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Yoga tourism – a catalyst for transformation?

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ABSTRACT

Yoga tourism has experienced increased interest and relevance in recent years due to the changing landscape of spirituality in the western world. However, research addressing this phenomenon is scarce. This study explored yoga tourism through a priori dimensions of positive psychological well-being. Deductive thematic analysis was used to analyse 12 semi-structured interview transcripts. Findings revealed the existence of five a priori dimensions related to positive psychological well-being and their relationship with transformative experiences. Evidence from this study indicated that yoga tourism provides the environment for yoga tourists to experience positive psychological well-being during their trip as well as post-trip. Results suggest that yoga tourism has the ability to transform the lives of participants on varying levels. Future research exploring these findings within a larger wellness tourism context is warranted.

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Introduction

Yoga tourism has seen rapid growth in recent years due to the changing face of spirituality in the west (Yoga Alliance 2016). This niche tourism sector evolved as a part of the 'travel to feel well' trend, now commonly referred to as 'wellness tourism'. Wellness tourism has been defined as

the sum of all the relationships resulting from a journey by people whose motive, in whole or in part, is to maintain or promote their health and well-being, and who stay at least one night at a facility that is specifically designed to enable and enhance people's physical, psychological, spiritual and/or social well-being (Voigt, Brown, and Howat 2011, 17).

Yoga tourism, a subset of wellness tourism, is described as 'tourism which focuses on the union of body, mind and spirit, but which is essentially areligious'¹ (Smith and Kelly 2006, 17). Although travelling for yoga has seen a recent growth in popularity (Yeung and Johnston 2017), the model of yoga is thousands of years old. Yoga is one of six central systems of Indian thought known as *darsana*, which means, 'to see' (Desikachar 1999). Yoga means union of the body, mind and spirit (Desikachar 1999) and is thought to provide stress relief through pranayama (breathing techniques), asana (physical postures) and meditation. According to the Yoga in America Study (2016), yoga has grown from a niche activity to

one that now involves 36.7 million Americans (up from 20.4 million in 2012) and supports a US\$27 billion industry with forecasts for continued growth (Clarke et al. 2015). To compliment this growing industry, yoga practitioners are now beginning to seek a more balanced vacation through the pursuit of yoga centred travel opportunities (Bowers and Cheer 2017). Due to this growing demand, a plethora of vacation opportunities have begun to emerge including yoga retreats, seminars, conferences and festivals. While current statistics report that only 8% of yoga practitioners have attended a yoga retreat, 62% report interest in attending a retreat in the near future (Yoga Alliance 2016).

Despite the rapid growth of yoga tourism, research in this area remains in its infancy. Aside from a study exploring socio-demographic and motivational characteristics of yoga tourists (Lehto et al. 2006), yoga tourism remains an underserved phenomenon. The current state of the research seems to provide very little understanding of the yoga tourist experience, especially in relation to transformative experiences and positive psychological well-being. Therefore, this study attempts to extend the literature on yoga tourism by exploring these gaps in the research. In line with the paradigms provided by positive psychology, this study attempted to explore the transformative experiences of yoga tourists utilizing the PERMA model of well-being. Qualitative methods were used to explore two research objectives:

- (1) Uncover and explore the mechanism by which the yoga retreat experience acts as a functional means to guest well-being and transformation
- (2) Investigate the catalysts that initiate transformational experiences.

Literature review

Yoga tourism and well-being

Philosophers around the globe have debated the concept of 'well-being' for hundreds of years. Originally, the notion of well-being revolved around two main tenants – hedonism and eudemonism. The hedonic view is based on the experience of pleasure and intense happy moments (Carlisle, Henderson, and Hanlon 2009). Hedonism refers to those instances of pure joy and pleasure that provide instant appreciation in the moment. On the other hand, the eudemonic view is based on experiences of deep gratitude and meaning affecting overall life satisfaction. Together, both these viewpoints aid in the complexity of understanding what makes up overall well-being. The pursuit of wellness is rooted in finding balance in mental, physical and emotional states. Wellness is not static, but a continuously evolving and ongoing phenomenon affecting daily living practices (Dunn 1959; Travis 1984). Today's notion of balance through wellness symbolizes an important cultural shift from a reactive health and wellness paradigm, to a more proactive personalized approach. Proactivity begins with deep self-study in order to develop a balanced and healthy lifestyle focused on long-term success, instead of short term fixes (The Hartman Group 2015). Consumers today focus on elements of wellness, including a healthy diet, rest and exercise as well as the fulfilment of emotional, mental and/or spiritual needs (The Hartman Group 2015; Verschuren 2004). While the awareness of health and wellness is on the rise, consumers still struggle with maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Current literature regards yoga tourism as a subset of wellness tourism because of the

shared commonalities between the two markets. According to a 2015 health and wellness study, consumers claim to be actively managing ten health conditions, either through treatment (35%) or prevention (65%) (The Hartman Group 2015). Fundamentally, these factors contribute to the thriving wellness tourism industry, as well as its subset, yoga tourism. Moreover, yoga tourism includes holistic practices and therapies that address the need for improved physical fitness, nutrition education, preventative medicinal practices, coping with personal issues, and reduction of stress (Lehto et al. 2006).

