

Abstract

Stress in everyday life is common in our postmodern society leading some people to seek relief and fulfilment from a range of leisure and lifestyle activities such as travel experiences. Travel in itself, even adventurous or unstructured travel does not guarantee that travellers will receive positive benefits from their experiences. However, the notion of mindfulness may play an important role in producing positive consequences from different experiences. Thus, this study explores the nature and experiential benefits of 'meditative mindful' tourist experiences that can be experienced during travel.

Mindfulness is a mental state that may facilitate positive experiences. Understanding the importance of mindfulness is becoming a mainstream field of academic study in many therapeutic settings. However, there has been little discussion of mindfulness theory as it might be applied to tourism studies. Previous research in tourism has mainly focused on socio-cognitive mindfulness related to visitor learning rather than meditative mindfulness experiences. These include contexts such as tourist-wildlife encounters, appreciation of scenery, or through interaction with other people. The conceptual framework in this thesis is based on the Eastern notion of meditative mindfulness and has been used in Western therapeutic studies. In the past decade, evidence of the effectiveness and application of meditative mindfulness has grown dramatically due to a developing dialogue between Buddhist traditions and Western clinical psychology. There is a growing interest in whether meditative mindful experiences can occur outside of formal therapeutic settings, including travel. However, it is not clear how meditative mindful tourism experiences might be defined or whether they occur at all during travel. Furthermore, few studies have investigated the antecedents and consequences of meditative mindful experiences in tourism contexts.

This thesis presents an exploratory study of the occurrence as well as the antecedents and consequences of the meditative mindfulness phenomenon in a tourism context. A qualitative methodology based on an interpretive constructivist paradigm was adopted for the data collection. Taiwanese backpackers in Australia were selected as respondents and snowball sampling was used to recruit participants. In total, 43 semi-structured interviews were completed, and a total of 77 instances of meditative mindful experiences were identified. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Brisbane (at backpacker hostels) and at Uluru (Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park), as these two main sites provided the best opportunities to meet Taiwanese backpackers. Two interview protocols were used in screening and extended interviews for qualifying and exploring the three research objectives. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. NVivo 10 qualitative analysis software was used to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the data analysis process.

The findings indicated that meditative mindful experiences occurring in tourism contexts were characterised by three constructs of awareness ('paying attention', 'living in the present', and 'non-elaborative awareness'). An operational definition of tourist experience associated with meditative mindfulness is proposed as "*paying attention to a present moment experience, without elaboration on it*". In addition, the study clarified and contrasted three related concepts (meditative mindfulness, socio-cognitive mindfulness and flow). This thesis is the first study to empirically identify tourist experiences that have been associated with meditative mindfulness.

The findings also identified the antecedents and consequences of meditative mindful tourist experiences. The four main types of identified triggers that facilitated tourists experiencing a mindful state were labelled as travel-induced relaxation, aesthetic appreciation, atmosphere of quietness, and curiosity-developing. Natural encounters and participation in specific activities were found to foster a state of being mindful. The mental process of meditative mindfulness contributes to relaxation and tranquillity and helps to create memorable experiences. Such psychological and physical benefits were identified among backpackers.

A theoretical framework to provide a better understanding of the phenomenon and mental process of tourist meditative mindful experience is also discussed. This model is considered to be a useful tool for academics and the tourism industry to scope the mental and spiritual dimensions of tourist experiences for backpackers. An examination of how mindfulness occurs and how it can be further developed in tourism experiences is expected to be useful for tourism stakeholders. Business operators or policy makers should be aware of how to design engaging experiences and, in particular, how they can enhance affective, sensory or mental experiences through encouraging an awareness of the present moment and non-judgmental thinking during on-site visits. This may help tourism industries to better understand how to design holistic engaging experiences that benefit tourists' understanding of an alternative access to personal fulfilment. A number of areas for further research are also discussed.