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Zhang, Ye; Gao, Jie; and Ricci, Peter, "The Potential of Tourism for Benefiting Individual Short-term and Long-term Wellbeing: A Character-strength-based Exploration" (2019). *Travel and Tourism Research Association: Advancing Tourism Research Globally*. 33.
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The Potential of Tourism for Benefiting Individual Short-term and Long-term Wellbeing: A Character-strength-based Exploration

Introduction

The identified tourism benefits in existing literature are often short-lived in nature, no matter the facilitation of physical wellbeing (De Bloom, Geurts, & Kompier, 2013; Kim, Lee, Chun, Han, & Heo, 2017), or subjective wellbeing (Dolnicar, Yanamandram, & Cliff, 2012; McCabe & Johnson, 2013). Subjective/hedonic wellbeing stresses the maximization of pleasure and minimization of pain, which is often measured by life satisfaction (Pagan 2015) as well as positive and negative affect status (Nawijn, Mitas, Lin, & Kerstetter, 2013). There is, however, the growing interest in exploring the potential of leisure travel services/products in benefiting individual wellbeing in the long term (*eudaimonia*) (Chen & Petrick, 2013; Minnaert, 2012). For instance, tourist population are increasingly drawn to pursue authentic happiness which contains not only the positive affect but also the meaning and engagement during a trip that can potentially influence individual life even after the trip (Filep & Deery, 2010). Such growing demand from tourists, along with the increasing interest among businesses across industries in transformative service design that can bring positive transformation to their clients and society in large (Anderson et al., 2013), will push the trend of identifying and achieving more profound and long-lasting tourism benefits to individual lives.

Only a handful of studies indeed investigated into the approaches of expanding the potential contribution of tourism to long-term eudaimonic wellbeing, and most of them are limited to certain types of tourism (e.g. retreat tourism, volunteer tourism, slum tourism) (Raibley, 2012; Smith & Diekmann, 2017). Moal-Ulvoas (2017) nevertheless offered some promising implications that, the occurrence of eudaimonic versus hedonic effect may depend less on the types of tourism activities, but more on the meaning and personal significance they assign to the experience. The latter points at a promising direction to pursue, that the eudaimonic tourism benefits may be cultivatable across different tourism types as long as tourists can identify sufficient meaning/significance in those activities.

The difficulty in creating eudaimonic travel experiences however lies in the demanded level of effort/engagement and the occasional unpleasant feeling in overcoming necessary challenges for self-growth/self-realization, which can conflict with the primary purpose of most tourism products for hedonic pleasure (Knobloch, Robertson, & Aitken, 2017). Resolving such difficulty is of paramount significance in order to fulfill the eudaimonia-benefiting potential of tourism experiences, yet has been lack of examination in tourism and positive psychology. To fill such gap, this study explores the perspective of character strength employment to examine *the potential and approach to foster the long-term tourism benefits on eudaimonic wellbeing, without compromising its benefits for short-term hedonic wellbeing*. The character strength cultivation has been verified in positive psychology as efficiently fostering eudemonia when incorporated in daily living and working settings (Seligman, 2012). This study nevertheless proposes that tourism may have advantages in cultivating unique strengths that are less likely employed in daily living/working settings and hence is a setting with great potential for strength cultivation and consequently the fostering of eudemonia. Specifically, three major research questions are investigated, among a student population only given the exploratory nature of the current study:

- *Q1: Whether tourism cultivates types of character strengths that are less employed in daily life settings?*
- *Q2: Whether the character strength employment in tourism can facilitate both hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing of tourists?*
- *Q3: Whether we can strengthen the wellbeing benefits of tourism with cognitive priming practices, such as simply priming among tourists the connection between tourism and character strength employment?*

Literature Review

Character Strengths and Wellbeing

The twenty-four Character Strengths are a group of positive traits for thinking, feeling, and behaving (Park & Peterson, 2010), and they are the inner determinants of a life full of pleasure, engagement, and meaning (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005). They also correspond to six important virtues of human beings: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (Table 1)(Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Specifically, the character-strength employment can improve wellbeing through enhanced awareness of meaning in life (Baumann & Eiroa-Orosa, 2016). According to Seligman (2012), character strengths are building blocks for a flourishing life and essential paths to both short-term and long-term wellbeing, hence people should benefit from employing more character strengths in their lives.

