical interpretation based on the idea that individual choices are not autonomous and independent, and that aspects like comparisons, observability of possessions and level of competition in the reference group may dampen the effect of various correlates on people's life satisfaction.

**KEYWORDS**

appreciative tourism, Blinder–Oaxaca decomposition method, consumptive tourism, life satisfaction, social comparison

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The debate on happiness dates back to the ancient Greek philosophers. While the issue of subjective evaluations of life has been widely investigated in psychology and sociology, it only became a research topic in economics after Easterlin's seminal paper (Easterlin, 1974). He showed that economic growth did not automatically translate into greater life satisfaction,<sup>1</sup> at least once basic needs are met (Easterlin paradox). From the 1990s on, empirical and experimental economic research have revealed other traits which together with income, tangible goods and services, may affect people's well-being (for a review of the literature, see Frey & Stutzer, 2002a, 2002b; Kahneman et al., 1999; Powdthavee, 2007). Many studies have looked for correlations between socio-demographic, institutional and contextual variables (e.g., social relationships, social capital, trust, quality of public services, equity) and self-reported happiness (Blanchflower, 1996; Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004; Frey & Stutzer, 2000; Helliwell, 2003; Veenhoven, 2000).

In recent decades, leisure and social interaction has been considered among the dimensions/domains to account for in measuring well-being (EUROSTAT, 2020). Tourism, as a leisure activity, has received particular consideration. It has been shown that it contributes to subjective well-being (SWB), because it allows people to build social relationships, interact with different cultures, and experience positive emotions (Iwasaki, 2007; McCabe & Johnson, 2013; Neal et al., 2007; Sirgy et al., 2011). This is in line with research highlighting that relational goods and social capital in general are valuable determinants of individual wellbeing (Bruni & Stanca, 2008; Diener & Seligman, 2009).

While it is now broadly recognised that tourism contributes to individual happiness, it has only recently been asked whether certain types of tourism contribute more than others. For example, Bimonte and Faralla (2012, 2015) investigated the relationship between life satisfaction and the activities tourists engage in while on vacation. The key question they posed was: in terms of impact on individual happiness, are all types of activity equivalent? They found that

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appreciative tourists presented different attitudes and reported a higher score in term of SWB compared to more consumptive type of tourists. Although statistically significant, results were not tested for the tourist's socio-demographic characteristics. The latter issue was an aspect addressed by Bimonte (2022). It represents the starting point of this paper.

However, as it is often the case in the tourism research, despite indisputable efforts to give the research a theoretical basis, most studies tend to be basically exploratory and descriptive in nature. There is an undeniable dearth of theoretical research capable of generalising the empirical results (Deery et al., 2012). Therefore, building on the above mentioned line of investigation and empirical findings on the impact of social comparison on individual happiness, we delved into the relation between type of tourism and SWB, and developed a theoretical model to interpret why certain types of tourism promise a different level of happiness. The theoretical interpretation advanced has its roots in the concepts of social scarcity and choice interdependence. It distinguishes between *ex ante* tourist choice aimed at maximising utility, given her/his preferences, and *ex post* tourist satisfaction, that we assume depending, among the others, on the 'environmental setting' of the vacation.

In particular, the main theoretical hypothesis developed in this paper is:

**H1.** *Comparison and interdependence of choice undermine people's capacity to enjoy things (obtain utility), therefore reducing their satisfaction with life.*

**H2.** *The higher the observability of possessions and competitiveness in the reference group, the higher the impact of comparison and interdependence on life satisfaction.*

On the basis of these hypotheses, we investigated the following question:

**Q1.** *Do types of tourism having different levels of comparison, interdependence of choice and observability of possessions contribute differently to life satisfaction?*

