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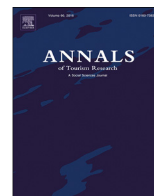

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Theoretical linkages between well-being and tourism: The case of self-determination theory and spiritual tourism

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ABSTRACT

Self-determination theory (SDT) offers a robust and globally adopted evidence-based foundation from which explorations of increasingly popular forms of travel, like spiritual tourism, can be analyzed for their potential contributions to well-being. This paper draws on SDT to examine outcomes of well-being within spiritual tourism. It draws on autoethnography, a thick data approach to qualitative inquiry, which allows for the emergence of *experiential* and *self-reflective* processes engendered by forms of travel like spiritual tourism. The autoethnographic narrative is based on the author's spiritual tourism experience at a yoga/meditation retreat in Rishikesh, India. The narrative is transcended through theory-based linkages to broader social phenomena (*i.e.,* well-being, SDT), by so doing, the legacy of *theoretical* development, characteristic of interpretive inquiry, is sustained.

Introduction

Tourism is a quintessential realm within which spirituality and religiosity can be experienced, by "questing travelers" in search of meaning (Buzinde, Kalavar, Kohli & Manuel-Navarrete, 2014; Kujawa, 2017, p.197; Norman & Pokorny, 2017; Sharpley & Jepson, 20111), and critically analyzed, by scholars looking to explore social phenomena (Cheer, Belhassen, & Kujawa, 2017). There has been extensive research on the nexus between tourism and religion (see Cohen, 1979; Collins-Kreiner & Kliot, 2000; Raj & Morpeth, 2007; Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005; Timothy & Olsen, 2006; Vukonic, 1996). Religious tourism scholars have thoroughly explored the supply side as well as the demand side, through which forms of travel like pilgrimage tourism, and meanings ascribed to them, have been assessed (Belhassen, Caton, & Stewart, 2008; Digance, 2003; Hudman & Jackson, 1992; Shinde, 2010; Terzidou, Scarles, & Saunders, 2017). Of recent, the notion of spirituality, a concept related to religiosity (Willson, McIntosh, and Zahra (2013), has been gaining traction in popular culture (Singleton, 2017). This has been paralleled by growth of interest in spiritual tourism destinations wherein demand for "religious and non-religious" travel is pursued so as to attain "challenging, visceral, intellectual, transcendental and at times life changing or life affirming experiences" (Cheer et al., 2017, p.187). Within religious tourism scholarship, discussions of spirituality have been scarce (Moufakkir & Selmi, 2018); however, scholars have highlighted well-being as a common denominator underpinning the pursuance of spiritual travel or imbuing it with meaning (see Gill, Packer, & Ballantyne, 2019; Heintzman, 2013; Norman & Pokorny, 2017). For instance, Norman (2011) describes spiritual tourism as "a self-conscious project" aimed at enhancing one's "sense of being well" (p.203). Similarly, Moufakkir & Selmi, 2018, p.108) indicate that individuals in search of self-betterment are increasingly turning to spirituality "to fill in the emptiness engendered by … the decline" of institutionalized religions. Such motivations have fueled demand for spiritual tourism wherein the rational, biophysical, and spiritual coalesce (Cheer et al., 2017) to

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potentially contribute to subjective well-being. The links between spirituality and well-being have been discussed extensively in the allied field of religious studies (Fredrickson, 2002; Koenig, Kvale, & Ferrel, 1988; Steger & Frazier, 2005; Witter, Stock, Okun, & Haring, 1985). However, within tourism scholarship on spirituality and religiosity, well-being is scarcely the core unit of analysis yet it has the propensity to highlight the contributions of travel to the philosophy of living a good life. One notable exception in tourism studies is Norman and Pokorny (2017) conceptual paper on meditation retreats which highlights the significance of *well-being* as a key driver for spiritual travel. According to Norman and Pokorny (2017, p.202),

> [t]he concept of spiritual tourism serves as a useful example with which to flesh out the notion of well-being as practiced reflexivity. Understanding spiritual tourism as a well-being intervention gives researchers interested in subjective well-being useful access points for research. With these, researchers can begin to look at the ways communities and individuals self-consciously attempt to maintain and increase their own sense of being well.

The current paper builds on Norman and Pokorny's (2017) prolegomenon by problematizing the manifestation, or lack thereof, of subjective well-being within spiritual tourism contexts, specifically yoga retreats. To highlight the dynamic nature of subjective well-being, the current paper draws on the conceptual foundation of Self Determination Theory (SDT), a robust and globally adopted evidence-based theory, which articulates the basic psychological needs necessary for an individual, in any context, to experience subjective well-being. This paper further builds on Norman and Pokorny's (2017) treatise by drawing on autoethnographic data, derived from a yoga retreat experience, to showcase the dynamic nature of subjective well-being within a spiritual tourism context. In essence, the purpose of this paper to draw on SDT and autoethnographic experiences to theorize subjective well-being within the context of spiritual tourism. By weaving innovative theoretical and methodological threads into the fabric of scholarly renditions on spiritual tourism, this paper offers a unique opportunity for tourism research to contribute to the global debate on well-being and related constructs of living a good life.

The subsequent section presents discussions on the key concepts of well-being, spiritual tourism, and analytical ethnography. This is followed by a synopsis of the autoethnographic data which is grounded within the theoretical foundation of SDT to showcase the nuances related to subjective well-being.