The existing positive psychology research support the potential uniqueness of different activities/settings in activating certain character strengths, and also imply the possible importance of a relatively relaxed or free setting in activating more strengths (Gander, Proyer, Ruch, & Wyss, 2012; Harzer & Ruch, 2013). It hence shed light on the potential of the relaxing tourism setting in activating more and unique strengths that are less cultivatable in daily lives. As Torres (2016) revealed, that “travel brings forth a heightened sense of awareness of the brevity of the present” (p. 2148), which lead individuals to become more mindful of the present and more open-minded about opportunities/challenges/changes or even slightly risky activities that they would not have engaged in the daily routines. Individuals are in general less-motivated in the daily life to step out of their comfort zone and cultivate their weak/less-used character strengths. This study thus explores *whether tourism indeed has the potential of cultivating less-used strengths as compared to the daily life settings (Q1); and if so, whether the unique strength employment in tourism is associated with positive wellbeing outcomes (Q2).*

Character Strengths and Leisure/Tourism Research

The character-strength cultivation practices have been conducted in some other life settings (e.g., work, dieting, and serious leisure) for self-development and well-being fostering purposes (Dieser & Christenson, 2016; Quinlan, Swain, & Vella-Brodrick, 2012). There is a lack of explorations to our best knowledge that employ character strengths in facilitating tourism benefits. As an application in serious leisure, Filo and Coghlan (2016) explored with interviews what types of character strengths can be activated under what circumstances in a charity sport event. Another highly relevant study conducted by Dieser and Christenson (2016) is a case study on a depressed individual and incorporated character strength practices into serious leisure engagement, which confirmed the effectiveness of such integration in depression therapy. Such evidence demonstrates the hope of using the character-strength-based practices to fulfill the transformative potential of leisure activities in cultivating mental health and subjective wellbeing. This study further explores the possibility of strengthening tourism benefits through character-strength cultivation practices.

While the existing strength cultivation practices in daily settings can take different forms, they mostly take place over the process of activities (Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010). This study specifically explores a potentially more efficient and flexible alternative, an retrospective approach that primes individuals the an automatic associations between their previous travel experiences and strength employment (*semantic priming*). Such semantic priming would influence individual travel information searching and processing, trip evaluation beforehand and afterwards, and the perceived importance of leisure travel to life (Janiszewski & Wyer Jr, 2014). Ultimately, the wellbeing benefits from leisure travel may also be prolonged given the established automatic linkage between leisure travel and self-development by the nodes of character strengths. Then the positive memory about a trip can activate the awareness or even sustained employment of the strengths cultivated during that trip; or else, when individuals are exposed to information about a character strength, its associated positive travel experiences can also be activated. Either of the above possibilities can form a mutually reinforcing positive cycle that provides positive

feedback to individuals, boost their self-confidence, and potentially encourage their sustained strength employment in future trips or daily lives. Such approach can be easily implemented into the after-trip marketing communication and promotion. *Whether such simple retrospective semantic priming intervention can enhance individual wellbeing and the extent of such influence will be explored (Q3).*

Methodology

A two-group experimental design is adopted among undergraduate students in a university in Florida, USA. Data was collected from eighty-two students, who were randomly assigned to two groups- group aware and not aware (control group) of the strength employment in the previous vacation. The sample size satisfies the minimum size of fifty-two required to detect a large effect size with power level of .8 and significance level of .05, calculated using the G*Power software. The expected large effect size is supported by the effectiveness of character strength interventions in positive psychology research (Proctor et al., 2011; Proyer, Gander, Wellenzohn, & Ruch, 2015).