To answer this question, we carried out an empirical analysis comparing two type of tourists who hold a different view of and interact differently with their surroundings (environmental and social). To such aim, we compared two type of tourists who have a very different way of interacting with and appraising their surroundings, that is, *nature* tourists and *beach* tourists. We assumed them as representative of two broad categories: green and more massive forms of tourism. To test our hypothesis, that is, whether the two type of tourism pay a different 'return' in terms of happiness, we replicated the analysis carried out by Bimonte (2022), based on the Blinder–Oaxaca decomposition method (Blinder, 1973; Oaxaca, 1973). It allows to test for differences in happiness between tourist types and determine to what extent they are related to differences in socio-demographic characteristics (endowment) of tourists (explained difference) or other

aspects (unexplained difference), presumably the type of tourist or the activities engaged in. It allows to deliver new insights and overcome some limits of the previous mentioned work. Before to go through the model and empirical analysis, we present an essential reference literature on the determinants of happiness.

## 2 | DETERMINANTS OF HAPPINESS: REVIEW OF ESSENTIAL LITERATURE

From current happiness research (Diener et al., 1999; Diener & Seligman, 2009), we know that endogenous and exogenous factors influence individual wellbeing. Frey and Stutzer (2002a) categorised five groups of elements that can help identify and interpret the main aspects of individual happiness/unhappiness. They classified them as personality, socio-demographic, economic, contextual-situational and institutional factors.

With regard to economic factors, times series analyses show a stylised fact known as the 'Easterlin paradox': happiness increases with income until basic needs are met, after which adaptation seems to occur and contentment ceases to increase (hedonic treadmill hypothesis) (Brickman & Campbell, 1971; Folkman, 1997). Researchers showed that in a long-term perspective, income does not affect people's wellbeing and other factors seem to come into play. The important role played by social comparisons was recently pointed out (Frey & Stutzer, 2002b). Social comparisons not only concern relative income but also other economic domains, such as unemployment and environmental factors, which have consistently been linked to life satisfaction (Clark, 2001, 2003). For these other domains, however, adaptation and coping seem to occur more slowly than for income. Easterlin (2003) emphasised that adaptation might differ across different fields depending on individual aspirations. He advised that adaptation occurs more easily for domains in which aspirations adjust to changes in the domain itself. Income is a classic example (Rainwater, 1994).

Scholars have also stressed that the relationship between income and happiness may be mediated by psychological factors, like those connected with ideology and faith (Diener & Seligman, 2004); for example, the effects of income appear smaller among liberals (Alesina et al., 2004) and believers (Lelkes, 2002). Personality and socio-demographic factors also affect happiness (Diener & Lucas, 1999; Frey & Stutzer, 2002a). Aspects such as education and situational context have been found to influence life satisfaction inasmuch as they facilitate the achievement of individual goals, whether economic or social (Diener & Fujita, 1995; Oishi et al., 1999).

Among non-economic variables, contextual and situational factors have received attention as determinants of wellbeing. For example, empirical research shows a positive correlation between health and happiness (Lyubomirsky et al., 2006; Murrell et al., 2003; Wilson, 1967). This correlation emerges particularly when testing for correlations between SWB and perceived health status rather than with objective health data (Okun & George, 1984; Watten et al., 1997). As happens for income, it is worth noting that a number

of studies found inverse causality between health and happiness, using the latter as a proxy for present and future health status (Devins et al., 1990; Ostir et al., 2000; Vázquez et al., 2004). A positive correlation also emerged with aspects such as job satisfaction, living conditions and social relationships, especially marriage (Frey & Stutzer, 2005).

With regard to institutional factors, empirical research shows that they particularly affect happiness in the framework of social capital formation. The progressive deterioration of relational goods, which are basic components of social capital, erodes individual life satisfaction (Diener & Seligman, 2002; Helliwell, 2003; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001) and is highly correlated with psychological problems such as depression (Hammen & Brennan, 2002).

The above review highlights the multiplicity of factors affecting individual happiness. A new line of research concerns the relationship between tourism and SWB (Gilbert & Abdullah, 2004; Pearce et al., 2010; Sirgy et al., 2011; Uysal et al., 2016; Vada et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2022).<sup>2</sup> Tourism and travel are thought to improve SWB, because they facilitate and enhance social relationships, knowledge and family cohesion (Brajša-Žganec et al., 2011; Iwasaki, 2007; Lehto et al., 2009; McCabe, 2009; Rodríguez et al., 2008; Sirgy et al., 2011).