Self-determination theory and well-being

The body of scholarly literature on well-being is growing in importance and contributions include disciplines such as psychology, sociology, economy, community development, and philosophy, to name a few (Dehaan, Hirai, & Ryan, 2016; Dehaan & Ryan, 2014; Dodge, Daly, Huyton, & Sanders, 2012). Well-being refers to the practices and processes entailed in living well or in a life well lived; it is a state of being centered on psychological and socio-cultural needs (Teghe & Rendell, 2005). It has been equated to the Aristotelian concept of *eudaimonia*, which refers to human flourishing, and distinguished from the hedonic notion of happiness that is regarded as a symptom of well-being (Dehaan & Ryan, 2014). DeHann, Hirai, and Ryan's (2016) research proposes the use of self-determination theory (SDT), a globally adopted evidence-based framework that is well suited for assessments of *subjective* dimensions of personal wellbeing. SDT is related to the realm of positive psychology that focuses on positive human functions and the influence on health and *well-being* (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

According to SDT, well-being can be attained in the activities that people engage in (*e.g.,* spiritual tourism) if the three fundamental psychological needs have been fulfilled. The three psychological needs are: "*autonomy* (*i.e.,* engaging in behavior that reflects one's interests or values), *competence* (*i.e.,* being effective in valued and challenging pursuits), and *relatedness* (*i.e.,* having close and satisfying bonds with others, feeling accepted and cared for by others, as well as caring for them)" (Sedikides, Ntoumanis, & Sheldon, 2019, p.74). SDT "proposes that *well-being* … is promoted through the support of the three basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness" (Barrable & Arvanitis, 2019, p.39). Satisfaction of the aforementioned three fundamental needs results in individuals feeling a sense of interest, confidence, and creativity which enhances performance, autonomous motivation, and general *well-being* (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017). By contrast, thwarting of the aforementioned fundamental needs, yields disinterest, *ill-being*, and sensations that one's motivations are being controlled by external factors (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

According to SDT "activities and lifestyles … associated with eudaimonic living" are a vital avenue through which well-being can be explored (Dehann & Ryan, 2014, p.40). For instance, eudaimonic activities can include those related to religious and spiritual endeavors such as religious and/or spiritual tourism. However, for such activities to contribute to well-being, to facilitate constructive social development, and optimal functioning, the aforementioned three psychological needs have to be fulfilled. From this theoretical vantage point, simply engaging in spiritual travel is not sufficient ground on which to assess well-being because one still needs to account for the fulfillment, or lack thereof, of three basic psychological needs. In addition to the psychological evaluation one engages in to assess whether the context is autonomy supportive to self (*e.g.,* the spiritual tourist), it is important to note that the external surroundings (*e.g.,* a spiritual destination/center; see Gill et al., 2019) are partly socially constructed and can also impact well-being (Dehaan & Ryan, 2014). SDT thus allows scholars to account for psychosocial characteristics and offers insights into how individuals negotiate presence in various contexts. For instance, Thal and Hudson (2019) apply SDT to "identify … conditions [that] promote subjective well-being" between hosts and guests in hospitality settings (p.41). SDT is indeed applicable to tourism in general and spiritual travel in particular because elements of "autonomy and self-development" (*i.e.,* competence) resonate across the field (Lopez, González, & Fernández, 2017, p.226).

SDT can augment knowledge related to the nexus between subjective well-being and spiritual tourism, particularly the *in-situ* experiences that manifest during spiritual travel. Spiritual tourism research on *in-situ evaluations of subjective well-being* continues to be scarce (Kujawa, 2017). Consequently, explorations of how, increasingly popular forms of travel like spiritual tourism advance

and/or thwart well-being, have remained relatively under researched (see Norman & Pokorny, 2017). As a result, there is an underproduction of tourism manuscripts that "flesh out the notion of well-being as practiced reflexivity" and draw on appropriate *self-reflective* methods like *autoethnography*, which forms of travel, like spiritual tourism, engender. Some exceptions that adopt allied methodological genres include Willson et al.'s (2013) phenomenological analysis of spiritual tourism and Kujawa's (2017) creative work on spiritual travel memoirs. This paper draws on an autoethnographic narrative derived from a spiritual yoga retreat to highlight the dynamics of well-being. A synopsis of the social backdrop that has given rise to the popularity of yoga tourism is presented next.

Spiritual tourism and yoga retreats

Advertised packages for spiritual tourism, in the global north, often adhere to Eastern philosophies and include a gamut of activities such as meditation, yoga, teachings about self, and, zen retreats. In the US, the commercialization of Eastern influenced spiritual related travel, geared towards Western consumers, is ubiquitous (Collins-Kreiner & Tueta Sagi, 2011; Timothy & Conover, 2006). For instance, yoga retreats for individuals in search of well-being have become very popular (Bowers & Cheer, 2017), particularly those that involve travel by Westerners to the East. Yoga tourism involves physical and transcendental attributes as well as extended periods of intellectual engagement. This didactic element is akin to Cohen's (2006) use of the term educational pilgrimage and it resonates with Maddox's (2015) study on perceptions of authenticity held by Westerns who participate in yoga retreats in India, to learn ashtanga yoga. Norman and Pokorny (2017) state that "retreats, as periods of concentrated learning and practice … ought to be phenomena of interest for understanding subjective well-being" (p.201). According to Gill et al., (2019), yoga tourism is a form of retreat tourism that involves religious traditions and/or spiritual approaches to well-being; although their work does not directly focus on well-being it innovatively explores design elements and their restorative outcomes. In essence, geophysical and psychosocial dimensions are key elements that imbue individuals to engage in yoga retreats.

Rishikesh, India is a quintessential destination for individuals in search of yoga retreats. The geopolitical location is the one of the epicenters of spiritual tourism; "yoga, meditation and spiritual/philosophical lectures are the central attractions … English language advertising plastered on light poles and walls offers either accommodation and food, or some kind of spiritual course or experiences" (Norman, 2011, p.27). From this vantage point, yoga tourism is a quintessential example of the "East-West intersection" and the opportunity for "the attainment of physical, psychological and well-being transformations" (Bowers & Cheer, 2017, p.211). The demand characteristic of this spiritually motivated market trend is rooted in the socio-politics of the 1960s and 1970s wherein "the popular rejection of mainstream religiosity and of 'the system' more generally led to a turn toward Eastern religions" particularly, Indian philosophies (Lucia, 2014, p.14). Over the years, India has successfully created a destination brand linked to spirituality and religiosity; "spiritual activities are among the strongest draw-cards for a number of destinations within" the nation (Norman, 2011, p.27). Furthermore, frequent visitation in the 1960s, by the Beatles, to a spiritual center in Rishikesh led by "Maharishi Mahesh Yogi" as well as "George Harrison's chanting of the mahamantra of Krishna devotionalism into the pop culture mainstream" propelled India's placement on the international map of spiritual travel (Lucia, 2014, p.13). The Beatles are often credited with elevating spiritual tourism and Eastern philosophies for Westerners; however, in the United States, "the entrée of [monk and yogi] Swami Vivekananda in 1893 … at the World's Parliament of Religions … marked the beginnings of the contemporary paradigm wherein mystic religious adepts from India attracted followers of large American audiences of spiritual seekers" (Lucia, 2014, p.14).