Both groups responded to a Qualtrics survey. The original scales/items with broadly verified validities and reliabilities were adopted to measure 1) individual *chronic strength-employment patterns* (McGrath, 2017), 2) *hedonic wellbeing right after last trip* which encloses life satisfaction (overall satisfaction (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) and satisfaction about different life domains (Dolnicar et al., 2012)), as well as affect status (positive and negative)(Thompson, 2007), and 3) *eudaimonic wellbeing since last trip* (with six aspects of autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationship with others, self-acceptance, and purpose in life) (Ryff, 1989). Except for the satisfaction with different life dimensions which is measured with single item per life dimension, and the types of strengths employed using yes/no dichotomous measures, the values of other scale measures are calculated by averaging item scores of each scale. To check for *between-group variances* other than the intervention, travel frequency, features of a recent overnight trip (i.e., trip satisfaction, length, how long since the return till now, international/domestic, and repeated/first-time), whether experienced any extreme events between last trip and now, and demographics are also measured for each group.

The only difference between two groups is that the awareness group is asked to select the character strengths that they employed in the recent trip and describe how did they employed those, while the control group only recalled their travel experiences during the recent trip. Explanation of what each strength means and demonstrative examples of how other tourists have used each strength are also provided to facilitate their interpretation. Participants needed to pass the interpretation check questions to proceed with their answers to the strength employment questions.

Results

To answer Q1, the possible uniqueness of tourism in character strength cultivation, a mix of qualitative and quantitative data analyses were conducted. McNemar's tests were first conducted to compare the *within-subject* differences between the strength types frequently employed in the recent trip and those frequently employed in their daily lives. McNemar's tests are chosen on one hand because of its robustness to the small sample size which may result in non-normal data distribution; and also is considering its fit in comparing within-sample two correlated dichotomous variables (Adedokun & Burgess, 2012). The test results revealed two character strengths that are less employed in daily life than in leisure trips, that of *zest* (Odds Ratio = 3.67, McNemar's $\chi^2(1) = 4.57, p = .03$) and *love of learning* (Odds Ratio = 1.44, McNemar's $\chi^2(1) = 7, p = .01$).

The qualitative data provided by each participant regarding how they use different strengths in that recent trip was analyzed with themes and corresponding examples extracted under each strength category (Table 1). Several interesting findings emerge:

(1) although each of the twenty-four strengths has been employed by some participants during the travel process, there were only six strengths employed during the trip-planning stage (i.e., *creativity, judgment/critical thinking, leadership, teamwork, prudence, and appreciation of beauty/excellence*);

(2) some activities are deemed to activate the employment of more types of strengths than others, such as when exploring new attractions/food/things the strengths of *curiosity, love of learning, and courage* were employed; acting funny or telling jokes activates the employment of *zest, social intelligence, and humor*; and exchanging travel feelings with each other is most beneficial, by triggering the employment of *perspective, honesty, zest, love, kindness, social intelligence, forgiveness, humility, and gratitude*;

(3) participants stressed the most about how the trips allow the employments of *wisdom-related, humanity-related, and transcendence-related strengths*. Specifically, participants mentioned how they became more intimate with important others, as the relaxing atmosphere made it easier for them to be *honest* with family/friends and also easier to express their *gratitude* and *love* to family/friends, such as employing *humor* to make family/friends happy. They even enjoyed socializing with strangers (e.g., other travelers, locales, and service staff) better, thanks to the nature of travel setting as offering plenty of stress-free and non-utilitarian social opportunities, which inspired them to frequently utilize *social intelligence* (e.g., paying attention to others' feelings) and *gratitude* toward strangers. In this sense, tourism experiences become an incubator for cultivating some strengths that can be challenging for many individuals to employ in daily lives, particularly the strengths belonging to the virtues of *transcendence* and *humanity*. It is reasonable, as the sense of freedom and relaxation associated with leisure travel is likely to provide the space for self-reflection (Brown, 2013) and also shorten the psychological distance between individuals, no matter the distance between strangers or close others (Durko & Petrick, 2013; Proyer et al., 2015).

The descriptive statistics also solicit interesting findings about Q1, from the comparison of the ranking of strengths by percentage of people frequently employing them in daily lives versus in travel process (Table 2). It shows that besides *creativity* and *curiosity* as top popular strengths used in both settings, *zest* and *humor* are more likely to be used than most other strengths in the leisure travel setting, while less likely to be used in daily settings. More importantly, the strengths least likely employed in daily settings, *love of learning* and *appreciation of beauty/excellence*, are popularly employed in leisure trips. Such supplementary descriptive data further supports the unique advantage of leisure travel in cultivating character strengths that are less-likely employed in daily settings.