Various studies also indicate that certain types of tourism or activities contribute more than others to people's happiness. Kay Smith and Diekmann (2017) assert that some forms of tourism, like retreat tourism and volunteer tourism, may have more eudaimonic or long-term benefits, which is not necessarily true for the usual tourism experiences. McCabe and Johnson (2013) showed that participation in a holiday for disadvantaged groups enhanced aspects of SWB and overall life satisfaction. Gillet et al. (2016) investigated the role of photography on vacation and found a positive relationship between this activity and SWB, especially for those for whom photography is a form of social interaction and not an end in itself. Schmitt et al. (2018) and Welsch (2020) investigated the relationship between pro-environmental behaviour and SWB, while Bimonte and Faralla (2012, 2015) investigated the relationship between types of tourism (and activities) and self-reported happiness. They found that those practising more appreciative activities, as opposed to consumptive forms of tourism, had a higher probability to report a higher level of happiness. Bimonte (2022) confirmed this result. He explained the difference in term of motivations, intrinsic versus extrinsic, and made also a quick reference to the role played by social scarcity. However, also due to its slant (more didactic), the paper did not develop this latter issue.

These studies highlight the importance of various factors that may explain differences in tourist life satisfaction. Here we aim to enrich or complement previous interpretations by offering additional empirical evidence and theoretical explanations. To test whether different types of tourism ensure different return in terms of happiness, we make use of the Blinder–Oaxaca decomposition method (Blinder, 1973; Oaxaca, 1973) to take into consideration the impact of individual's characteristics on reported happiness. Together with testing for differences in the response variable (happiness), it allows to determine to what extent it is related to differences in the endowment of individuals (explained difference) or other features

(unexplained difference). The theoretical interpretation we advance has its roots in social scarcity, comparisons and interdependence of choice, all closely related to individual motivations. This is an aspect touched upon, but not developed, by Bimonte (2022). According to our hypothesis, comparisons and interdependence help to explain why tourists who engage in greener and sharing-oriented activities (such as nature-based tourism) are normally more satisfied with their life than those engaging in more massive and consumer-oriented activities (such as beach resort tourism).

### 3 | TOURIST ACTIVITIES AND HAPPINESS: AN INTERPRETATIVE PARADIGM

According to Hirsch, economic growth implies that an increasing portion of consumption takes on a social as well as an individual aspect, so that 'the satisfaction that individuals derive from goods and services depends in increasing measure not only on their own consumption but on consumption by others as well' (Hirsch, 1976, p. 2). He sustained that positional goods are 'either scarce in some absolute or socially imposed sense or subject to congestion and crowding through more extensive use' (Hirsch, 1976, p. 27). This means that in certain circumstances, what matters is not the absolute level of income, consumption and wealth, but rather one's relative position (Ferrer-I-Carbonell, 2004), a concept that dates back to Veblen (1899). Individual happiness therefore depends on individual possessions, as well as on the possessions of a reference group (keeping up with the Joneses). This is especially true when possessions and purchasing activity happen in a context that makes comparison observable.

The fact that consumption may not be evaluated on an absolute basis hails back to the origins of economics as a social science; for example, Mill (1907) maintained that 'men do not desire to be rich, but to be richer than other men'. Solnick and Hemenway (1998) conducted a survey which found that people preferred to make more money than others even at the cost of having less money in absolute terms.

In the author's opinion, this is also true in tourism. To explain the effect of a tourist activity on individual satisfaction, the independent and interdependent parts of consumption choices must be considered. This latter has been neglected by standard neoclassical theory. It accustomed us to think of the demand curve for a private good as being independent (in consumption, no interaction occurs), continuous and decreasing (showing decreasing marginal utility). Economists generally assume that economic agents are utility maximisers, so their choices (demand) accurately reflect their true preferences. But how and whether an activity or rational purchasing choice contributes to individual satisfaction is a more complicated issue. It may depend on various aspects.