The concept of wellness tourism has taken on a significant destination image in countries such as India, South Korea, China, Russia, Germany and The United States. According to Gregoire (2013), due to its rich history and culture of yoga, India is currently the fastest growing wellness tourism destination with a projected annual growth rate of 22%. The concept of the yoga retreat can be defined as a programme where the main theme and purpose for travel is 'the yoga practice, around which the total travel experience, is planned and developed' (Lehto et al. 2006, 27).

Although there is evidence of substantial growth within the yoga tourism market, very little research has been done in this area. Over a decade ago, Lehto et al. (2006) attempted to understand the motivations behind yoga travel using consumer involvement theory. This study found motivations to travel for yoga included 'seeking spirituality', 'enhancing mental well-being', 'enhancing physical condition', and 'controlling negative emotions' (Lehto et al. 2006). More recently, Kumar (2015) published a conceptual study using secondary data to highlight the potential for yoga tourism as a unique offering of Indian tourism.

Transformative experiences

The root of transformative experiences can be traced back to Mezirow's (1978) transformational learning theory. Mezirow described transformative learning as 'an enhanced level of awareness of the context of one's beliefs and feelings and involves profound changes in self, changes in cognitive, emotional, somatic and unconscious dimensions' (Mezirow 1978, 161). Transformative experiences can be framed within the spectrum of ordinary to extraordinary experiences, described as immersive, peak and optimal (Walls et al. 2011), leading to perspective transformation (Mezirow 2000).

Within the travel environment, it is argued that almost everything a tourist does and encounters in a destination is an experience, whether it is 'behavioural, perceptual, cognitive, emotional, expressed or implied' (Oh, Fiore, and Jeoung 2007, 120). In fact, travel and tourism can be an agent of change, peace and international understanding that can lead to long-term perspective shifts and behavioural changes (Lean 2009). Although travel and tourism have been associated with personal transformation for many years now (Leed 1991), research on transformative experiences within the wellness tourism context is limited. Within the wider field of travel and tourism, the term has been used to discuss the effects of travel on the destination (Andereck et al. 2005; Kim, Uysal, and Sirgy 2013) as well as the impact of travel upon the traveller (Kim, Woo, and Uysal 2015; Lean 2009). Additionally, transformational experience has been discussed in regards to environmental awareness (Beaumont 2001), learning (Coghlan and Gooch 2011), cross cultural understanding (Lyons et al. 2012), spirituality (Willson, McIntosh, and Zahra 2013) and volunteer tourism (Coghlan and Weiler 2015). Within the wellness tourism literature,

transformational experience has been discussed in regards to the benefits of wellness tourism (Voigt, Brown, and Howat 2011) and retreat centre experiences (Fu, Tanyatanaboon, and Lehto 2015). Voigt, Brown, and Howat (2011) conducted a quantitative study which revealed six benefits of wellness tourism; namely transcendence, physical health and appearance, escapism and relaxation, importance of community, re-establishing self-esteem and indulgence. More recently, Fu, Tanyatanaboon, and Lehto (2015), performed a thematic analysis on a set of TripAdvisor™ reviews about retreats in Thailand. Results from this study revealed a framework to analyse the spectra of these changes and suggested further inquiry utilizing this framework.

Transformative experiences in hospitality and tourism are extremely complex and multidimensional in nature. One of the criticisms of well-being research in tourism is that the potential effects on ones well-being may be inflated (Nawijn 2016). In order to address this concern, one branch of Fu, Tanyatanaboon, and Lehto's (2015) framework has been utilized for this study. This spectra of changes delineates between the degree to which an experience is considered permanent or ephemeral (Fu, Tanyatanaboon, and Lehto 2015). Temporary changes refer to those experiences most often stimulated by the environment and atmosphere a retreat provides, without reference to how long the changes may have lasted. On the other hand, enduring changes affect one's lifestyle beyond the retreat experience.

Yoga tourism & serious leisure

Impressions of inscribed yoga poses have been discovered by historians dating to 3,000 BC (De Michelis 2005). However, yoga was not introduced to Western countries until the nineteenth century. More specifically, yoga became popular in the United States during the 1960s as it provided a uniquely different life perspective incorporating principles of Hinduism and Buddhism (De Michelis 2005). Today, yoga is a global phenomenon, growing in popularity around the world.

As mentioned earlier, yoga comprises of three main tenants, pranayama, asana and mediation. The practice creates space for emotional and social rejuvenation from our busy lives, and therefore, can be classified as a leisure activity (Driver, Brown, and Peterson 1991; Kyle and Chick 2002; Nimrod 2007). In fact, based on its attributes, it can be argued that yoga could be categorized as 'serious leisure', a concept originally developed by Stebbins (1982, 1992, 2001). Stebbins suggests that serious leisure is the

systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity that is highly substantial, interesting, and fulfilling and where, in the typical case, participants find a career in acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience (Stebbins 1992, 3).

On the other hand, casual leisure refers to activities that are more hedonic in nature, instantly and intrinsically rewarding. The pleasures gained from the activity are usually short lived (Stebbins 1992). Further to this, serious leisure can be differentiated from casual leisure via the following six characteristics (1) need to persevere at the activity, (2) availability of a leisure career, (3) need to put in effort to gain skill and knowledge, (4) realization of various special benefits, (5) unique ethos and social world, and (6) an attractive personal and social identity. Travelling to participate in yoga requires an

individual to first realize the deep benefits of the practice and second seek further knowledge of the practice through the unique circumstances a yoga retreat provides. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, yoga tourism is categorized as serious leisure within Stebbins framework.

