

# ABSTRACT

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This thesis aims to highlight the existing relationship between tourism and positive psychology in the context of Asian spa tourism by understanding tourist motivations, the experience of flow and the perceived benefits of spa going. The review of the literature suggested several clear research needs; hence, five opportunities were identified and explored. The first two opportunities consisted of highlighting spa tourism as a form of special interest tourism, and using South East Asia as the geographical context of the project. This shift in focus from the European and North American settings for spa research provided a timely approach in studying a rich and thriving component of Asian tourism. The third opportunity relates to the under-researched relationship between tourism and positive psychology. The vital relationship between these two contemporary fields of study provided a pathway to consider different approaches for studying spa-related tourist behaviour. The fourth opportunity lay in testing and expanding specific existing theories and conceptual schemes. In this project, the travel career pattern (TCP) and the flow construct were used and tested in ways that have not been previously undertaken. Finally, the opportunity to provide empirical work on the trajectory of tourist behaviour in the Asian spa-going context was identified. This thesis has used Clawson and Knetsch's (1966) five phases of tourist behaviour. It has focused on the three main phases: pre-travel (Chapter 3 – motivation), on-site experiences (Chapter 4 – “flow”), and reflection (Chapter 5 – benefits of spa experiences).

This thesis is divided into six chapters. The introductory chapter provides the background for the study by outlining the wellness context (as a phenomenon, as an industry and as a tourism product). A discussion about health, wellness and spa tourism is also presented. Further, the chapter presents a background of spa tourism by highlighting the history and types of spas, the recent global spa trends and the nature of the Asian spa industry. This chapter also includes the significance of the research. Chapter 2 provides further background for the research by outlining some key concepts in the thesis such as the TCP, the meaning of flow and the kinds of benefits-sought. Additionally, the research paradigm, perspectives and justifications of the geographical

context of the study are explained. Finally, the research gaps are identified in more detail; the research design is presented and the research aims are also laid out.

Three studies were conducted to support the overarching aim of the research. The first study involved on-site surveys in India, Thailand and the Philippines. The second study was framed from the initial results of the first study; it involved an online survey of spa-going tourists in South East Asia. The third and final study entailed an analysis of travel blogs about spa experiences in India, Thailand and the Philippines.

Chapter 3 consisted of two parts which discussed the tourist motivation-related findings from the on-site and online surveys. The aims of the first study were to profile the tourist spa-goers in India, Thailand and the Philippines and identify their key motives in visiting these countries. In exploring the pull factors, it was found that safety and security was the most important factor in choosing a destination. The TCP was the main theory used in analysing the push factors, and the results were very similar to the original TCP study (Lee & Pearce, 2002, 2003; Pearce, 2005; Pearce & Lee, 2005). Novelty, escape and relaxation were found to be the most important motives for the tourists in the three countries. Health as a travel motive was found to be moderately important among the respondents. Additionally, it was found that the pursuit of health motives was not as important to experienced travellers as it was to less experienced travellers. In effect, as one gains more travel experience, the importance of the health motive diminishes. The second part of Chapter 3 focused on the travel and spa motives of tourists who participated in the online survey. For both travel and spa-going sets of motives, it was found that novelty, relaxation and escape were the most important motives for the respondents. Unlike health in the previous study, *beauty, health and wellness* as a motive factor was the least important travel motive for overall holiday taking. As a motive for specifically going to spas, however, it was regarded as moderately important.

Chapter 4 applied the flow construct to spa and health experiences. The measure of flow, FSS-2 was used to address an aim of the study that is, to assess the tourists' propensity to experience flow during a spa experience. The data for this chapter were part of the same information collection process which surveyed travel motives among tourists in India, Thailand and the Philippines (Study 1). The nine dimensions of flow

(Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) were used as the framework of the FSS-2. Overall, the results of the study showed that the 319 spa-going tourists reported a moderately high propensity to experience flow during a spa treatment, thereby indicating that spa treatments generally provide positive experiences to tourists. Of the nine dimensions, autotelic experience – the domain which refers to the view that the individuals involved in the activity are inclined to undertake or repeat the experience – was the highest across the flow dimensions. Overall, tourist spa-goers are likely to experience intrinsic rewards from spa treatments. Also, the results suggested that tourists are likely to purchase spa treatments for their future holidays. To address the final aim and to highlight the novel approach used in this study, the mean scores of each flow dimension in the spa activity were compared with the mean scores of other activities that were previously studied by the developers of the FSS-2. The results indicated that loss of self-consciousness and action-awareness merging were lower in spa settings than the other activities. Meanwhile, the spa activity was comparatively higher on the concentration dimension than the other activities. In general, this comparison also suggests that spa-going while on holidays is a successful activity that is viewed as beneficial in terms of flow-related positive psychology outcomes.

Chapter 5 presented the benefits from spa experiences as reported by tourists in their travel blogs. Overall, it was revealed that the kinds of positive-experiences that tourist spa-goers gain from the spa activity was found to encompass the different dimensions of well-being. More specifically, physical, psychological and social dimensions benefited the most from spa experiences. The physical domain was usually affected by touch during spa treatments. Psychological dimensions of change (emotional, intellectual and sometimes spiritual domains) were reported during and after the spa experiences. Finally, the social dimension was also affected through perceived improvement in relationships as a result of the spa experience.

The concluding chapter provides a reconsideration of the main aims and an overview of the results. It highlights the theoretical and conceptual implications, and offers insights for commercial/marketing considerations from the project. Finally, the limitations and challenges are presented, and then the future directions of this area of inquiry are identified. Academic publications relating to this research are documented in a separate section.