This issue has been widely evidenced and investigated in the literature on the relationship between possession and happiness (Carter & Gilovich, 2012; Van Boven, 2005; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). For example Kasser (2002) proposed that materialistic values undermine various aspects of life, reducing people's ability to enjoy things,

therefore threatening their satisfaction with life (for a review see Tsang et al., 2014). Kasser and Ryan (1993) assert that individuals characterised by intrinsic motivations tend to be more satisfied with their lives than those characterised by extrinsic ones.

In the following model, we assume that individual choices are not independent and that comparisons affect the way in which a choice contributes to people's satisfaction. In the light of this hypothesis and using Hirsch's definition, we write a function in which happiness relates to two components that we call 'private', represented by the vacation selected according to the tourist's preferences, and 'social', where positional aspects prevail:

$$H_i = f(P_i, S_i)$$

where  $P_i$  is the private component, that is, the vacation selected by tourist  $i$ , consistent with her/his preferences, and  $S_i$  is the social component. We assume that the two components are positively related to happiness. We also assume that  $S_i$  depends on a status variable and on the level of cooperation/competition prevailing in the reference community:

$$S_i = g(Y_i, Y_s, C)$$

where  $Y_i$  is the level of  $i$ 's status variable (it can be understood generically as income or any other positional good: trendy clothes, car, yacht, etc.),  $Y_s$  is the level of the status variable in the reference group and  $C$  is the level of competition (intensity of comparison) prevailing in the community or perceived by individual  $i$ , which depends among other things on the context (e.g., gala dinner as opposed to an informal dinner with friends). Given our aim, we concentrate on the second (social) component, since the first has already been explained and interpreted in the standard economic models. In our view, the social component affects the way in which a rational purchasing choice (vacation), consistent with the utility maximiser agent' preferences, contributes to individual satisfaction.

The relation has the following assumed properties:

$$S'_{Y_i} = \frac{dS_i}{dY_i} > 0; \quad S''_{Y_i} = \frac{d^2S_i}{dY_i^2} < 0;$$

$$S'_{Y_s} = \frac{dS_i}{dY_s} < 0; \quad S''_{Y_s} = \frac{d^2S_i}{dY_s^2} > 0;$$

$$S'_C = \frac{dS_i}{dC} < 0; \quad S''_C = \frac{d^2S_i}{dC^2} > 0.$$

It describes a situation where three assumptions hold, that is, that individual  $i$ 's happiness is: (i) positively related to the level of her/his positional good  $Y_i$ , the marginal effect of which is decreasing; (ii) negatively affected by the level of the reference group's positional good  $Y_s$ , the marginal impact of which is decreasing; (iii) negatively related to the intensity of competition/comparison ( $C$ ) prevailing in the reference group or community, with a decreasing effect.

Now, according to our interpretation, tourists (economic agents) choose their vacation (activities) according to their preferences, in order to maximise their ex ante utility. This is what the standard neoclassical theory tells us. But the way in which the vacation (activity) affects the (ex post) tourists individual satisfaction depends (among the others) on the social component. The latter's impact depends on the 'environmental setting', that is, on the observability of possessions in the reference group (so-called *conspicuous consumption*, a notion coined by Veblen (1899) to identify purchases calculated to impress other people) and the prevailing social rules, that is, competitiveness in the reference community.

Under this hypothesis, we would expect types of tourism with higher level of comparison, interdependence of choice and observability of possession to yield a lower return in term of happiness. To test for a gap in tourists' happiness, we compared *nature* and *beach* tourists. The results of our empirical analysis are presented in the next section.