Similar to the relationship between yoga tourism and serious leisure, continued developments in the field of positive psychology are in line with the growing interest in and demand for yoga tourism. Positive psychology is the study of happiness. It is the scientific study of what makes life worth living and of how humans prosper in the face of adversity (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). The goal of positive psychology is to understand the complexity of human strength and virtue, determining what can lead to higher levels of overall life satisfaction and happiness.

From a tourism perspective, it has been suggested by Filep (2012) that more researchers should take into account the positive psychological experiences of tourists, and, more specifically, Seligman's recently introduced PERMA model of well-being (Seligman 2011). To date, very little research has been conducted in this area. Two studies to note are those of Filep et al. (2013) and a more recent study conducted by Laing and Frost (2017). In 2013, Filep et al., utilized the PERMA model in an attempt to answer the question 'What psychological value do tourists get out of adventure holiday experiences'? Resultant from this qualitative study of 14 adventure tourists visiting the Republic of Vanatu, the researchers found that engagement and relationships were the dominant factors of well-being in their participants adventure tourism experience. Studying a significantly different phenomenon, dark commemorative events, Laing and Frost (2017) also used the PERMA model to investigate experiences of well-being during the centenary of World War I in Australia. Utilizing a case study approach, six themes emerged from the study, suggesting a connection between dark commemorative events and well-being. Five of these themes fell in line with the PERMA model, while the sixth theme, identity, did not. Most notably, this study revealed identity as a well-being construct, suggesting that our ability to discover our true selves, and find roots to our history, heritage and culture can be experienced as a result of experiences with dark tourism. In rebuttal to Nawijn's (2016) critique of positive psychological work in tourism, this model of well-being seamlessly integrates both hedonic and eudemonic domains, including positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment. Positive emotions refer to hedonic feelings of happiness while engagement refers to the psychological connection to different areas of life (e.g. work, organizations and activities). Positive relationships refer to the feeling of being socially assimilated in ones environment, feeling support from a community and other social connections. Meaning refers to the abstract concept of belief in the value of ones life and connectedness to the greater universe. Accomplishment encompasses progress towards goals, thus leading to a sense of achievement in life. Seligman's model indicates that these five dimensions individually contribute to one's overall well-being, life satisfaction and happiness.

Another critique of positive psychological research that is important to note has been made by Nawijn (2016) who argues that potential effects of vacationing on subjective well-being are overestimated. This paper attempts to mitigate against that by including the spectrum of transformation as a means by which to indicate how much and how long the constructs of the PERMA model have an effect on any one individual who reports them.

These tenants of positive psychological theory share some common threads with those characteristics of serious leisure presented earlier. For example, the notion of engagement, meaning, accomplishment and growth link back to the need for serious leisure activities to provide opportunities for perseverance, attainment of new knowledge and skills, and the ability to be a part of a unique social world. Utilizing the PERMA model of well-being as a theoretical framework, underpinned by serious leisure as a conceptual framework, this study explored the experiences of yoga retreat participants using qualitative methods. While there is some research linking yoga to positive psychology (Butzer, Ahmed, and Khalsa 2015), research linking yoga tourism to positive psychology is absent in the literature. In response to this gap in the research, this study attempted to explore yoga tourist experiences through the lens of positive psychology.

Methodology

The current study implemented qualitative research methods in order to delve deeply into understanding yoga retreat experiences as they relate to psychological well-being. Qualitative methods were considered appropriate due to the scarcity of research on this phenomenon. Moreover, the qualitative approach was considered a better fit due to the multi-dimensional nature of examining yoga within the tourism context. Employing a qualitative approach allowed the researchers to gain insightful information as well as to discover additional nuances and relationships between themes in the data (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Rooted in the tenets of the PERMA Model of Well-Being, a deductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was used to investigate each research objective.

Data collection

Comprehensive networks including individuals who had travelled to participate in yoga retreats were not available to the researcher, therefore the snowball sampling technique was deemed most appropriate to attain a purposive sample suitable for this study (Noy 2008). Initial contact was made with a local yoga studio owner in the South-Eastern United States of America to request a sampling of yoga retreat participants for interviews. This resulted in five participants. Each participant was asked to identify any other possible yoga retreat participants who may be interested in doing an interview. These contacts resulted in four more interviews. In addition to these participants, personal contacts were used to further expand the sample. Participants were no longer recruited for this study once similarities in the responses became apparent and theoretical saturation was reached. The sample included twelve female yoga tourists representing four countries of origin ranging from twenty-five to fifty-two years of age. Though it was not the intent to recruit an all female sample, current literature argues that women are the core market for retreat tourism (Kelly and Smith 2016), thus this sample was deemed suitable to explore yoga retreat experiences.

Data were collected by conducting individual in depth semi-structured interviews, which asked participants about their experiences as yoga tourists. Using a semi-structured guide allowed for consistency across the data while also making it possible to gain rich insights from participants (Patton 2002). Prior to asking any theory specific questions, participants were asked to reflect on their overall experiences while travelling for their yoga retreat and any benefits they felt as a result. Subsequently, participants were asked questions

about their experiences as they related to positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA). Lastly, participants were asked to reflect on the relationship between travelling for yoga and their day-to-day lives. Interviews were conducted in English and lasted on average, 42 min, covering a range of 29–69 min. A pseudonym was given to participants for ease of reference and to protect their identities.