Swami Vivekanda's visit to the US and the spiritual travel escapades of the Beatles are notable historical markers indicative of intergenerational shifts in perceptions of religion and spirituality. Addressing broader societal forces Robledo's (2015) work indicates that many in society, and within the private sphere, are turning to spirituality in search of meaningful solutions to existential voids. As relates to the public sphere, key culprits include dimensions such as the crises of representative democracy, the tragedy of the commons, as well as, the ubiquity of a global consumer culture that erroneously and directly equates the highly sought-after concepts of happiness and well-being with material consumption (see Bowers & Cheer, 2017; Cohen, 1979; Fedele, 2013; Kujawa, 2017; Robledo, 2015). The pursuance of spiritual tourism, for some, may result "as a mode of cultural criticism of the life practices of the West" which, obsessively focus on consumerism, material wealth, and work life consequently, veering away from the practice of self-study (Norman, 2011, p.29). Hence, whether one focuses on the internal void or the need for rootedness, as described by Robledo (2015) and Norman (2011), the general common denominator for spiritual seekers is often *well-being.*

Analytical autoethnography

Analyses of well-being and related practices of reflexivity (Norman & Pokorny, 2017) require reflexive methods, like analytical autoethnography, which is adopted in the current study.

Analytical autoethnography is a tool rarely adopted in tourism scholarship despite its capacity to shed light on psychosocial dimensions of human existence. Rooted in the interpretive paradigm, autoethnographic inquiry, also referred to as auto-anthropology or autobiographical ethnography, has witnessed an increasing use in social scientific research in part due to "the postmodern skepticism regarding generalization of knowledge claims" (Anderson, 2006, p.373; Denzin, 1997). As a genre, it is characterized by "explicit and reflexive self-observation" of the researcher as a social actor in the settings … under study" (Anderson, 2006, p.375–6). It is both process and product and it results in "aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, online). Data in this case can comprise, participant observation, research diaries, artefact analysis and/or photography, to name a few (Chang, 2016). Within analytic autoethnography, there are three parameters related to the role enacted by the researcher, which includes:

a) a full member in the research group or setting, b) visible as such a member in the researcher's published texts, and c) committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving *theoretical* understandings of broader social phenomena (Anderson, 2006, p.375).

SDT has been applied to a variety of settings, particularly contexts characterized by hierarchy such as education/training, healthcare, sports, religious institutions, and parenting, to name a few. By applying an auto ethnographical lens to the *in-situ* experience of spiritual tourism this paper broadens the scope of the embodied nature of spiritual tourism. The autoethnographic narrative comprises the author's experience of spiritual tourism at a Yoga Training Retreat in Rishikesh, India. Despite the global popularity that characterizes them, neither Rishikesh nor yoga have featured *extensively* within tourism scholarship; thus, their inclusion in this paper bridges yet another gap in the literature. The methodological, theoretical, and to some extent geopolitical, contributions of this manuscript are more explicitly evident in the discussion of the autoethnographic inquiry section, which is presented in a relational manner so as to purposefully link the self-narrative of the author and spiritual tourist, to a set of broader social phenomena (data transcendence), that is, well-being as explicated by SDT. This particular data transcending criterion, furthers the legacy of sustained theoretical development characteristic of interpretive inquiry, in general, and autoethnography in particular.

The autoethnographic experience presented in this paper is written with full cognizance of my fractional perspectives and constructed self (Haraway, 1988). As a female scholar of color, employed in an established institution of higher education in the West and whose ancestry is linked to neocolonial landscapes, I write from a place similar to, yet different from, the geopolitical location in which my spiritual tourism endeavors occurred. My deployment of auto ethnographic inquiry stems from my understanding that there are "a multitude of ways of speaking, writing, valuing and believing-and that conventional ways of doing and thinking about research [are] narrow, limiting and parochial" (Ellis et al., 2011, online). My use of auto ethnographic inquiry is purposefully aimed at: centering the often-absent voice of the other within spiritual narratives; engaging under investigated aspects of consciousness and subjectivity; questioning canonical approaches to knowing about spiritual tourism; and, offering a relational narrative (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnographic inquiry allows for self-reflection but it can also facilitate self-transformation for researchers and readers of the text (Chang, 2016).

Credibility within the context of autoethnography refers to the presentation of what can be perceived of a truthful, *versus*, fictional account; the touristic experience discussed is common practice in India as indicated by a travel visa category dedicated to this form of travel as well as Norman's (2011) and others' accounts of similar occurrences. *Verisimilitude* is attained in the aforementioned narrative by offering a realistic and believable account that allows readers to envision themselves in my world (Plummer, 2001). Verisimilitude is also attained by showcasing the relevance of the narrative to an extant body of scholarly literature as well as its applicability to evidence based theoretical frameworks (*i.e.,* SDT) (Bochner, 2002). As part of the interpretive paradigm, objectivity, as conceptualized in deductive inquiry is not the goal of research. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), "[o]bjective reality can never be captured. We can know a thing only through its representations" (p.5). From this vantage point, the value of autoethnography emerges out the experiences of self "and its own experiences that reflect the cultural and social context in which those events took place. It is through this representation that understanding of a particular phenomenon is accomplished" (Méndez, 2013, p.279).

As an autoethnographer, I commence this writing endeavor with some trepidation fueled by awareness of the scarcity of autoethnographical renditions within tourism scholarship but inspired by the insight that an underutilized genre avails to a deeper comprehension of spiritual tourism and its modern manifestations. As tourism scholars we inevitably navigate spaces of travel by complementing our *in-situ* experiences with *a priori* knowledge filtered through the lens of existing tourism theories (Buzinde, 2020). For instance, scholars may mentally download information on authenticity and/or commodification of culture whilst on a cultural tourism tour. All such travel experiences are further enriched by the intersectionality (gender, age, ethnicity, *etc.*) of the subjectivities that navigate them and most importantly they can yield invaluable autoethnographical data related to the phenomenon of travel. Poignantly, within tourism studies, critical theoretical analyses of such autoethnographic accounts, have remained scarce, but my hope is that this manuscript will "trigger an internal narrative" (Kujawa, 2017, p.197) amongst readers and inspire scholars to change the existing trajectory. My self-narrative is featured in the subsequent section followed by a theoretical synthesis that links the autoethnographic experience with the tenets of SDT and outcomes of well-being.