## 4 | NATURE VERSUS BEACH TOURIST: METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

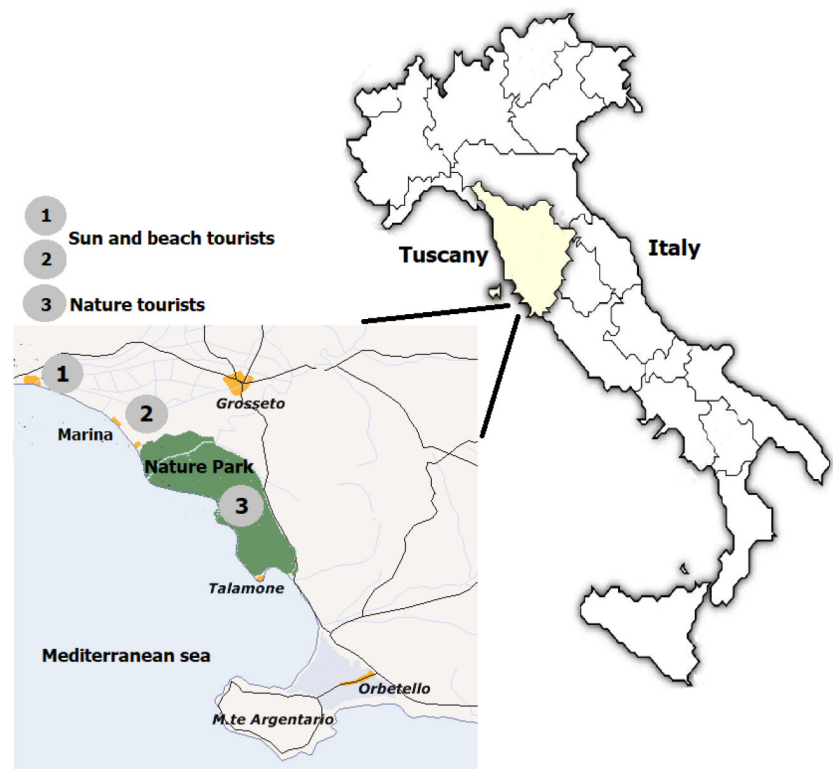
### 4.1 | Study site and sample procedure and characteristics

To develop our analysis, we used data from a survey carried out on the south coast of Tuscany, a well-known beach and nature tourism destination (Figure 1). Using a systematic sampling procedure, tourists were segmented according to the activities they engaged in, that is, nature tourists who visited and appreciated the nature park in the area, and beach tourists whose main interest was to enjoy the sea, sand and sun without visiting the park. These two subsamples are mutually exclusive, because beach tourists were asked to declare whether they had visited the nature park during their holidays in the area.

Building on and enlarging the classifications of Dunlap and Hefernan (1975) and Geisler et al. (1977), we defined the former as Nature tourists (N), that is, people who practice appreciation-oriented activities (walking, sightseeing) that entail enjoying the surroundings without altering it and share experiences; the latter Beach tourists (B), that is, vacationers who are involved in consumer-oriented activities that also reflect an utilitarian view of the surroundings, where competition prevails over sharing. We assumed them as representative of the two broad categories of tourists characterised by different motivations, behaviour, and way of interacting with and appraising their surroundings, that is, green and mass tourists (Naumov & Green, 2016; Pintassilgo, 2016).

Following a now common and widespread procedure (Cummins & Gullone, 2000; Frey & Stutzer, 2002a; OECD, 2013; Van Praag, 2007; Veenhoven, 2007), respondents were first invited to assess their satisfaction with life on a 10-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (unhappy) to 10 (very happy). Then, they were asked to indicate what were the

**FIGURE 1** Nature Park of Maremma and surrounding area. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



most important thing for a happy life. The subsequent questions aimed at recording behaviours, spending habit, and sociodemographic characteristics. The main individual characteristics (endowment) are presented in Table 1.

Around 62% of nature tourists claimed to buy local and organic products, against 39% of Beach tourists. Almost half of the former invested more than 10% of their daily outlay in the purchase of these products, with 14% spending more than 30%. These figures are 38% and 6% respectively for beach tourists. Moreover, while 78% of nature tourists declared that local and organic brands influence their consumer choices, this is so for only 56% of beach tourists. As for accommodation and typology of restaurant elected for meals, 29% and 75% of the former preferred farms (agriturismo) and typical local restaurants respectively. This is true for 8% and 42% of the latter. All these differences were statistically significant ( $p$  value <0.001). Differences emerged also in term of personal beliefs. In fact, compared to beach tourists, park visitors assigned higher importance to immaterial aspects (sentimental situation, social relationships) and lower relevance to material domains (income and social position) as determinants of individual wellbeing. Together with the different activities practised by tourists, all these aspects are congruent with our previous definition.