Overall, the strengths belong to the virtues of *transcendence, courage, humanity, and wisdom* are more likely being employed in leisure travel setting, while those belonging to virtues of *transcendence* and *humanity* are more *uniquely* cultivated in tourism experiences, while the *temperance-related* strengths are less-likely employed in the leisure travel setting.

For Q2 investigation, nonparametric Mann-Whitney U tests, which are also robust to relatively small sample sizes and normality violations, were adopted to analyze the relationships between strength usage in tourism and wellbeing outcomes. In terms of short-term hedonic wellbeing right after the trip, the only significant finding is that overall life satisfaction was higher for those employed *spirituality* in interpreting the trip ($U = 21, p = .035$). For long-term eudaimonic wellbeing status since last trip, the employment of *self-regulation* is positively correlated with the *autonomy* aspect of eudaimonic wellbeing ($U = 12, p = .024$), while the usage of *humor* in the trip is positively related to the personal-growth aspect of eudaimonic wellbeing ($U = 13.5, p = .018$). These findings confirm the potential benefits of using certain strengths (primarily related to the *transcendence* virtue) in leisure trips for both short-term and long-term wellbeing.

However, there are also some employed character strengths that are associated with lower-level eudaimonic wellbeing of participants. Specifically, the employment of *creativity* ($U = 16.5, p = .021$), *judgment* ($U = 21, p = .037$), *perseverance* ($U = 14, p = .021$) in last trip, is related to lower-level personal-growth aspect of eudaimonic wellbeing; *judgment* employment is also negatively related to purpose-in-life aspect of eudaimonic wellbeing ($U = 15, p = .016$); *bravery* travel usage is negatively correlated with self-acceptance aspect of eudaimonic wellbeing ($U = 21.5, p = .039$); and *perseverance* usage is negatively related to positive relationship with others in after-trip life ($U = 12.5, p = .036$). The above strengths all correspond to two virtues: *wisdom* (creativity and judgment) and *courage* (perseverance and bravery). It is possibly because that during-trip cultivation effects and wellbeing benefits of these strengths do not last long enough to spill over to the after-trip life, hence makes the mundane life after the trip appearing as even less exciting and beneficial to personal growth and life purposes than the travel experiences.

To explore Q3, the travel outcomes were then compared between the group with and without awareness of strength employment in tourism settings. The randomness in group assignments was confirmed with insignificant between-group differences in demographics, travel habits, and the features of the recent trip (at .05 level). The nonparametric Mann-Whitney U tests which is also robust to normality assumption however failed to identify any significant between-group differences.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study proposes and confirms the uniqueness of tourism in cultivating individual character strengths that are less likely employed in daily settings; those are, in particular, the *transcendence-* and *humanity-related strengths*. The study also reveals how the individual employment of various character strengths in leisure trips can contribute differently to short-term and long-term personal wellbeing. Most importantly, the *transcendence-related strengths* that are most uniquely cultivated in leisure trips are positively associated with both personal hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing outcomes, supporting the potential of facilitating strength employment to enhance long-term wellbeing benefits of leisure travel. The findings hence shed light on a promising direction to strengthen the long-term wellbeing benefits of leisure travel, so that a breakthrough can be made to the long-debating long-term benefits of leisure travel in *social science*. The findings also advance the body of literature in *positive psychology* by revealing the unique strength of the relaxing leisure travel settings in facilitating the long-term wellbeing.

Methodologically, this study examined the effectiveness of a simple cognitive priming approach to enhance the perceived wellbeing benefits of tourism, which attempts to build a semantic connection between tourism experiences and strength employment in tourists' mind. Although it appears that such a short semantic priming practice may not be effective enough to change individual chronic perception about travel benefits, it is an attempt to explore more feasible and efficient strength-cultivation approach to be integrated into the tourism industry, as compared to the intensive training workshops/sessions adopted in the experimental settings (Quinlan et al., 2012). Future studies thereby should compare among alternative intervention approaches (e.g., during-trip or before-trip interventions) to identify the most effective and feasible approach to be integrated into tourism product/service design for better wellbeing outcomes to tourists.

