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An exploratory examination of the wellness tourist experience using netnography

Introduction

The prominence of wellness tourism has recently reemerged across the global travel market, garnering growth and recognition as a crucial topic in academic research. While the term '*wellness tourism*' is relatively new in the western world, the idea of offering activities and facilities conducive to healthy living can be traced back hundreds of years. For example, Japanese travellers have sought out hot springs for healing purposes for over 1500 years (GWI, 2013). Additionally, people have been travelling since ancient times to the Dead Sea for its therapeutic properties, while the Romans have journeyed to baths and hot springs for their healthier environments and spiritual practices (GWI, 2013). Coupled with an increasing longing to simply slow down and focus on the deeper meaning of life, the growth of wellness tourism addresses a clear need amongst travelers (Douglas, 2001; Pollock, Williams, Gartner & Lime, 2000; Lehto, Brown, Chen, & Morrison, 2006; Smith & Puczko, 2008). With no signs of these issues decreasing, the wellness tourism market is expected to grow exponentially within the next decade rising to account for 16% of the global tourism market by 2017 (GWI, 2013). The available evidence seems to suggest that wellness tourism can directly impact tourists' well-being (Smith & Kelly, 2006; Smith & Puczko, 2008), however there is insufficient research to draw any firm conclusions. Understanding well-being as a subset of the tourism experience is a complex phenomenon, leaving much room for expansion within academic research (Chen, Prebensen & Huan, 2008; Laing et al., 2010). Therefore, the focus of this exploratory research was to understand tourists experiences while travelling for wellness. The following research questions are posited:

1. What are the current market characteristics of wellness tourism?
2. What are the underlying dimensions of the wellness tourism experience contribute to/create barriers towards holistic well-being?

Literature Review

Dr. Halbert Dunn first established the concept of 'wellness' in 1959 when he introduced a holistic state of health involving body, mind and spirit as well as ones immediate environment or surroundings (Dunn, 1959). Within the small body of literature on wellness tourism, the majority of studies focused on motivations to travel for wellness (Chen et al., 2008; Hun Kim & Batra, 2009; Lehto et al., 2006; Mak, Wong & Chang, 2009; Medina-Muñoz & Medina-Muñoz, 2013) while profiling the characteristics of wellness tourists (Hun Kim, & Batra, 2009; Lehto et al., 2006; Voigt et al., 2011) and market demand analysis (Heung & Kucukusta, 2013; Laing et al., 2010; Mueller & Kaufmann, 2001; Smith & Kelly, 2006) did not fall far behind. However, in 2010, Voigt, Howat and Brown extended the literature beyond the surface by exploring specific outcomes of the wellness tourism experience from a positive psychological perspective. On the basis of the evidence currently available, it seems fair to suggest that much of the current research on wellness tourism revolves around surface issues. Therefore, this study attempts to explore the underlying dimensions of the wellness tourism experience using qualitative methods.

The tourism industry has long since been acknowledged as a domain filled with information and communication dependent on technology for the day-to-day management of an

operation (Poon, 1993; Sheldon, 1997). However, only recently has a new term been characterized to encompass the second stage of development of the World Wide Web: Web 2.0. Web 2.0 is the term used for all technologies and websites that focus on the user as the focal point of content creation, as opposed to focusing on the company as the originator of content (O'Reilly, 2005). According to Papathanassis and Knolle (2011), Web 2.0 is already influencing the tourism industry by way of diminishing the control of tourism enterprises and relinquishing the control to consumers. Within the tourism domain, online holiday review sites are the most widespread Web 2.0 communities. The largest, and most globally recognized of these is TripAdvisor. TripAdvisor is an online social travel networking website that allows users to generate content on travel related sectors, interact with other users and book their travel related needs (TripAdvisor, 2015). For the purposes of this study, TripAdvisor was used for data collection.

Methodology

This study employs netnography to examine the experiences of wellness travelers as reported on tripadvisor.com. Netnography is defined as “a qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications” (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62). Tourism researchers have recently begun to adapt the netnography methodology, but and contend the further use in future tourism studies (Mkono & Markwell, 2014; Mkono, 2012). A total of 20 companies were sampled from a larger list of the top 100 wellness tourism companies worldwide. Companies were selected using a stratified random sampling method based on geographical location. The data collected comprised 1216 reviews totaling 222,815 words.