## 4.2 | Methods

In order to sort out the extent to which differences in the reported life satisfaction of the two groups of tourists depended on individual

socio-demographic characteristics (endowment) or individual preferences, as expressed by the type of tourism, we run a regression using the Blinder–Oaxaca method (Blinder, 1973; Oaxaca, 1973). The Blinder–Oaxaca method, in fact, allows to decompose the difference in the means of an outcome variable between two groups into components and to discover how much of the gap depends on differences in observable determinants (explanatory variables), and how much on differences in the effects of these determinants (regression coefficients), that is, it calculates how much of the gap is due to differences in the individual socio-demographic characteristic (explained difference) and what part depends on other factors (unexplained difference).

We formally tested whether the observed raw data difference in happiness between tourists ( $T$ ), with  $T \in \{N, B\}$ , was explained by differences in the socio-demographic characteristics (endowment) of individuals of the two groups. Referring to groups  $N$  and  $B$ , the observed gap in life satisfaction is the difference in the mean outcomes (happiness) of observations denoted as  $\bar{H}_N$  and  $\bar{H}_B$ , respectively. Thus, we ran the decomposition using the coefficients  $\hat{\beta}^*$  from a pooled model over both groups as the reference coefficient. The estimated equation is the following:

$$\bar{H}_N - \bar{H}_B = (\bar{x}_N - \bar{x}_B)' \times \hat{\beta}^* + \bar{x}_N' \times (\hat{\beta}_N - \hat{\beta}_B)$$

where  $(\bar{x}_N - \bar{x}_B)' \times \hat{\beta}^*$  is the part explained by differences in the endowments of the explanatory variables and  $\bar{x}_N' \times (\hat{\beta}_N - \hat{\beta}_B)$  the unexplained part. The results are shown in Table 2.<sup>3</sup>

**TABLE 1** Main sociodemographic characteristics.

Socio-demographic characteristics	Type of tourist	
	Nature	Beach
<i>Sex</i>		
Male	46	48
Female	54	52
<i>Region of origin</i>		
Tuscany or neighbouring	48,6	80,0
Other regions	51,4	20,0
<i>Age</i>		
Median	43,6	45,2
SD	(12,52)	(12,86)
<i>Education</i>		
High school diploma or lower	61,0	76,3
Degree or higher	39,0	23,7
<i>Political view</i>		
Left and centre-left	68,5	46,7
Right and centre-right	8,6	29,6
NA	22,9	23,7
<i>Believer</i>		
Yes	60,0	68,1
No	34,3	16,3
NA	5,7	15,6
<i>Employment status</i>		
Full time	67,6	54,8
Self-employed	3,8	17,8
Retired	11,4	11,9
Part-time	6,7	5,9
Student	6,7	3,0
Other	3,8	6,7

Our results evidenced a gap in the reported happiness and confirmed that nature tourists (*N*) have a higher 'return' in terms of SWB than beach tourists (*B*). The gap (0.57) is significant and cannot be explained in terms of differences in endowments (personal and social characteristics) ( $p$  value = 0.383) but depends on other unexplained features (coefficients) ( $p$  value = 0.067), presumably the type of tourism.

### 4.3 | Discussion and interpretation of the results

These findings are consistent and amend those presented by Bimonte and Faralla (2012). The methodology showed that results are independent of the individual's socio-demographic characteristics. The different return on happiness depends on unexplained features, that in our view is the type of tourists one belongs to. Unlike other studies, that normally only refers to the independent component of consumption, the explanation we offer builds on the model presented above.

