EFFECT OF VACATION DURATION AND FREQUENCY ON TRAVELERS’ SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

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ABSTRACT

Despite the substantial number of research on subjective well-being (SWB) and happiness in recent decades, limited efforts have been devoted to understanding vacation’s effect on travelers’ SWB and happiness. In addition, vacation duration and frequency, two critical travel characteristics in shaping SWB status have not been fully addressed. Based upon the affective theory of happiness, the purpose of the current study was to empirically examine travelers’ SWB with different vacation durations and frequencies. The results showed that longer vacation improves travelers’ contentment with specific life domains and affect greater while more frequent vacation improves travelers’ global life satisfaction and contentment with specific life domains greater. This study may have potential implications for public policy initiative and destination marketing organizations.

Keywords: Duration, Frequency, Subjective well-being, Affective theory, Vacation

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Vacation is “a cessation of work, a time when a person is not actively participating in his or her job” (Lounsbury & Hoopes, 1986). Vacation days together with the fixed holidays and weekends constitute the major part of the time that people leave home for a trip. An aim generally associated with vacation is the recovery from work stress and the restoration of work capacity (Allmer, 1996).

The entitlement of vacation time across the year, however, has structural differences between nations and world regions. Both the length and concentration of vacation consumption pattern vary between nations and even within nations. For example, in Finland, workers can get a minimum of 30 days paid vacation plus up to 14 paid holidays a year. In Thailand, Canada, Taiwan and U.S., people get less vacation and in some developing countries, such as China, people has paid public holidays only.

In addition to the varying vacation consumption across different regions; currently, there is a trend toward shorter vacations in many areas due to time pressures and the polarization of incomes (Richards, 1999). It has been suggested that as vacation became an established element of consumption for most people, the focus of growth shifted toward second and third vacations or short breaks (Richards, 1999).
The varying vacation time across different areas as well as the emergence of new vacation consumption patterns raised the discussions about the strategies of determining vacation policy so as its influence on the individual, the company and the society at large (Altonji & Oldham, 2003). The impact of vacation pattern on travelers’ SWB is among one of them. Studies showed that, for individual, time off from work improves physical and mental health and which also reduces the costs of illness borne in part by society (Altonji & Oldham, 2003). More and shorter vacation may be more beneficial to travelers’ quality of life since it induces more frequent change of environment or daily routine (Richards, 1999), which is the key factor in the enjoyment of vacation (Deem, 1996). Although the actual amount of time spent on short breaks may be less, the subjective perception of time may make a busy few days sway seem much longer than a few weeks of inactivity (Lengkeek, 1996).

Despite the importance of vacation policy for the sustainable development of diverse social units, the study on vacation pattern, specifically, vacation duration and vacation frequency’s influence on travelers’ SWB is rare. The current study aims at investigating the different vacation consumption patterns, specifically, vacation duration and vacation frequency’s influence on travelers SWB.

LITERAURE REVIEW

Subjective Well-being (SWB)

SWB, also referred as happiness in many studies, can be defined as all of the various types of evaluations, both positive and negative, that people make of their lives. It is composed of several major components, including global life satisfaction, contentment with specific life domains, positive affect (pleasant moods and emotions), and negative affect (unpleasant moods and emotions) (Diener, 2006). It is likely to have both stable and changeable components (Busseri, Sadava, & Decourville, 2007; Eid & Diener, 2004; Headey & Wearing, 1992).

An increasing number of promotional campaigns suggest that travel, vacation, or any tourism experience may have a positive impact on a traveler’s SWB. A few studies that have examined the travel’s effect on travelers’ SWB also showed that the holiday-taking individuals were happier with their family, economic situation and health domains compared to the non-holiday-taking people (Gilbert & Abdullah, 2002; Gilbert & Abdullah, 2004). Milman (1998) pointed out that vacation can change travelers’ SWB from both affect and life satisfaction aspects through various travel activities. Enhancement of SWB may result from participating in physical activities such as flying, riding a bus, or eating and drinking, as well as engaging in cognitive activities pertaining to the mind. Furthermore, the cognitive activities may have a possible impact on the traveler’s perception, awareness, imagination, and reasoning. They also influence travelers’ affect, both positive and negative.