An autoethnography of a spiritual tourist

My first experience with yoga took place decades ago in the company of fellow graduate students, at the University of Waterloo. Immersed in a giant university gymnasium, filled to the rims with eager graduate students, we were guided that evening to pursue a journey inward and confront the roller coaster of emotions that arose with each 'bizarre' yoga pose we were instructed to assume. Working out was not new to me; aerobics, kick-boxing, and/or spinning were part of my daily regimen. So, imagine my surprise at the physical challenge yoga presented as I asked my body to take on shapes unfathomed (to me) before. The constant surfacing of self-deprecating emotions with each challenging pose was astonishing to me and as though on queue the yoga teacher would instruct us to reflect on the emergent deleterious emotions and release them while still 'gracefully' maintaining what at the time seemed to me to be very peculiar body poses. The eloquent instructions that accompanied every yoga pose were complemented with a reminder to journey inwards and assertively but compassionately deal with whatever deep-seated emotional turmoil was triggered by navigating the new (to some of us) landscape of yoga. Schooled in Yoga Philosophy in India, the genesis of Yogic spiritual philosophies and practices, the Brazilian instructor artfully weaved anatomical guidelines with thought provoking transcendental quotes aimed at inspiring courage to seize the reins of one's emotions and mind in order to connect to our inner 'divinity' or the highest versions of

ourselves. After the class, I vowed to never step foot in a yoga class again but unbeknownst to me, the class had ignited a level of interest in the so-called inner divinity, which my Judeo-Christian-influenced mind would grapple with for years to come!

I did indeed return to yoga, more regularly during my pre-tenure years, once again, as a stress relieving and centering mechanism. Through the numerous classes I attended, I discovered that yoga was either taught as a physical exercise or as a physical tool/vehicle to facilitate inward journeying (on decolonizing yoga see Bowers & Cheer, 2017, p.211). Smith and Sziva (2016) indicate that benefits of yoga include physical as well as spiritual dimensions and it was pedagogical approaches related to the latter that appealed to my intellect and inspired in me a curiosity for the century old, yet contemporaneously relevant, Eastern thought that informed yogic philosophies. Around the same time the notion of mindfulness was gaining traction in popular culture and paralleled by a growing number of neuroscientific experiments on the positive changes in the human brain induced by mindfulness related activities like yoga and especially meditation. I would later take an intensive mindfulness training course (KORU) facilitated by Duke University, which focused on: the neuroscience of mindfulness, the relevance of Eastern influenced mindfulness for university students, and the tested pedagogical tools to teach mindfulness to university students. I left the course excited about the didactic possibilities but at the same time my curiosity about the Eastern philosophies had peaked. In 2006, I set the intention of pursuing, a spiritual yoga training retreat, in hope of attaining more knowledge on contemplative practices like yoga/meditation and yogic philosophies so as to complement my newly acquired awareness of neuroscience and mindfulness. This intention would be accomplished 13 years later in 2019 in Rishikesh, a town which according to Bowers and Cheer (2017) markets itself as "the Yoga Capital of the World" (p.211).

Describing the transformational characteristics of yoga, Ponder and Holladay (2013) indicate that experiences of self-discovery within one's home nation imbue individuals to pursue yoga abroad. Similarly, Lehto, Brown, Chen, and Morrison (2006) indicate that involvement with yoga influences proclivity to travel for yoga. These two studies encapsulate the sentiments that imbued me to pursue yoga teacher training in Rishikesh. Like most tourists my pre-trip preparation for India involved booking a flight and as a north American citizen, also getting a country entry visa. If I harbored any sense of being an 'explorer' on this journey it quickly dissipated after a glance at the e-tourist visa application, which amongst other options had a special visa category for yoga training retreats (see Bowers & Cheer, 2017). Any remnants of my explorer imaginations were further dispersed as my google search for yoga training retreat centers yielded hundreds of Rishikesh based options. I settled for the Abhayaranya Yogpeeth Yoga Teacher Training center, which at $1600 per person for a month of accommodation, food (albeit strict vegetarian diet), training led by accredited teachers born and raised in India, and International Yoga Teacher Training Certification, offered a decent deal. Like most available options Abhayaranya marketed itself as an 'authentic' ashram (spiritual retreat) located amidst natural landscapes that facilitate one's spiritual journey and contact with local culture (see Maddox (2015) on authenticity and yoga retreats). The online narrative promised an intensive spiritual immersion focused on yoga and meditation, an intellectually stimulating engagement with anatomy and yogic philosophy classes, as well as a fun experience navigating local sites related to local heritage, cultural tourism, and shopping. The entire package was clearly geared towards spiritual tourists however, the featured schedule, which strictly indicated that classes were held *six* days a week (only Sundays off) from *5 am to 9:30 pm,* was enough to wipe any hints of hedonistic thought out of every spectating tourist's mind.

The flight from Delhi landed at the Dehadrun airport where a patient taxi driver awaited me while holding a white placard with an *Om* sign next to my name. The forty-minute drive to Rishikesh came to a frightfully abrupt halt on the narrow edge of a one-lane-two-way traffic path, with a steep mountain to the right, a precipice on the left descending into the rapids of the spiritually revered river Ganges, and a couple of big horned bulls roaming in the middle of the road. I exited the car and dreamily admired the densely verdant forest that populated the vertical landscape of the mountain as well as the tranquil sound of the beautiful stream that meandered through this steep area. Religious and spiritual spaces tend to be regarded as therapeutic landscapes (see Terzidou et al., 2017), and this one certainly inspired a sense of catharsis. Intently focused on the resplendent beauty, I was disrupted by the driver informing me that a 30 min hike up the mountain would get me to the ashram. The forlorn look on my face, mostly due to the exhaustion of traveling for 24 h was enough for the driver to cheekily suggest that local porters were available to help carry my luggage up the mountain. Extra luggage weight or not, I still hyperventilated all the way up the mountain in my miserable attempt to catch up with the speedy porters. The image of an icon I once saw at a monastery depicting the narrow and very steep road to heaven with people falling down the hill and only a few making it to the top constantly flashed through my head as I wondered whether this religious parable was also true of the spiritual philosophies of yoga. Was physical endurance a measure of spiritual resilience?