Data analysis

This study employed the steps of deductive thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is a 'method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun and Clarke 2006, 6). Thematic analysis can be applied inductively or using a theoretical or deductive approach. The deductive approach was chosen for this research based on the a priori themes from the PERMA model of well-being. A deductive approach was utilized to adequately address the theoretical constructs of the PERMA model, while still maintaining room to explore nuances within the data.

Deductive thematic analysis is driven by theory, but still moves beyond simply counting words and phrases to derive latent meaning and relationships among themes. The following six steps were adopted from Braun and Clarke (2006) to guide the current study: (1) Familiarization – All interviews were transcribed from audio to text and subsequently read through by the primary researcher who began to write down initial ideas for coding within the proposed theoretical framework. Any ideas that fell outside this framework were also noted for further analysis (2) Generation of initial codes – Using NVivo 11, a qualitative text mining software, initial codes were attached to specific quotes in the data. This was done systematically for each individual interview, until all interviews were fully coded (3) Searching for themes – Data were extracted from NVivo 11 and organized into an excel chart, grouping all quotes with their individual codes. (4) Reviewing themes – Each code was re-examined and matched with an a priori theme to create a codebook. Subsequently, each a priori theme was given an operationalized definition specific to the context of yoga retreat experiences. Each identified theme was reviewed both at the level of the codebook as well as within the original data set. Table 1 provides examples of select direct quotes, codes and themes.

(5) Defining themes – Ongoing analysis of each theme and subsequent codes and quotes continued to refine the specifics of the overall story. A thematic map connecting codes and themes was developed to aid in explaining guest well-being and transformation (6) Scholarly report – Production of the final scholarly report provided opportunity for final analysis and refinement. At this point, selections of the most compelling and representative extracts were chosen to be displayed. Connections between previous literature and theoretical underpinnings were made.

Findings

Guest well-being and transformation

The yoga tourists interviewed for this study expressed a range of transformational experiences in relationship to overall well-being. Recollections of these experiences were described with clarity, often times accompanied by intense emotion. Rooted in the

Table 1. Example data extract from codebook.

Original quote	Theme and interpretive codes	Catalyst of change	Category of change
'I was (walking) with two other women, and we weren't talking because it was silent day, and we ended up finding a trampoline. It was in the middle of the woods, and we were just jumping on it and laughing and smiling, and not feeling like we had to say anything at all, and just experiencing those emotions together without having to say anything about it. That was a moment where I really just felt happy'	Positive Emotion Contentment Happiness Simplicity Silence Joy	Activity, Nature	Emotional
'There is this pose that I would work on and I didn't have the understanding about my hips needing to be more open, so I would force my knees down or I would force my legs into lotus pose trying to make this shape with the posture. I made it very external and I realized that I was doing myself more harm than good, so what needed to happen was I needed to slow down and get over my ego about it. Basically I had to just work through it slowly and let go the expectation of achieving in this particular posture'	Personal Growth Perspective Yoga Mindfulness Immersion	Activity	Physical
'The things that I buy in terms of food I try to go for ... sustainably caught fish, I'm not just going to go for the cheapest price, I'm going to go where I can get something that supports the farmer ... that kind of thing. I'm looking at wellness not just for me, but I exist in a community and I don't exist on my own. I'm trying to figure out what are the things that I can do that work for everyone'	Relationships Community Sustainability Transcendence	Retreat environment, Activity (local community food partners on retreat)	Attitudinal, Physical

principles of positive psychology, ranges of transformational changes were uncovered. For the purposes of this study, transformational changes were described on a spectrum ranging from temporary to enduring changes. In order to explore the relationships among each positive psychological factor and transformational change; an integrative thematic framework was developed to represent linkages between well-being, transformational experiences and the yoga retreat experience (Figure 1). Each positive psychological theme is presented within its spectra of changes below, supported by quotes from the interview participants.

Positive emotions

Experiences related to contentment and happiness were discovered within the data to support this theme (Seligman 2011). Positive emotion, or intense feelings of pleasure, were classified as a temporary change. Similar to findings from Nawijn (2010), these changes were often short lived and described with intense emotion. Though it was not surprising that these changes were described as temporary in nature, the idea of experiencing authentic happiness throughout one's life has been proven to be an essential part of well-being (Seligman 2011), thus laying the foundation for more long term transformational

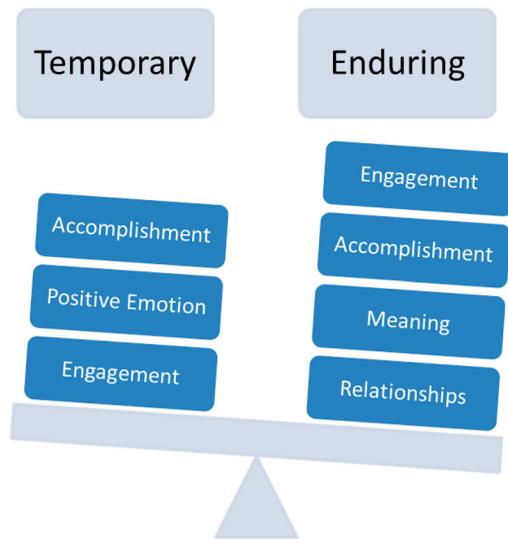


Figure 1. Integrative thematic framework.