In line with experimental research, we put forward the idea that 'economic agents' (in this case tourists) may not appraise things for what they are, but for their capacity to enable other pursuits, and contextual aspects, such as comparisons, may also affect individual happiness. In other words, we share the idea that individual choices are not autonomous and independent (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004; Frey & Stutzer, 2002b; McBride, 2001). This phenomenon is normally described in terms of motivation, which may be intrinsic, namely triggered by internal rewards, or extrinsic, namely driven by external rewards (i.e., money, recognition, etc.). Empirical research has evidenced that the pursuit of material possessions and status may be risky for personal happiness (DeLeire & Kalil, 2010; Helliwell, 2003; Kasser, 2002).

The previous aspects can give us a way to interpret the gap in tourists' happiness. In particular, to the author's opinion, the gap in tourists' happiness, among the others, can be explained in terms of the difference in the level of the interdependent component that characterises various types of tourist activities and settings. In the more consumptive types, social scarcity, which refers to the relative standings of different individuals, emerges in a more pronounced way, and the 'environmental setting', in term of observability of possessions and competitiveness, in which it occurs may exacerbate it. Social scarcity is less pronounced (if not absent) in the case of appreciative activities, while the environmental setting makes possessions less observable. In the more appreciative type of tourism, individuals are more likely to interact and share, and comparisons do not emerge, or if they exist, are less effective because of the way activities happen. Individuals appraise themselves as peers sharing an experience. In some senses, there is no reference group on vacation. In Scitovsky (1976)'s words, we can say that appreciative tourists aim for pleasure, while consumptive tourists look for comfort. In other words, the former's main 'path to happiness' is eudaimonia, while the latter's is hedonia, although the two paths are not mutually exclusive (for a review of the literature see Ryan & Deci, 2001, among others).

For example, it is standard practice to greet people when walking in the countryside or on a mountain trail. Greetings are units of social interaction (Kendon, 1990). They are a way to move interlocutors from physical co-presence into social co-presence (Nilsson et al., 2020). Unlike in other places (in town, on the beach), greeting fellows in country settings is not a routine but an ancient custom. As stated by Biagioli (2022), on the trail, people are all peers and feel united by a common choice.

In the case of consumptive form of tourism, aspects of consumerism and materialism emerge, and extrinsic motivations tend to prevail. Individuals perceive others as antagonists and competitors while engaged in the same activity. In some senses, on vacation they replicate their everyday lifestyle. This makes it more difficult for true relationships and connectedness to arise, eliciting conflict and feelings of alienation (Kasser, 2002). At the same time, interactions with members of one's own reference group are more pronounced, facilitating comparisons. Comparisons may concern economic and non-economic, material and immaterial aspects. For example, some people actively try to lose weight in order to have the perfect body to show on the

**TABLE 2** Blinder–Oaxaca decomposition.

	Coef.	SE	z	$p >  z $
Beach tourists ( <i>mean</i> )	7.525926	0.197654	38.08	0.000
Nature tourists ( <i>mean</i> )	8.093923	0.155689	51.99	0.000
Difference ( $\Delta$ <i>mean</i> )	−0.5679967	0.251607	−2.26	0.024
Explained	−0.0641528	0.073506	−0.87	0.383
Unexplained	−0.5038439	0.275463	−1.83	0.067

Note: Difference = Explained + Unexplained.

beach. This can be stressful and risky. In fact, even if the person is satisfied (*ex ante*) with the results, satisfaction may be frustrated (*ex post*) by comparison with other members of the reference group. There is ample literature on the effect of exposure to images of attractive models on self-esteem and negative mood (see Jung & Lennon, 2003). In our interpretation, all these things are detrimental to consumptive tourist happiness.

In the spirit of the previous explanation, it is somehow not relevant to discuss of whether is the type of tourist one belongs to (nature vs. beach) that explains the gap or the type of people that select certain type of vacation. In fact, when performing activities people put ideas into practice (Leiper, 1990). In their choices, people are normally driven by at least two self-concept motives: self-esteem and self-consistency. The former concerns the search for experiences that enhance self-concept; the latter concerns attempts to behave consistently with one's view of oneself (Sirgy, 1982).