The research findings also inform the design of leisure trips to leverage its advantage in uniquely cultivating the strengths less cultivatable in daily lives, particularly those strengths related to virtues of *transcendence* and *humanity*, to best fulfill the potential of leisure travel in benefiting the long-term personal wellbeing. For instance, practitioners can incorporate an experience of mindfulness when surrounded by the pristine nature to strengthen the *transcendence-related strengths*, or perhaps develop the activities/opportunities to facilitate communication not only with important others, but also with other tourists and service staffs to boost the *humanity-based strengths*. The findings also suggest how the travel experience design should fully capitalize on social gatherings/encounters and novelty-seeking activities to

cultivate more character strengths. Moreover, how the potential of travel planning stage in cultivating strengths may have been underestimated and should be strengthened by incorporating strength-related information/activities into the information searching process.

Future research with greater sample sizes can potential reveal more strengths being cultivated in travel experiences or maybe greater wellbeing-facilitating effects from strength employment in tourism, given the greater statistical power. With the greater sample size, the regression analyses with all covariates controlled can help identify more accurately the extent of contribution to explaining after-trip wellbeing outcomes by during-trip strength employment patterns. Hence the results from this exploratory study should be interpreted with caution regarding its generalizability limited by the relatively small sample size. Some other possible future research directions include: 1) a systematic examination of the variation of strength employment and benefits by travel activities and travel stages, and 2) the customized service/product design fitting the individual character strength profile for optimized travel satisfaction and benefits.

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Table 1. 24 Character Strengths, Sub-themes, and Examples

Virtues	Strengths	How	Examples
Wisdom	Creativity	Planning vacation activities	Coming up with creative or fun things for family to do on vacations (e.g., proposing to play board games)
		Visiting new attractions	visiting statue of liberty, etc.
	Curiosity	Explore new things (e.g., food & artifacts)	Trying food that never had (3)
			Riding a different car
			See something new and search how it is produced
	Judgment/Critical Thinking	Providing service feedback	Leaving comments for hotel services
		Collect opinions from others	Collect all opinions/preferences from family before planning the vacation
		Analyze travel options before making decisions	decided to take the scenic route that was longer so we didn't run into traffic; research to make transportation route and schedule decisions
	Love of Learning	Learning new cultures	observe new cultures
			Talked to locals about <u>there</u> experience during the past Hurricane Irma
			Checking out all the monuments
			learning a new language (2)
			Investigating into trip-relevant knowledge
	Perspective/Wisdom	Trip-specific perspective sharing	Sharing ideas when touring rare attractions
Help everyone find their way around			
Sharing interpretation of local environment along with the tour guide			
Courage	Bravery/Courage	Chance to share perspective about life with others	During the trip sharing with others about how an important life decision was made
		Try unfamiliar places/things	traveled with my <u>boyfriends</u> family, deep see fishing, snorkeling
	face challenges or fear	talk to local people	
		facing the cold	
		Rode a big rollercoaster	
	Perseverance	goal setting	faced my fear of heights
			set the schedule
Honesty	The chance to be	told a friend an important secret involving	