changes. Frequently, participants described moments of positive emotion invoked by the atmosphere of the retreat, including being surrounded by nature, spending time alone and sitting in silence. Many participants also recalled feelings of positive emotion immediately after completing an intense yoga practice or meditation session. For instance, one participant described her experience as ‘euphoric’ following a meditation:

It was a moment after one of our meditations. I think the euphoria after you’ve come out of a long meditation, surrounded by nature, in tune with everything around you and then you’re just like, this is just great. That’s the feeling. That is happiness. – Lauren

Similar to descriptions from other participants, Lauren recalled this experience with intense emotion. It is important to note that, within these recollections, participants not only mentioned the activity as the catalyst (e.g. yoga, meditation), but highlighted the importance of the natural setting in which the activity took place. Ayanna shared a similar experience she had at a retreat in Thailand:

We were practicing outside on a platform overlooking the ocean ... there were monkeys swinging in the trees, breeze blowing and people sweating. Even though it was just yoga, a practice I’ve been doing for years, in this moment, it felt like more. The combination of the practice, the teacher, the other students ... nature, it was just perfect, I couldn’t help but smile the entire time. – Ayanna

Another theme that came up repetitively was the space to experience alone time and silence. Many of the retreat interviewees participated in silent days where retreat participants would continue to do different activities together (yoga, meals, recreational activities etc.), but would not speak during these designated days, an experience that, for many, may seem difficult. Surprisingly, retreat participants reflected on these silent days as a time where they actually felt connected to a shared experience with others, even without speaking to them. One participant reflects on a moment during a silent day where she shared an experience with other retreat participants:

I was (walking) with two other women, and we weren't talking because it was silent day, and we ended up finding a trampoline. It was in the middle of the woods, and we were just jumping on it and laughing and smiling, and not feeling like we had to say anything at all, and just experiencing those emotions together without having to say anything about it. That was a moment where I really just felt happy. – Ayanna

Engagement

Engagement has been described as experiences when we are able to engage fully with the present moment, thus entering the state of being known as 'flow' (Seligman 2011). In line with positive emotion, engagement was mostly classified, as being shorter lived, resulting in temporary changes. However, there were two participants that described their experiences of engagement on the retreat as leading to changes and perspective shifts in other areas of their life. One explanation for this may be that engagement through serious leisure experiences often involves being surrounded by a specific social group with a unique ethos, in this case, yoga (Stebbins 1992). Therefore these experiences of engagement are bound by place and time. Elaboration on this theme involved comments describing experiences that involved mindfulness, creativity, nature, immersion, learning and reflection. The thematic analysis of interviews revealed that engagement most often occurred in nature and led to the psychological enhancement of the self. These changes were categorized as being primarily attitudinal in nature as many participants described having a perspective shift due to intense levels of engagement. The majority of comments used to describe engagement referred to a specific moment in time, rather than something that transcended the space of the retreat:

A storm rolled in, and it's humid and hot and we're dripping with sweat and breathing big breaths, and it starts to rain and it was kind of violent outside and we were working really hard at our asana under the tent. Through nature I guess, I felt connected in that moment.
– Vanessa

Another participant describes her experience with becoming absorbed and engaged as being the catalyst for a change in perspective:

What helps me become absorbed is ... just detaching from the world and being surrounded by nature. Simply, the setting of retreats help you to gain perspective on what a small speck you are in this huge world. – Anna

Further to this, one participant reflects on a vision board workshop² she did on one of the retreats as the catalyst for engagement, and something that led to enduring change.

I want to say this vision board workshop we did last year. I was really absorbed during that workshop, just the creativity of it and actually having to put your goals down on paper was really engaging. It was cool because over 50% of that board had come true for everybody who did it. That just hit me, like it actually works. – Kaitlyn

Relationships

Relationships refer to the idea that well-being must be supported by a community of love and support from others (Seligman 2011). Relationships were classified as having an enduring impact on yoga tourists. Findings illustrated that relationships built during

retreats often times led to a shift in perspective motivated by learning about different cultural backgrounds, but also bound by the shared experience of vulnerability while on retreat. Though wellness tourism has been found to lead to transformation of the self, these findings also support the notion that wellness tourism has the power to transform individuals through forging relationships within communities (Smith 2013).

Many participants recollected the feeling of community that their retreat evoked, and the fact that many of the people they met while on retreat remained lifelong friends.

We were all at the same age trying to figure out our lives. I was in transition, and then I met several other women who were in the same weird space of not knowing ... Having that bond with those women was essential, and I still talk to them. The connections definitely transcend the retreat. – Kaycee

To add to this, another participant refers to an experience of community during a group activity while on retreat leading to a shared perspective among the group.