It is widely accepted that travel is a human activity driven basically by motivational forces arising from physiological or psychological needs. These forces stimulate behaviours and actions that aim to satisfy these needs. The latter depend on individual preferences and beliefs (Luthans, 1998). Purchases, actions and behaviours must be congruent with needs or self-concept to maximise the reward (Sirgy, 1982). This means that tourists are supposed to make activities and choices congruent with their preferences/reference values. Therefore, in some sense, it does not matter whether it is experiencing and sharing that makes people happier, or that happy people, because of their preferences/values, consolidate their wellbeing by acting consistently.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

Building on some empirical results discussed in the literature, we presented and discussed the results of an analysis intended to determine whether different types of tourist activities deliver different returns in terms of life satisfaction. Unlike previous studies, we applied the Blinder–Oaxaca decomposition method to verify the research hypothesis and understand whether the observed gap in reported happiness depends on differences in tourist socio-demographic characteristics (explanatory variables) or other unexplained aspects (coefficients). Our findings confirmed that *nature* tourists are more satisfied than *beach* tourists. It showed that the gap did not depend on the

explanatory variables but rather on coefficients, that is, on unexplained features. According to our research hypothesis, these unexplained features express the type of tourist and the type of activities performed (appreciative as opposed to consumptive).

To complement, enrich and reinforce existing explanations, we offered a theoretical interpretation to describe why appreciative as opposed to consumptive forms of tourism bring a higher return in terms of happiness. Accepting Hirsch's analysis, according to which consumer choices are not independent and individual satisfaction depends on absolute as well as comparative consumption, we posed two theoretical hypotheses, that is, that individual happiness is a function of a private and a social component (personal possessions and possession of a reference group), and the impact of comparisons on individual satisfaction is mediated by the operational context (setting), defined in terms of observability of possessions and competitiveness in the reference group. With these conceptual categories, we tried to explain the different return in terms of happiness offered by different types of tourism and recreational activities, in our case *nature* as opposed to *beach* tourism.

Obviously, the issue that we examined here goes beyond the case of tourism and entails aspects of everyday life. However, we found it remarkable that in certain settings, where individual possessions and competitiveness in the reference group are more readily observed, comparisons have more effect. In our opinion, the different settings of nature and beach tourism contribute to the different return in terms of happiness that these two types of vacation deliver. In the case of beach tourism, social scarcity intermingles with physical scarcity. The latter, besides its externalities, exacerbates the former. In the case of nature tourism, life experience and non-rivalry in resource utilisation prevail (without externalities) and nature tourists consider others to be partners, rather than antagonists and competitors.

Our empirical results are in line with the findings of previous studies on the relationship between materialism and life satisfaction, all of which suggested that people driven by extrinsic motivations and desire for material goods tend to be relatively less happy (e.g., Dittmar et al., 2014; Kasser, 2002). To validate our theoretical interpretation, more focused investigation is necessary. The model we used complements and enriches other explanations and interpretations; it offers a different perspective based on recent results regarding the determinants of happiness.

The importance of relations and cooperation as opposed to material possessions and competition is an aspect that emerged strongly

during the COVID-19 pandemic (see among others Bimonte et al., 2022). The social isolation caused by lockdowns led many people to re-evaluate the importance of social relations and sharing as opposed to competing. Isolation and the pandemic made traveling seem desirable, but the pandemic also made people more cautious and made them reflect on the things that bring satisfaction. Understanding the determinants of individual wellbeing could be useful for policy makers; identifying the types of tourism and activities associated with more enduring wellbeing could be useful in the tourist industry.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The are no competing interests and funding.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The overlap of the two terms is not universally accepted. Life satisfaction is regarded as an evaluation of circumstances, whereas happiness is considered a measure of feelings. However, given the aim of this paper, we conform to other studies in considering the terms interchangeable.
- <sup>2</sup> For a literature review on the topic see Chen and Li (2018).
- <sup>3</sup> Due to the non-probability sampling, caution is required in analysing results and no statistical inferences is possible. Unfortunately, also due to the reference population, this is a problem shared by many empirical research in tourism.

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