Namaste, which means, I recognize, honor and bow down to the divine in you, was a melodious greeting whose notes would fill my daily existence for the following 30 days. All encounters with locals entailed placing one's palms in direct contact with each other, gently laying them vertically by the chest, gracefully nodding one's head and politely uttering the word *Namaste*; its frequent utterance at the ashram forced me to think existentially about the material and immaterial aspect of the body. The nexus between spirituality, corporeality, and culture was fascinating and for me it was symbolized by the greeting *Namaste*. Was I a spiritual being having a human experience or a human having a spiritual experience? Did the body matter? Hours of yoga philosophy class at the ashram would later yield a response, which asserted that through years of practicing of yoga, non-violence, equanimity, positive thinking, meditation, non-judgement, patience, and much more, one can access and sustain contact with inner divinity. In essence, the message was non-attachment with the body, which was an interesting concept while one was within the quiet and safe space of the ashram. By contrast, on Sundays (free day) while I miserably negotiated traffic perusing the souvenir strewn shops that laced the busy and noisy streets of downtown Rishikesh, looking for cute yoga outfits and greasy snacks to counter the super healthy and strict vegetarian ashram meals, I experienced a hyper association with the body and its corporeal necessities. As I moved through the chaos of the town I was conscious of the gazes directed at me which in some ways confirmed the foreignness of my skin color and body in the space. Furthermore, all the foreigners in the streets, young and old, male and female, wore loose, cheap hippy pants or skirts and tie dye tops with spiritual motifs on them. I soon replaced my Nike t-shirts and Adidas slacks with elephant themed harem pants and

Om t-shirts, so as to fit in. As is correctly noted by Norman (2011), "[t]he clothing aesthetic … among spiritual tourists in Rishikesh" (p.28) is distinct; so, adapting to the "standard spiritual tourist attire" is recommended for those who want to blend in (p.30).

Corporeality was also evoked as I reflected on the body images of yogis, featured in the United States, renowned for having long, lean, and toned muscles. My ethnic body was muscular but long and lean were not descriptors I could apply to self. So, as I navigated this spiritual yogic landscape I had to come to terms with the fact that there are numerous body types and shades of yoga and mine was just one of many. While I worked to clothe my body in my own version of the yogini 'uniform' I concurrently also needed to be conscious of cultural mores related to attire worn in public, particularly by local females. A quick scanning of the landscape, a skill acquired through frequent travel, indicated that tank tops and shorts were rarely seen clothing items for women in Rishikesh. This was an aspect that my female peers and I navigated on a daily basis by covering up to and from the yoga hall, which was considered the safe space in which certain body parts, (thighs and full arms) could be exposed without offending our local hosts and while being sensitive to the revered spiritual built space we were immersed in. The yoga hall and the dining hall were considered sacred spaces but the former was the only location in which skin revealing clothing was 'permissible'. This notion of how the body navigates sacred spaces was not new to me; as a teen, trips to monasteries and convents all required full length skirts, long-sleeved blouses and sometimes a head scarf (see Terzidou et al. (2017) on structured religious performances). Thus, in many ways, I was a seasoned spiritual tourist, when it came to dressing the part. Interestingly, all the male staff at the ashram always wore long pants but my male peers were allowed to roam around in shorts.

Age was another dimension of corporeality that I had to negotiate. The group of 25 participants at Abhayaranya with me, entailed 15 *very* progressive and mature minded 20 to 26-year-olds, five 30-year-olds, and five 40 to 50-year-olds. Age within the space of yoga, which has been commercially coopted in the West to symbolize youth, is a contested space for middle aged adults, like myself. I would learn from one of my instructors that in India, my generation was in fact the predominant group engaging in yoga and their achievements where often promoted so as to inspire younger generations to pursue yogic philosophy as a way of life. Notably, my cohort was markedly culturally diverse, which was not in consonance with extant research. In his description of spiritual tourism in India, Norman (2011) states that this is a "distinctly and exclusively Western practice done to better the self," which although veers aware from Western consumerism is lacking in "interaction with Indian practitioners (p.29). The critique on modern culture resonates with my experience at Abhayaranya ashram and it was an aspect that Western and non-Western urban residing participants bemoaned; however, at Abhayaranya, the journey towards self-involved numerous cross-cultural interactions between locals and internationals. This intense inter-cultural interactively can perhaps be attributed to living in a communal and isolated space for 17 h, every day for a month.

Every morning I would awaken to the sound of a bell at 5 am followed by a final call 30mins later. At 5:30 am we would all gather for a bodily cleaning activity to symbolize preparations to 'greet the day'; at Abhayaranya, the chosen activity was the use of the *neti* pot to clean the nasal passages with the use of a warm saline solution prepared for us by the staff. We would all gather in a specific part of the garden and watch as some of us gracefully allowed the saline solution to drip to the ground, perfecting the ritual of cleansing the body, whilst others miserably choked in the process. I was raised to never blow my noise in public but any *neti* related shame I harbored was superseded by the overwhelming sense of sleepiness coupled by an evolving allowance of bodily imperfections, and a shedding of certain cultural mores. This daily event also allowed for a certain bond with the collective to ensue and in many ways highlight Bourdieu's (1990) notion of *existential habitus*.