There was one night and the activity was around a fire and we had to write three things that we wanted to let go of and then we threw them in the fire. As a part of that, some people shared what they wrote. Actually, the leader of the retreat began ... and she shared some pretty heavy things she was struggling with. It kind of made you feel vulnerable in a way, but it also made you feel really connected because everybody's things were different, but what they had in common was that we all have struggles and we are all in this thing together. – Ayanna

Another participant recollected how her retreat experience resulted in an enduring life change that led her to be more cognizant of the relationships she builds and sustains within her home community:

The things that I buy in terms of food I try to go for ... sustainably caught fish, I'm not just going to go for the cheapest price, I'm going to go where I can get something that supports the farmer ... that kind of thing. I'm looking at wellness not just for me, but I exist in a community and I don't exist on my own. I'm trying to figure out what are the things that I can do that work for everyone. – Kaila

Meaning

Meaning encapsulates having a sense of purpose and direction in life. This may involve religious connections to a higher power or feeling connection to a higher purpose or meaningful goal (Seligman 2011). Meaning was classified as producing enduring transformational experiences. Recent literature on transformational tourism argues that travel has the ability to help us find clarity around our 'true' or 'authentic' self (Reisinger 2013; Smith 2013). Results from this study support this as participants reflected on their experiences with self-love, acceptance and growth. Further elaboration on this theme revealed the connections between 'meaning' and cultivating reverence, perspective and a connection to a higher purpose or power. These experiences lead participants to the clarity around 'self' described by both Reisinger and Smith in 2013. For example, Catherine described an experience she had with her spirituality while on retreat and how this marked a major turning point leading to a shift in her attitudes and beliefs:

My first retreat in India is really where I learnt about spirituality. I just learned that honestly, God is in everything, God is a part of you. If you praise God and honour God, you honour

and praise yourself. I think when I do yoga, that's when I feel most connected to God and myself, my mind, body, soul, spirit ... it connects everything and everyone. Catherine

Another participant illustrated her experience while on retreat as being clarifying in determining what her passion and purpose for life was:

I am not religious in any way, shape or form, so I don't look to a higher power in terms of any deity or anything like that, but I certainly feel my highest calling as a human being and as a member of this community ... of this world. For me, it is to serve others and to hold space in a way that's non-judgmental ... to be there for people who need to cry, laugh, be angry – whatever they need. Kaila

Based on participant accounts, it was evident that connection to a higher purpose and/or power was seen as a transformational retreat experience. More specifically, these experiences led to lasting changes rather than temporary ones. To further clarify this, another participant reflects on how the different activities she participated in during her retreat led her to a deeper and more meaningful understanding of herself.

I would say that going on a yoga retreat has allowed me to gain a sense of clarity about myself, my life and my connection to the world around me. Just through the activities you do, silence, sharing your struggles with others, partner yoga, hiking, they all help you to get close to your own truth. Essentially I believe my meaning or purpose in life is simply to be the best version of myself at any given moment. That is really all any of us can do. – Ayanna

Accomplishments

Accomplishments can be marked as receiving a certification or award in addition to being described through feelings of achievement (Seligman 2011). In this study, accomplishments were mainly described as feelings of achievement while on the retreat as well as accomplishments reached by continuing certain practices after leaving the retreat. Therefore, accomplishments were categorized as both temporary and enduring transformational experiences. These findings reject ideas from previous work that argue tourists come on vacation unsatisfied and can only find happiness while away from their daily lives (Corvo 2011; Nawijn 2010). In contrast, findings consistently demonstrated that yoga retreats led to major concrete changes with regards to accomplishments in one's daily life after their retreat experience. For example, many participants shared different daily routines they later incorporated in their daily lives as a result of their retreat experience. Some even spoke of sharing this new found knowledge with their friends and family upon returning home:

I think just having the confidence, is what I gain from going on the retreats, and then practicing this mindfulness. When I leave, I'm always so sad that I'm leaving all these people who are like-minded, but then I realize I have an opportunity to bring what I've learned — the courage, the love, the patience — and I can use that in my day-to-day job in Labour, dealing with people who have just lost their jobs ... I try to ask myself – How do you practice patience here? How are you courageous when you see stuff going wrong? Are you the one to stand up and say something? – Kaycee

This notion of taking away knowledge and new practices from a retreat into one's daily life was the most tangible transformation retreat participants described. Similar to Kaycee,

Kaitlyn reflects on bringing specific strategies into her home that she practiced while on her yoga retreat.

Honestly, before the retreat, we have never tried a vegetarian diet. My husband has some health issues that we need to overcome, so we're eating totally vegetarian, healthful, nutritious food. I would not have taken the opportunity to explore that with him had I not been exposed to it during the retreat. – Kaitlyn

Transformational catalysts

Participants in this study articulated a variety of transformational experiences that are described above. Further investigation into each transformational experience revealed three categories of catalysts: activities, retreat environment and natural surroundings. Figure 2 illustrates each category revealing the associated sub-classifications.

A wide range of activities were referred to as catalysts for transformative experiences. In fact, the majority of transformational experiences began with an organized activity. Participants commented on the challenging nature of certain activities on both a physical and emotional level. Further to this, many participants revealed certain activities that they transferred into their home life, including journaling, cooking healthier food, daily yoga practices, meditation and self-love practices. In general, activities that had the greatest impact put participants in challenging and vulnerable situations. This is substantiated by the quote below:

There was an activity that we did where we looked in a mirror, and you had to sit there in a chair with all these people around you, and you had to tell yourself, 'I love you' ... and everybody came up and said, 'I love you,' and people were in tears, crying, because we never do that