Analysis and interpretation for this study followed the steps for framework analysis as recommended by Ritchie and Spencer (1994). Analysis began with familiarization including reading through the reviews within each star category while taking notes on key themes and substantive issues in order to become immersed in the data. The text was content analyzed using NVivo 11, a qualitative text mining software. To begin identifying a preliminary thematic framework, a list of the top 100 most frequent keywords for each star was obtained. In combination with the notes from familiarization, these keywords were used to identify 21 preliminary interpretive codes. Next, NVivo 11's *text search* function was used to explore key words and themes throughout the data to begin indexing. For example, the keywords “food”, “delicious” “healthy”, “restaurant” etc. were entered into the text search function to identify raw data that matched with the interpretive code “culinary”.

After the process of indexing was complete, sample quotes were lifted from their original context in the data and organized according to their interpretive code (charting). This process was completed five times for data corresponding to each star rating (1-5). Themes were identified based on the raw data, but do fall in line with Dunn's (1959) concept of holistic well-being. At the end of this process, the coding spectrum included 4 themes, 14 interpretive codes and 2174 free codes representing 5 different star categories of data.

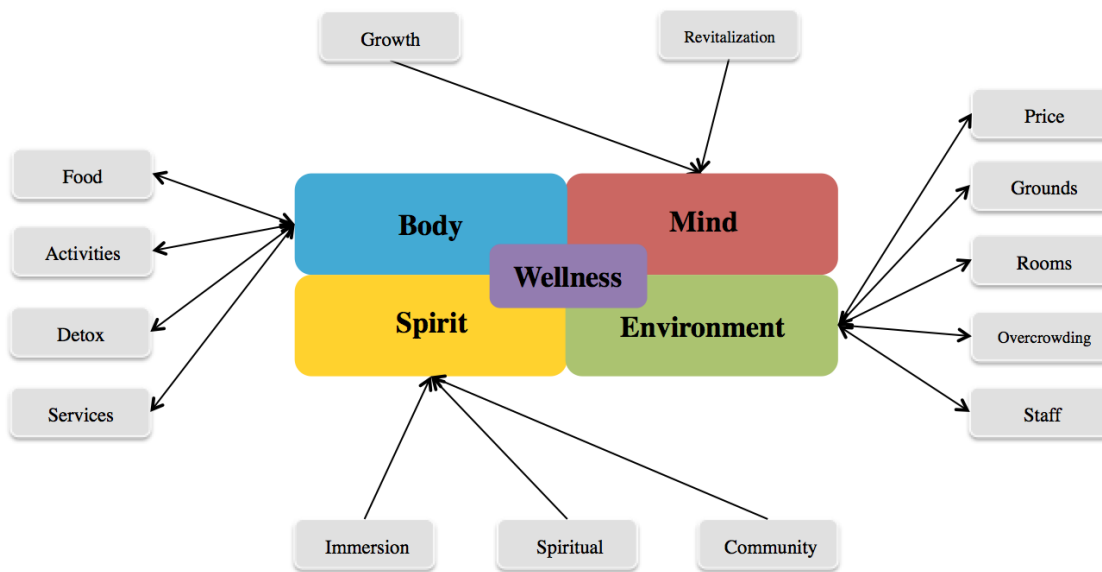
Once all charts were complete, the final step of framework analysis (mapping & interpretation) took place. First, a search for the most meaningful and representative sample quotes was conducted for each interpretive code, within each star-rating category. In addition to this, a search for disconfirming evidence within each interpretive was also conducted. Searching for both confirmation and disconfirmation within each theme resulted in the organization of a synoptic chart that aided in the derivation of latent interpretive meaning (See figure 1).

Results

Wellness tourism companies represented four continents and sixteen countries (Table 3). Approximately 55% of the companies were based in North America, 30% in Asia, 10% in Europe and 5% in Australia. Review writers travelled in numerous different groups including couples (46%), with family (17%), friends (16%) and for business (3%). Approximately 18% of all reviewers traveled solo. The most popular time to travel for wellness was Summer (29%) and Spring (28%). The nations with the highest number of reviews were USA (48%), England (10%), Australia (9%), New Zealand (6%) and Canada (4%). The entire sample reported their star rating for the wellness company they reviewed. The proportion of excellent reviews (72%) and very good reviews (18%) accounted for the majority of reviewers while only 4% of reviewers reported experiences as poor or terrible.