Meditation, yoga, anatomy class, and lectures on philosophy followed by more yoga and *Satsang* entailed the daily schedule. Breakfast was served at 9:30 am, lunch at 1 pm and supper at 6 pm. We were granted the freedom to practice or specialize in any style of yoga that we preferred, for instance, yin, hatha, and/or ashtanga. There was also a two-hour period of self-study during which the local and well stocked library, was opened to encourage self-directed study. The unstructured time and freedom to pursue readings of interest granted me the chance to "construct part of the experience" and allowed for "unpredictable moments" to surface (Terzidou et al., 2017, p.120). Yoga was presented as areligious given that it was originally designed to be used by the masses, regardless of religion or culture. From this vantage point, the teachers at Abhayaranya encouraged us to be courageous in our pursuance of a yogic path that was authentically ours. I appreciated having the option to choose a school of Indian philosophical thought to adopt and a style of yoga that resonated with me. I also appreciated the diversity in participants' faiths, which included: Christians, Hindus, agnostics, animists, sheikhs, Buddhists, non-denominationalists; all were free to adopt yoga as they saw fit.

On Sundays at Abhayaranya, three organic groups manifested: the hiking group, the shopping group, and the stay-back-and-catch-up-on-sleep group. These options were not the norm; in fact, some centers offered prepackaged mandatory leisure activities. Sundays would often result in a sense of yearning for the structure entailed in the structured days, given the pronounced sense of togetherness/community. Each evening a contemplative meeting called *Satsang* was held, during which participants would share a meaningful life experience and reasons for their pursuance of yoga. Such accounts were humbling, intensely evocative, revelatory, and deeply moving in a way that facilitated and strengthened the humanistic bonds amongst all present; the aforementioned resonance of *communitas* is akin to that documented by Terzidou et al. (2017) amongst religious tourists in Greece. The life experiences shared would generally showcase the evolution of one's identity, the negotiation of identity in various life changing contexts, and use of yoga/meditation to affirm a satisfying sense of self. Norman (2011) talks about "café conversations" amongst spiritual tourists in downtown Rishikesh that were "performances, as much as… catharses" (p.44), and which were "displayed by either action or discussion" (p.30). By contrast to Norman's account there was generally a sense of authenticity that emanated from the existential predicaments captured in the narratives shared during *Satsang*. Given my infrequent visits to the city center, the element of performativity allegedly prevalent in town was not readily apparent to me, with the exception of my interactions with certain vendors in town, during which I felt the need to perform the astute spiritual tourist; such symbolic acts tend to be common place within religious and spiritual spaces as is indicated in recent research by Terzidou et al. (2017).

Locals recognize spiritual tourists' investment and consequently, there is a certain admiration associated with being a spiritual tourist, which was reflected in the eyes of the employees that worked at the retreat, the odd merchant in the city center, and even in the gaze of random drivers dropping off or picking up participants at the ashram. Norman (2011) states that for "spiritual tourists… time spent in Rishikesh is an opportunity for a period of intensified or concentrated learning … a personal practice with skills to be acquired by the practitioner" (p.34). Accordingly, the admiration locals showcased towards spiritual tourists could also be interpreted as a respect for the discipline required to pursue a spiritual path. Furthermore, locals' pride in Indian knowledge systems would often manifest in the form of name dropping through the use terms like for instance *ahimsa* (non-violence), *Patanjali* (author (s) of the yoga sutras), or *sattvic,* with the goal granting me and others an opportunity to affirm our identities as spiritual tourists in training or yogic juggernauts. Many of these conversations also often included interrogative remarks to ascertain whether and how many other local spiritual tourism landscapes I had visited. Any unintended verbal pauses on my end, during this spiritual landscape inventorying, would be immediately filled with the provision of exemplars like "the holy city of Haridwar" or "Dharamshala where the Dalai Lama lives." I had been to the latter (see Collins-Kreiner & Tueta Sagi's, 2011 on Dharamshala) but my interlocutors were often awestruck when I would inform them that I had attended the largest pilgrimage in India and the world, Maha Kumbh Mela, which was held every twelve years (Buzinde, 2014). They would regularly respond by asserting the sacredness of the Kumbh and concurrently excuse their absence from it on account of the crowds (40-50million) who often attend the event.

On the day of graduation, having done two hundred hours of yoga, written a 40-page assignment and taught two classes of yoga, we were all dressed in specially tailored local traditional attire. It was a momentous event and another apex in my life. I experienced a sense of elation unlike that felt during all three of my higher education graduations, because it felt as though I could sustain the sense of jubilation. Perhaps because I was more intrinsically motivated to pursue this than I was higher education; the latter mostly being parent-influenced. As I stood at the podium proudly grasping my certificate with one hand while fiercely holding onto my *sari* for fear it would unravel on stage, I thought: this is not a certificate of completion, rather it is a license to continue down the fulfilling journey of self-inquiry that forms of travel like spiritual tourism engender.

Linking autoethnographic data to self determination theory and well-being

Autoethnographers document "epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity" (*i.e.,* spiritual tourist) (Ellis et al., 2011). This act of retrospection is akin to Philippe, Koestner, Beaulieu-Pelletier, Lecours, and Lekes's (2012), notion of episodic memories, which are "mostly about significant and affectively charged past events" that tend to yield "the reexperience of this affective charge in the here and now," whether it is need satisfying or need thwarting (Philippe et al., 2012, p.505). SDT related research by Philippe et al. (2012) indicates that need satisfaction in an episodic memory predicts individual well-being. From this vantage point, recollection of my spiritual tourism experience, can be regarded a "need satisfying episodic memory" that "positively affects… [my] well-being and promotes self-growth" (Philippe et al., 2012, p.506). Had the experience been need thwarting, recollection of it would have yielded what Philippe et al. (2012) refer to as emotionally disruptive sentiments aligned with a state of dis-ease or ill-being, rather than well-being. My experience is not universal, principally due to the complexity of the inner engineering of human existence.