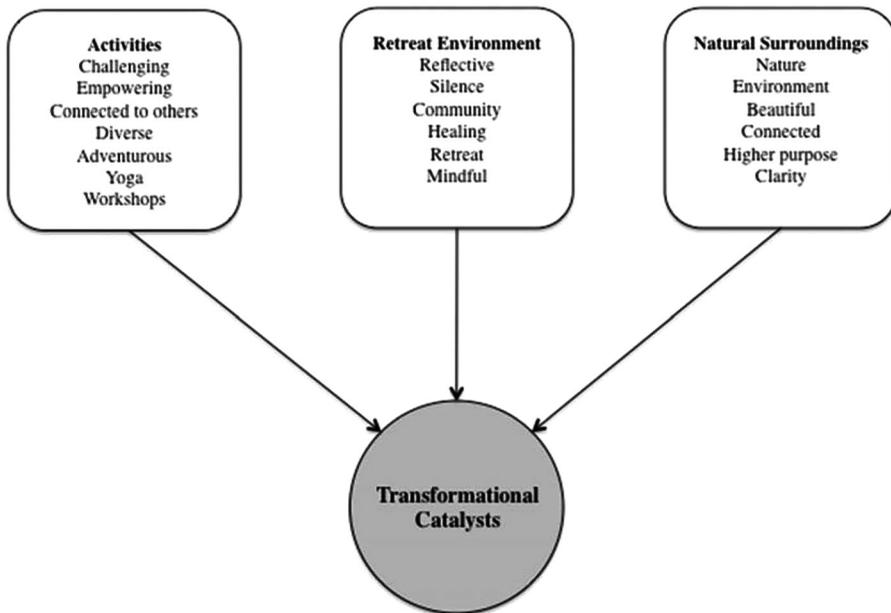


Figure 2. Transformational catalysts with interpretive codes.

for ourselves. You do it for other people, but to do it for yourself – this was life changing for me. – Kaycee

The second catalyst was the retreat environment. This category refers to the atmosphere felt within the retreat environment. For example, many participants reflected on the ability to be in silence while on retreat without being judged as a catalyst for reflection. Other descriptions of the atmosphere included sharing meals and space with like-minded people along with the ability to spend time detached from the outside world (free from electronics, internet etc.). This type of atmosphere provided participants with the space to feel free from judgment and comfortable enough to reflect:

Just being surrounded by a group of women was really powerful to me because women can relate on many things. I think it was really important to be among a group of people that I felt that I could relate to and feel comfortable around. I felt safer in a sense ... it was just a nice closed in environment that came together to create a little community. – Elizabeth

Lastly, natural surroundings were mentioned several times throughout the data as providing the physical environment necessary for transformation to occur. Participants reflected on having time to reflect alone while surrounded by nature, feeling a type of reverence for the planet that is usually clouded by activity and feeling connection to the elements through practicing yoga outside in the wilderness. The simplicity of being surrounded by nature seemed to have significantly supplemented the transformative experiences of many participants as epitomized by the quote below:

I just like seeing the beauty of the world. It makes you feel a little bit of reverence for this planet. You get a little bit more respect for the environment. It just makes you feel a little bit smaller than you might feel otherwise ... there's this little bit of diminishment to your ego. One night I looked up, and it was like being in a planetarium. I literally ended up on my knees because it was dizzying. I'll never forget those kinds of moments. They create memories that are almost tangible. – Ashley

Discussion and conclusion

The results of this exploratory study revealed the mechanisms by which yoga retreat participants experience well-being and transformation. The purpose of this study was to explore if and how transformational well-being experiences occur for yoga tourists.

Accounts from the interviewees revealed a clear pattern amongst yoga tourists that the PERMA model of well-being can in fact lead to greater levels of holistic wellness through yoga retreat experiences. Additionally, findings revealed both catalysts for transformational change and the spectra in which these changes occurred. As mentioned earlier, the concept of well-being originally revolved around two main tenants – hedonism and eudemonism. In the past, it has been argued that travel and tourism mainly lead to hedonic, shorter-term moments of intense happiness and joy (Nawijn 2010). However, results from this study reveal that yoga tourism does in fact lead to longer-term changes in line with overall well-being. First and foremost, this study confirms that the PERMA model of well-being can in fact be derived as a result of a yoga tourism experience. More specifically, this study identifies transformational change within specific categories of activities and catalysts, providing a depth of information previously non-existent.

Pure temporary changes while on the retreat included those intense moments of happiness and positive emotions. While these changes may have been transient, they were an important aid in creating memorable experiences for participants which led to enduring changes that often transcended the retreat. Changes experienced on retreat included physical changes as well as changes in behaviour, attitude and skill. This echoes previous literature in confirming that some tourist experiences do result in shorter-lived moments of happiness (Nawijn 2010), however, it debunks the theory that travel experiences do not move beyond the time and space in which they occur. Most insightfully, the analysis from these interviewees reveal that positive emotions create the environment for deeper, more meaningful and permanent transformational change to occur.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, findings related to engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishments point toward enduring transformational change. Although previous studies have identified wellness tourism through a hedonic and eudemonic lens (Voigt, Brown, and Howat 2011), no other studies have identified transformational change and the extent to which it occurs. The transformational well-being experiences described by yoga retreat participants are in line with Stebbins' framework for serious leisure, which includes gaining new skills and knowledge, participating in a unique ethos and social world, and realizing the various special benefits of a yoga retreat experience. Perhaps most important to note, and in line with previous research from Carr (2002) these changes transcended the retreat, suggesting that travel does have the ability to infiltrate our daily lives and overall well-being. More specifically, this research reveals that yoga tourism has the ability to introduce new well-being practices into our daily lives upon return.