Existing literature has demonstrated the variability of SWB and that vacation has an effect on SWB. The dynamic pattern of SWB, however, has far from been fully discovered. The current study investigated vacation duration and frequency’s effect on travelers’ SWB based upon the affective theory of happiness. The next section presents the affective theory of happiness as well as its implications in the tourism context.
Affective Theory of Happiness

Affective theory of happiness holds that happiness is a reflection of how well we feel generally. In this view we do not ‘calculate’ happiness, but rather ‘infer’ it (Schwarz & Strack, 1991). This line of thought addresses the question of how we stock our affective experience and what makes us feel good or bad which links up to the wider question about the functions of affect (Veenhoven, 2006).

Affective theory of happiness holds that affects are an integral part of our adaptive repertoire and seem to be linked to the gratification of human needs, such as eating, bonding and exercise. Happiness can be increased when needs are satisfied (Veenhoven, 1984). Overall evaluation of life is geared by the most salient affective experiences and that these are the relative frequency of positive to negative affect (Diener, Pavot, & Sandwick, 1991). Frequency not only can be accurately and validly measured but also is a necessary and sufficient variable to produce the state we call happiness (Diener, Pavot, & Sandwick, 1991). One way to access the relative frequency of affect is to utilize the cognitive view of affect procession, computing an affect balance in some way and using estimates of frequency and duration.

Based upon affective theory of happiness, happiness can be increased by taking stock of our affective experience (Veenhoven, 2006) and that travelers’ happiness is a desirable state. Travelers’ SWB increases when travelers gratify their needs and gain positive travel experience during the vacation. In addition, travelers may gain more happiness by taking longer and more frequent vacation as they may have chances to experience more frequent favorable experience. The current study hypothesizes that vacation frequency and duration have a significant positive effect on change of SWB. The hypotheses of this study are:

H1: Vacation-taking length has a significant influence on travelers’ SWB.
H1a: Vacation-taking length has a significant influence on travelers’ global life satisfaction.
H1b: Vacation-taking length has a significant influence on travelers’ contentment with specific life domain.
H1c: Vacation-taking length has a significant influence on travelers’ affect.

H2: Vacation-taking frequency has a positive influence on travelers’ SWB.
H2a: Vacation-taking frequency has a positive influence on travelers’ global life satisfaction.
H2b: Vacation-taking frequency has a positive influence on travelers’ contentment with specific life domain.
H2c: Vacation-taking frequency has a positive influence on travelers’ affect.

METHODOLOGY

Data

The current study utilized a quasi-experimental nonrandomized control group pretest-posttest design to examine the effect of vacation length and frequency on SWB. The population of the current study was Chinese travelers. The data used in this study
was collected through a self-administrated survey conducted in a city located at the southeast part of China.

This study followed a two-stage procedure. First, an onsite survey was conducted to identify travelers’ socio-demographic information, such as: gender, age, marriage status, income, and education level as well as their vacation pattern within a three month period from January 2009 to March 2009. Respondents were divided into frequent short-duration travelers, infrequent short-duration travelers and infrequent long-duration travelers according to their trip length and trip frequency. Then, an in-depth follow-up survey was conducted. Participants were asked to rate their SWB at the baseline (End of December), post baseline (end of March), and after each of their during the three month period. A total of 152 responses were collected, among which 48 were from frequent short-duration travelers, 50 were from infrequent short-duration travelers, and 54 were from infrequent long-duration travelers.

Measurement

The current study utilized Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) measurement scale developed by Diener, Emmons, Lasen, and Griffin (1985) to assess global life satisfaction and contentment with specific life domains. The SWLS is shown to have favorable psychometric properties, including high internal consistency and high temporal reliability.