It is important to note however, as indicated in the autoethnographic narrative, that there were moments of identity negotiation (*i.e.,* age, gender, ethnicity) that required reflection and creation of new and empowering meanings that transcended the original self-constraints. Bauer, King and Steger's (2019) work is relevant here as they address meaning-making and wisdom as related to self-determination theory, by specifically focusing on how "people make sense of life's more difficult or unfulfilling events" (p.82). These authors argue that "when levels of subjective fulfillment diminish" one has to engage in "reflective wisdom, an ethical concern rooted in humane value orientations," in a manner that yields "desirable outcomes related to subjective well-being (p.92). The notion of wisdom in this context entails deep contemplation related to self and others, the identification of alternate vantage points, and the pursuance of an alternative course of action (Staudinger & Glück, 2011). Bauer et al. (2019) state that "at the heart of a difficult situation is a sense of disequilibration, the sense that one's needs are not met" which according to SDT, results in "low levels of well-being" (p.95). However, if the individual undergoes a process of conceptual (not emotional) understanding of self and others with a level of openness to alternative viewpoints and a critique of one's assumptions, then the individual can adjust to a state of mind that allows for human flourishing and well-being (Bauer et al., 2019). This process of meaning making/wisdom as I reflected on notions of age, gender and ethnicity, was necessary for my subjective assessment of need fulfillment vis-à-vis the three psychological needs (*i.e.,* competence, relatedness, and autonomy) and my ability to feel confident, excited, and intrinsically motivated (see (Buzinde, 2019) to pursue the described spiritual tourism activity.

A cross sectional survey of my spiritual tourism experience might have yielded valuable results but yet it would have rendered obsolete the messiness of my interactions in the spiritual tourism context. The use of autoethnography allowed for the dynamic dance through which I negotiated the space in a manner that animates the SDT concepts of competence, relatedness and autonomy while explicating the dynamics of well-being. My *in-situ* experience indicates that well-being does not just manifest in spiritual contexts, which tend to be equated with bliss and well-being. Rather, as illustrated by the autoethnographic inquiry, psychosocial nuances related to spiritual tourism contexts can be autonomy supportive or autonomy thwarting with both outcomes having severely different relationships with well-being. The subsequent subsections further apply each of the three SDT basic psychological needs to the autoethnographic narrative with the goal of making explicit the links between the ethnographic experiential narrative of spiritual tourism and psychological theory of well-being.

Fig. 1. Nexus between self-determination theory and an auto ethnographic narrative on spiritual tourism.

Competence - structured and non-structured learning

The term competence "involves understanding how to attain various external and internal outcomes and being efficacious in performing the requisite actions" (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991, p.327). It can also be described as "being effective in valued and challenging pursuits" (Sedikides et al., 2019, p.74). Competence can be related to the concept of *habitus* because the former can help to formulate the latter in a way that allows one to have social advantage (see Bourdieu, 1990). Generally, as shown in Fig. 1, competence was reflected in my use of knowledge acquired from structured (*i.e.,* yoga retreat in India) and non-structured (*i.e.,* previous international travel, academic training, previous yoga studio experiences in the West). My ability to effectively navigate the spiritual tourism realm required a level of cultural, physical, intellectual, and, spiritual competence. The knowledge brought to the fore within this space was a combination of previously and onsite acquired cultural capital which enhanced my aptitude to express my capacities with confidence. For instance, knowledge of basic yoga and contemplative practices resulting from years of practice gave me an advantage in class over participants who had never or seldom practiced yoga and meditation (there were two in the cohort who met this criterion); many spiritual tourists purposefully travel to attain knowledge of self and others (see Collins-Kreiner & Tueta Sagi, 2011). My interest in spiritual philosophies, beyond those shared by my parents, provided a much-needed foundation on which to comprehend the complex history of Indian philosophy, which generally informs a great deal of Eastern philosophy.

Previous and extensive travels to Asia, Middle East, South America, and Africa meant that I was predestined to be culturally sensitive and attuned to local cultural mores and always ready to adapt accordingly. Lastly, decades of long immersion in the social politics of tourism also meant that a certain level of academic cognition informed my navigation of the aforementioned spiritual tourism space in a manner that allowed me to pick up on local social cues where necessary and to ask the right questions when in doubt. In general, I was confident in my ability to be in the space and complete the tasks at hand which meant that I was able to satisfy the need for competence in a way that contributed to my psychological well-being. Within tourism studies, the attainment of a level of mastery in spheres of consequence to one is perhaps reflected in the types of travel people choose to participate in. Within spiritual tourism the element of mastery is important because it highlights the fact that simply placing an individual at a spiritual center known to be emblematic of bliss and well-being will not automatically deliver those qualities unless the individual can feel competent enough to navigate that space. There is therefore a symbiotic relationship between the characteristics of the place (needs supporting or thwarting) and the person's perception of self.

Relatedness - connectedness and shared learning

The term relatedness "involves developing secure and satisfying connections with others in one's social milieu" (Deci et al., 1991, p.327). Scholars have extensively written about spiritual and religious contexts' facilitation of a sense of belonging but little has been written about how one negotiates presence in those spaces and the influence of such perceptions on well-being. Generally, as shown in Fig. 1, relatedness was reflected in the opportunities I had to connect intimately with others (*e.g.,* Satsang meetings) as well as experiences of others reciprocating connectivity (*e.g.,* Sunday outings with others). This notion of relatedness is akin to the concept of *existential communitas* (spontaneous state of bonding through interpersonal interaction, see Turner, 1969), which was been deployed

in the context of religious travel; however, *communitas* explains the outcome but it does not allow for discussion on the nuances entailed in the process of negotiating for participation in community. For instance, there was undoubtedly a psychological juggling act initially entailed in connecting to self and others. The self-reflections related to age, ethnicity, and gender as well as new constructions of self as embodying divine (*i.e.,* namaste) certainly influenced my interactions with others, who also *may* have experienced similar internal diatribes.

The safe space and need supporting environment created by the center allowed for authentic interactions to manifest amongst participants and the collective struggle to endure the long hours of yoga practice, philosophy and anatomy classes, also engendered a strong social bond. Our journeys may have been symbolically different but we were united in our belief that each of us uniquely enriched the collective experience. In essence, the concept of relatedness, which implies "having close and satisfying bonds with others, feeling accepted and cared for by others, as well as caring for them" (Sedikides et al., 2019, p.74) was applicable to my experience and aided in facilitating a sense of belonging. I felt that I belonged to a tribe of *yogis* and *yoginis*. This deep quality of human interactions starkly contrasted with many superficial and meaningfully devoid interactions that tend to permeate day to day existence, owing to the super accelerated rhythm of modern living. It is important to note that in general, the need to feel connected to others was fulfilled but it necessitated the allowance of the dynamic aspects of identity to emerge. Social interactionists claim that encounters others serve to affirm, counter or alter our perceptions of self; thus, identities are always in flux (Griswold, 2012). This notion of identity and how subjectivities varying navigate and negotiate spiritual tourism spaces is a fruitful area for further tourism scholarship connected to well-being.