Analyses of the findings relating to the experience of wellness tourists are discussed in the following section. In alignment with Dunn's (1959) holistic concept of wellness, the content analysis has identified four dimensions of wellness, namely, body, mind, spirit and environment under which interpretive codes from this study have been clustered (Figure 1). Additionally, codes have been identified as providing a pathway towards wellness or a barrier to wellness, with some codes representing both sides.

Figure 1
Dimensions of the wellness tourism experience



The Body

Food

Representing the highest number of interpretive codes, gastronomic experiences illustrated that, for the most part, food was fresh, local and well prepared, providing guests with the energy they sought out for both a productive and relaxing stay:

"The food here is amazing. I never knew vegetarian cuisine could taste so good. I ended up eating most of my meals from their detox menu. I was surprised to find that I did not feel weak or lethargic, but had more energy than usual."

While the majority of the findings related to food were positive in nature, there were some reviews that mentioned culinary experiences detracting from their experience:

"We are not big people but we were often left hungry in the evening. Three apples were provided in our room when we arrived but were not replenished without asking."

Activities

Reviews commented favorably on the knowledgeable staff, the diversity of activities and the skill level of teachers:

"The yoga was also one of the highlights. The yoga deck is paradise for anyone who practices. It is open and the view is amazing. The teacher Amanda was fantastic. She worked towards the skill set of the group and mixed between beginners and advanced. She was very keen in sharing her passion for yoga, Vinyasa yoga in particular."

Findings also illustrated that not all teachers maintained the same skill level, and some visitors felt overwhelmed by the amount of activities offered:

"I found Canyon Ranch was not the best choice for a "rest & relaxation" vacation. There are SO MANY choices of how to spend your time. We found that we felt guilty for wanting to sleep in or lay by the pool, because we would miss something like an early morning hike or an exercise class. For us, it was too overwhelming."

Services

Wellness traveler reviews reflected on the competencies of the staff in addition to the feeling of being physically renewed after a treatment:

"I opted for the 7 day relax and renew package which was perfect for me- different types of massages evenly spaced out, such as essential oil, Thai massage, hand and leg massage etc. I left each session feeling like I was floating on air. The therapists are highly knowledgeable and very experienced."

While the majority of guests had positive experiences with the services offered, there were some complaints about the levels of service and lack of attention to detail:

“The Spa...we were machines, in and out. The masseuse made zero effort to connect on a personal level. It was all about - rub left leg 5 times, proceed to rub right leg 5 times.”

Detoxing

Wellness tourists reflected on the fact that while the detox was often difficult, the rewards were worth it:

“During the detox a whole host of problems that hadn't reared their heads in years came back to the fore - I was told that this was normal during the process, and it felt about right. It was unpleasant, sure, but I had the prevailing feeling that it was cathartic.”

On the other hand, some reviewers diverged from this viewpoint and felt that they were not fully prepared for the effects of detoxing:

“We regrettably were only at San Benito for 2 nights, where I was pretty much chained to bed from all the nasty toxins being released from my body that I didn't have the chance to explore or partake in any of the activities that the farm offered.”

The Mind

Revitalization

Wellness travelers stressed the importance of this dimension as an expectation and a benefit of their experience:

“This wellness farm is the place to escape from the noise and tension of the city. The whole ambiance will immediately enchant your body and mind to "stop and smell the roses" as soon as you arrive. Your body clock automatically slows down and rejuvenates. You will achieve rejuvenation and renewal by participating in this supportive holistic environment.”

Growth

Growth is a difficult concept to measure and identify as a tangible experience. However, the notion of transformation, progress, illumination of the mind and life changing experiences were present in many of the reviews:

“There should be a moratorium on reviewing Kamalaya until way after the fact, because its benefits aren't always felt immediately. I didn't expect it to have such a profound impact on me but it really was a little slice of paradise, with a very calm and enriching energy. It is the perfect place to come and contemplate your life, to make some changes to your mind and body, to re-charge your batteries, to detox, or simply lie by the pool. I have come away with so much more awareness of life, my mind and health and have the tools to carry what I learnt with me.”

The Spirit

Immersion

Immersion was particularly apparent in reviews referring to becoming immersed in the sounds of nature, the culture of a community or a spiritual practice:

"I have been here alone, twice. It's a really good place to reflect with oneself and commune with nature. You have the space to really, truly immerse yourself in the surroundings. I really had a truly joyous moment alone at this place. I cannot find the right words to describe this place, it is simply amazing. Enchanting."