The instrument for measuring positive and negative affect is based on Affectometer 2, which is a 20-item scale developed Kammann and Flett (1983). It has separate items (10 items each) for measuring positive and negative affect (PA, NA). The overall level of well-being is conceptualized as the extent to which positive or pleasant feelings predominate over negative or unpleasant feelings and is reflected in the balance formula for calculating the total score: PA-NA.

Data Analysis

The current study utilized t-test on the gain score to compare the groups on differences between post-test and pretest. By analyzing the change scores within each group, we can specify whether groups improved at different rates. To test the effect of vacation on SWB, a series of t-tests were conducted on the gain scores of three aspects of travelers’ SWB (global life satisfaction, contentment with specific life domains and affect) between the four measurement points (from the baseline to post first trip, from baseline to post last trip, from baseline to post baseline and from post last trip to post baseline). For effect of vacation duration, t-tests on the gain scores were conducted between the short-infrequent vacation group and the long-infrequent vacation group. To test the effect of vacation-taking frequency on SWB, t-tests on the gain scores were conducted between the infrequent vacation group (combining the short-infrequent vacation group and the long-infrequent vacation group) and the frequent vacation group.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Respondents’ Profile
All respondents were 18 years of age or older. 61.1% of the respondents were female, while the remaining 40.1% were female. The majority of the respondents were married (84.4%) and fell into the age bracket of 30-59 years old (73.2%). 25.6% of them earned a bachelor’s degree followed by people who were undergraduate or had a associate degree (22.1%) and who had high school diploma or left high school without diploma (21.1%). More than half of them (57.8%) had a monthly household income between ¥ 4000 - ¥ 10 000 (approximately $586 to $1466). Their occupations were largely middle level manager or professional (27.2% and 15.6% respectively) or worker/craftsman (17.3%).

T-test on the Gain Score

For vacation duration’s effect, results (Table 1) showed that there were statistically significant difference on the gain scores of contentment with specific life domains from baseline to post last trip (t = -2.388, p = 0.019) and from post last trip to post baseline (t = -2.416, p = 0.017) between the long and short vacation group. In addition, the gain score of affect from baseline to post first trip (t = -3.851, p = 0.053) was significantly different between the long duration and short duration vacation group. Therefore, hypothesis 1a was rejected. Vacation duration does not have a significant influence on global life satisfaction. Hypotheses 1b was supported. Vacation duration has a significant influence on contentment with specific life domains. Hypothesis 1c was supported. Vacation duration has a significant influence on travelers’ affect. The results suggested that vacation duration had a significant influence on travelers’ contentment with specific life domains from baseline to post last trip and from post last trip to post baseline. More specifically, long vacation benefited travelers’ contentment with specific life domains more than short vacation. The long vacation travelers’ contentment with specific life domains increased greater and faded out slower than short vacation. Vacation duration also had a significant effect on travelers’ affect from baseline to post first trip. Long vacation benefited travelers’ affect life domains more than short vacation. Travelers’ affect increased greater when they have longer vacation.

Table 1 T-test of Effect of Vacation’s Duration on Travelers’ SWB

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Baseline – Post 1st trip</th>
<th>Baseline – Post Last Trip</th>
<th>Baseline – Post Baseline</th>
<th>Post Last Trip – Post Baseline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T-test</td>
<td>P-value</td>
<td>T-test</td>
<td>P-value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global life satisfaction</td>
<td>-1.034</td>
<td>0.304</td>
<td>-1.370</td>
<td>0.174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contentment with specific life</td>
<td>-0.624</td>
<td>0.534</td>
<td>-2.388</td>
<td>0.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>domain</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affect</td>
<td>-3.851</td>
<td>0.053</td>
<td>0.284</td>
<td>0.777</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For vacation frequency’s effect, results (Table 2) showed that there were statistically significant differences on the gain scores of global life satisfaction from baseline to post baseline (t = -3.464, p = 0.001) and from last trip to post baseline between frequent and infrequent vacation group (t = 3.022, p = 0.003). In addition, the gain score of