		open to close others	them
			Tell my parents I'm moving away from home
	Zest	express energy	Wore cute/atmosphere-fitting outfits for confidence and for photo-taking (6)
		bring others energy	Brought energy when people were tired
	Love	Expressed love to important others	Expressed love to important others during the trip while they were around (2)
		Gift for close others	went with my family and surprised my mom with a gift for her birthday
			Bought gifts for close others (4)
	Kindness	Help close others	held the elevator for other families
			tell others the right way
		help strangers	Helped hold bags when other people rode rides
Humanity			bought a meal for someone that could not afford to eat
			held the elevator for many people
	Social Intelligence	pay attention to emotion of others	Asking a family member how they are feeling
			branched out and talked to people i just met
			Talked to my friend when she was upset at our other friend
		attempt to get along with strangers	I had to interact with people I had never met and be with them all the time
	Teamwork	Work together to prepare for the trip	all worked together to carry things to different destinations
			pack up the car, clean the boat rental
		brainstorming together and jointly making vacation decisions	Worked together to decide which rides to ride
Justice			share the ideas
	Fairness	resolve disputes or complaints	Was the voice of reason when people were being hypocritical
	Leadership	team up effort	organize others as a team to participate in trip activities
		during trip leading	lead the way on a tour
		Trip plan leading	Take the initiative to plan the trip itineraries
	Forgiveness	Forgiving others' mistakes	Forgave my friend even when everyone else was mad at her
Temperance	Humility/Modesty	Recognize the limitation of knowledge	Asked people we trusted for directions
		Listening to and understand others'	sat quietly while others talked

	opinions and situations without interruption	Understand others view and situations with me moving
Prudence	wisely cautious about possible risks	thinking about what places I wanted to go sight see and if it would be too crowded we arrived early to planned activities
Self-regulation	maintain a healthy habit	made sure to stay hydrated with all the walking and moving around in the heat
Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence	Plan the trip based on sight-seeing	Intentionally stay at pretty sight seeing places
	Fully enjoy the sceneries	looked at the stars from the balcony, took in views of the ocean from the boat, admired the coral reefs and fish when scuba diving enjoyed the sunrise
	Take pretty photos	Took lots of pictures for memories went to a random field to talk pictures
	Embrace the beauty of close others	Complimenting/being with my girlfriend
Gratitude	Thankful for service delivery	all of the people who assisted me during my trip were thanked by me and my family no matter who or what their job was Thanked our trip leader with a gift Thank you to the host, getting them a gift on my way out
	Thankful for closed others	thanking my parents
Transcendence	Hope	Stayed calm in face of negative events Missed a flight but then got it fixed
	Humor	humorous attitude about things happening in the trip it is always fun going out with family, and joking around is always happening we all acted very funny and silly, dancing, laughing, telling jokes being my foolish self make some jokes when we feel bored Make jokes to make everyone laugh all the time cracked jokes while riding in the car Jokes/laughter/games I used humor in making my family laugh and joke around on the trip.
Spirituality	living in the moment	cherished the trip in the moment

Table 2. Ranking of Strength Employment in Daily versus Leisure Travel Setting

in Daily Life Setting (% of participants employed the strength)	in Leisure Travel Setting (% of participants employed the strength)
1. Creativity (72.7%)	1. Curiosity (68.2%)
2. Curiosity (68.2%)	1. Zest (68.2%)
3. Love (63.6%)	3. Creativity (63.6%)
3. Kindness (63.6%)	3. Humor (63.6%)
5. Fairness (59.1%)	5. Appreciation of Beauty/Excellence (54.5%)
6. Social Intelligence (54.5%)	5. Perspective (54.5%)
6. Perseverance (54.5%)	7. Love of Learning (50%)
8. Perspective (50%)	7. Love (50%)
8. Honesty (50%)	7. Social Intelligence (50%)
8. Teamwork (50%)	7. Gratitude (50%)
8. Gratitude (50%)	11. Humility (45.5%)
12. Judgment (45.5%)	11. Judgment (45.5%)
12. Leadership (45.5%)	13. Bravery (40.9%)
12. Humor (45.5%)	13. Kindness (40.9%)
15. Bravery (40.9%)	15. Spirituality (36.4%)
15. Humility (40.9%)	16. Perseverance (31.8%)
15. Hope (40.9%)	16. Teamwork (31.8%)
18. Forgiveness (36.4%)	16. Fairness (31.8%)
19. Zest (31.8%)	16. Prudence (31.8%)
19. Appreciation of Beauty (31.8%)	20. Honesty (27.3%)
19. Spirituality (31.8%)	20. Forgiveness (27.3%)
22. Self-regulation (27.3%)	20. Self-regulation (27.3%)
23. Prudence (18.2%)	20. Hope (27.3%)
23. Love of Learning (18.2%)	24. Leadership (22.7%)