Community

Several reviews confirmed social interaction as an integral part of the wellness tourism experience:

"The nature of my journey is somewhat personal, I was looking for answers to questions that I never believed would be answered here, but let's just say, I met some amazing people who changed my view on life, people who were just so beautiful, it's a rare thing in this world."

Spiritual Connection

The concept of spiritual connection was referred to with regards to meditation, astrology readings and spiritual development:

"Waking up before the sun and sitting for 25 minutes of silent meditation are definitely challenging, but I am growing and learning and discovering more about myself and others and our relationship to God." (5 star)

The Environment

Staff

The level of service provided by staff was a significant point of discussion amongst wellness traveler reviews:

"The staff really do look after you and genuinely care about your wellbeing and your program. The trainers are fantastic, the balance between education classes and fitness classes is perfect and the extra excursions give you the opportunity to try something new with support from the staff. We were blown away by their service, attention to detail and willingness to exceed your needs and highest expectations."

On the contrary, negative reviews regarding staff revealed inconsistency in service and lack of employee training:

“The service was entirely reactive instead of proactive. You have a choice between the Balinese employees that were cheerful and helpful, yet would screw things up due to language barrier, or the local indigenous employees that looked like they wanted to stab you when asking them for something.”

Grounds

Positive reviews described the grounds as beautiful, scenic, private, lovely, magical and perfect:

“The resort is a really special and nurturing resort, designed to sit in cohesion with the natural landscape, set in the midst of a lush, green rainforest, they are one. The view of the valley and surrounding hills is just lovely. It is the perfect place to relax and reflect.”

On the other hand, there were some reviews that did not have such a positive experience with the wellness resorts being located so close to nature:

“If you do not like bugs, this would not be the place for you. Given the proximity to nature, there were so many bugs. Everywhere. Cockroaches in our room, fire ants in our kitchen, and mosquitos galore.”

Rooms

Positively, rooms were described as comfortable, clean, private, beautiful and calming:

“Our room was in all the way at the edge, looking out over the river valley and across into the jungle. 'Room' is clearly an understatement, as even this, the most basic accommodation they offer, was a charming little villa. Exotic hardwood furniture and a canopied bed added a touch of tasteful 'colonialism'.”

In contrast to this, those reviews below 4 stars described the rooms as dated, forgotten and rustic.

“Our room unfortunately was a huge disappointment. It seems that we ended up at the “forgotten cabin”. All was very much worn and run down. No box spring for the mattress. Not the bed you would expect at a resort rated this high.”

Price

Price was mentioned as a barrier to enjoying the wellness travel experience as often times the price point was very high and did not match up with the level of service:

“Do not waste your time or money going to this place. We paid over \$2100 per night, per room. We booked two rooms. The rooms are 2.5, maybe 3 stars at best.”

Crowding

Overcrowding led to a less than satisfactory experience:

“Unfortunately, we visited the spa at the end of the day and sat in one of the pools as we watched busloads of LOUD tourists enter and crowd the entire place. Overall, it just was not the relaxing, quiet experience we were hoping for.”

Discussion & Conclusion

The results from this study revealed a clear pattern amongst online wellness reviewers with regards to experiences that can lead to a higher level of wellness versus those experiences that detract from a holistic state of wellness. Based on the number of interpretive codes supporting each theme, it was evident that the environment was the most important aspect with regards to providing the right atmosphere conducive to experiencing different components of wellness while travelling. More specifically, the relationships guests were able to build with staff had a profound impact on their experiences as wellness travelers. Unlike traditional forms of travel, wellness travel often involves more in depth relations between staff and guests. Additionally, findings from this study consistently illustrated that culinary experiences were also very important to wellness travelers. In contrast to a regular vacation experience, the food provided at a wellness resort is judged based not only on taste and quality, but also nutritional value, calorie content, its ability to provide energy and freshness. It was also evident that profound experiences of personal growth were an outcome for some wellness travelers. Many who wrote about this theme reflected that they had not expected to have such a life changing experience leading to new beginnings and perspectives. While this type of experience is highly intangible, it is particularly important to note for those wellness tourism companies that focus on both the mindful and spiritual aspect of wellness. Lastly, it was particularly apparent in the reviews that travelers truly valued the community aspect provided at many wellness resorts. Unlike more traditional forms of travel, wellness tourism attracts the likes of the solo traveler quite often. For those companies that are not yet capitalizing on this aspect, it is important to take note on its importance for holistic wellness and specifically for marketing towards solo travelers.

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