Findings from this study clearly revealed three distinct catalysts for transformational experiences: activities, retreat environment and natural surroundings. An in-depth look into the nature of the activities revealed that guests experienced transformation both singly and within a group. Guests reflected on activities that challenged them to be vulnerable, aware and contemplative. These activities often led to a boost in confidence, shift in perspective and realization of truths. Many activities were experienced with the support of a group, which allowed for a communal process of transformation. As reflected in the data, these activities allowed guests to spend time building lasting relationships with other yoga retreat participants. These results validate those of Voigt, Brown, and Howat (2011) who found wellness tourists experienced a 'belongingness to a special social world' (550).

Reflections from yoga tourists illustrated that the retreat environment was also an important catalyst for transformation. The environment described refers to a non-physical space encapsulating more of a feeling about a specific atmosphere yoga retreats provide. The presence of silence was very important to the participants in this study. Silence provided the ability to detach and reflect in a non-judgmental atmosphere. This was a novel finding unique to this research and may be considered specific to the yoga retreat environment. A closer look into the factors significant to wellness retreat environments is recommended.

Lastly, the presence of natural surroundings played a significant role in how guests consumed the yoga retreat experience. In alignment with previous findings, it was revealed that nature is an important element in the transformational experience (Fu, Tanyatana-boon, and Lehto 2015; Little 2012). The data revealed that untouched surroundings



provided the optimal environment to experience certain outdoor activities, alone time, meditation and yoga classes. This connection with nature provided guests with the space to reflect and come to certain attitudinal, emotional and physical changes. A closer look into the differences between various types of wellness tourism with regards to the process of transformational change could shed new light on this phenomenon. As such, this study makes a significant contribution to the literature by establishing a new link between positive psychological theories and yoga tourism.

Implications and future research

Findings revealed in this research lend themselves to three specific areas of implications. First, there is a clear indication that it is important to approach yoga retreat activities from a holistic perspective. For example, simply offering yoga classes at a retreat will not be enough. Thought must be put into the location for the classes, the content, as well as the experience level of the instructor. Further to this, it is obvious that those looking to go to yoga retreats are hungry for more adventurous activity as well. Including a certain number of these activities in a package would be advantageous to retreat operators looking to differentiate their business. It is also clear from this research that passive, silent activities are just as transformative as active ones. Providing a conducive atmosphere for this will be important for those retreats looking to brand themselves as transformative spaces. Lastly, retreat participants thrived as a result of sharing experiences and creating bonds with others on the retreat. In large part, this was due to the similarities between participants. With this in mind, yoga retreat companies could begin marketing retreats towards a specific type of person, for example women looking to start their own business.

Second, creating a clear and conscious connection to the local environment and community is paramount to yoga retreat operators. As evidenced in this study, yoga travellers are conscious stewards of the environment and their communities. Going beyond the conventional marketing strategies of 'going green', yoga retreat operators need to put more focus on creating and providing tangible experiences for their guests to interact with and give back to their local surroundings. For example, yoga retreat operators could employ a local chef to come and provide cooking classes for the guests. Additionally, they could employ a local tour guide to lead a hike or other nature based activity. In this way, yoga retreat participants would remain connected to their environment while being immersed in the local culture of the community they are visiting. Moving beyond the context of the retreat, yoga retreat operators need to begin tracking the transformational experiences of their guests. Over time, this collection of data could provide a foundation for truthfully marketing and providing transformational experiences. Additionally, this type of data could aid in increasing the amount of loyal guests who are passionate about coming back year after year to continue their transformational journey.

It is important to note that the current research is exploratory in nature, thus providing an initial starting point for further exploration into the transformational experiences of wellness tourists. There is considerable potential for future investigation into the relationships among positive psychology, yoga tourism and wellness tourism. Additionally, it would be interesting to examine the differences between transformational experiences of wellness tourists as opposed to those of traditional tourists. The current study, while

providing a sound foundational template, does have its limitations. Data from this study are only representative of the sample of twelve yoga retreat participants, therefore results from this study are limited to this sample. Future quantitative research validating the factor structure of the positive psychological measures explored in this study is warranted. Subsequent to this, it would be interesting to incorporate quality of life (QOL) measures to determine the impact of transformational yoga retreat experiences on QOL. Conducting comparative tests of this model within other tourism contexts would shed light on the relative importance of travelling for wellness versus other forms of tourism. Additional factors such as length of stay, at home wellness practices, current health and patron status would also be of significant importance within the model. Furthermore, conducting a longitudinal study would be of relative importance to both retreat operators as well as yoga tourists themselves.

To recap, the deductive thematic analysis employed in this study was based on five distinct positive psychological factors derived from previous literature (Seligman 2011). Though these factors had previously been developed, they had never been tested in a tourism context. Findings from this study revealed that yoga tourism is largely a eudemonic well-being experience leading to long term transformational change. Findings related to meaningful experiences, deep engagement, relationship building and achieving accomplishments prove this theory. In the past, authors have argued that, in the context of tourism, some forms of tourism may be perceived as having 'greater value' than others (Smith and Diekmann 2017). While we do not posit that yoga tourism can be ranked amongst other forms of tourism, this point of view is something to consider. In final conclusion, and perhaps most importantly, what the results from this study do prove is that yoga tourism does in fact have a place in serious leisure literature as well as positive psychological well-being.

Notes

1. The term 'areligious' refers to a practice that is not influenced by a specific religion.
2. A vision board is used to help clarify, concentrate and maintain focus on a specific goal or set of goals. Boards can be created using a display of images and words to represent the users goals(s).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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