Autonomy - options in skill development

The term autonomy "refers to being self-initiating and self-regulating of one's own actions" (Deci et al., 1991, p.327). It is "the need to experience one's behavior as volitional and self-endorsed" (Dehaan et al., 2016, p.2039). Generally, autonomy was reflected in the freedom, I sensed, to pursue activities (*i.e.,* intention to partake in spiritual tourism) that are aligned with my personal values. My reasons for pursuing this spiritual tourism journey were to deepen my yogic practice while searching for deeper meaning without having to deal with the confines of doxic ideals that characterize traditional religious contexts. The liberty to craft a practice tailored to my own needs and interests (see unstructured religious performances described by Terzidou et al. (2017)) was appealing to me and from this perspective the experience was autonomy supporting because I was able to engage "in behavior that reflects" my own "interests or values" (Sedikides et al., 2019, p.74). Sometimes, travel is a direct or indirect obligation; a Christian embarks on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem the same way a Muslim journeys to Mecca to affirm stronger devotion/affiliation to the institution of their respective religion. There is a hierarchy of sites which prevents a devout follower from simply going to the local neighborhood park to attain the same religious accolades. But by the same token one cannot argue that spiritual tourism affords one more liberty than religious tourism because even within the former there are autonomy supporting and autonomy thwarting contexts.

At Abhayaranya, the learning environment supported my need for autonomy in that I could choose to focus on any form of yoga and weave in a philosophy of choice. These liberties afforded to participants at Abhayaranya were not standard and in fact there were certain spiritual tourism centers in the near vicinity reputed for their autonomy thwarting tactics characterized by: strict dress codes (*i.e.,* white outfits all day every day); pronounced hierarchical relationship between teacher and spiritual participants (*i.e.,* teacher determines the type of yoga the participant practices each day and for how long); enforcement of disciplinary measures; and, absence of leisure/touristic activities. It would thus be interesting to apply SDT, particularly the *cognitive evaluation mini theory* to explorations of the experiences of individuals who experienced need thwarting spiritual tourism centers. *Cognitive evaluation mini theory*, is based on the premise that social contexts can contribute to intrinsic motivation by facilitating environments conducive to individuals' autonomy and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2017). For instance, in the context of tourism, the need for more freedom and autonomy is in part a key motivator that drives people away from certain *need thwarting* work environs to pursue leisure endeavors that are perceived to offer *need supporting* opportunities.

Abhayaranya, attracted people from various walks of life. Individuals that adhered to traditional religious denominations as well as non-adherents. All participants were invited to weave yoga philosophy into their belief systems, as they saw fit. This didactic approach is founded on the fact that the genesis of yoga, contrary to popular belief and contemporary political cooption of yoga, is not affiliated with any religious tradition. Yoga is an areligious philosophy and way of life created with the intention of sharing it with the masses, regardless of religious affiliation. In addition to the liberty to create one's own meaning system, one could also choose from three related, yet distinct, philosophical schools that informed yoga. Details regarding the frameworks that informed each school of thought were part of the lectures I attended and this was complemented by a self-study hour during which daily self-led knowledge acquisition as well as self-yoga practice was cultivated. I found this aspect of the program to be very empowering to self in that I could choose to focus on aspects that resonated with me. When yogic customs "are concerned with practices and philosophies of life … without having to give in to … dogma," one is thus able to amass "practices and ideas" to "fit personal circumstance" (Norman, 2011, p.41). Furthermore, the techniques taught are tools "for personal *agency*" and the foster functionality in the participant (Norman, 2011, p.31). This assertion invariably highlights the agentic approach promoted by *some* spiritual tourism centers.

The sustainability and functionality of religious and spiritual systems is contingent upon the internalization processes engaged in by adherents. Internalization is the "process through which an individual transforms a formerly externally prescribed regulation or value into an internal one" (Ryan, Rigby, & King, 1993, p.586). Individual approaches to internalization vary because "religious beliefs can be adopted because of fear, guilt, or social pressure or because of their compelling contents and meanings" (Ryan et al., 1993, p.586). There are two types of internalization: *identification* beliefs associated with choice and one's own values; and,

introjection beliefs linked with activities that "one 'should' do, because not doing so might engender anxiety, guilt, or loss of esteem" (Ryan et al., 1993, p.587). The former is positively related to perceptions of life satisfaction, self-esteem, and, of living a meaning life while the reverse is true for the latter which also showcases positive association with depression (O'Connor & Vallerand, 1990). Linking this to the autoethnographic narrative, I can surmise that my experienced was generally characterized by what Deci and Ryan (1991) describe as volitional or self-determined behavior aimed at activities of personal value. Thus, in *my* case, internal regulation in the form of *identification* underpinned by perceptions of spirituality in general and spiritual tourism in particular; identification explains how I engaged in spiritual tourism and why this experience catalyzed *well-being* and motivation for me in a way that engaging in this experience from a space of coercion, obligation, guilt and/or fear would not. The identification process, in my case, enabled the manifestation of sustained well-being as well as desire and interest in the activity (Deci & Ryan, 1991).

Conclusion

Self-determination theory offers an evidence-based framework through which future tourism research can explore constructs of well-being within spiritual tourism contexts. These theoretical linkages will increasingly become important as society continues to obsess over the notions of health, well-being, and longevity (*e.g.,* Silicon Valley efforts to prolong life). Also, in a world that is becoming increasingly automated (*i.e.,* Artificial Intelligence), scholars need to do a better job articulating what makes us uniquely human and what contributes to and sustains our well-being in a way that machines cannot. To accomplish this, we need to invest in further interpretive frameworks and tools (*e.g.,* autoethnography) in which subjectivities are central and not peripheral to the objective of research and through which the use of interdisciplinary theoretical lenses are welcome. Only then can we secure our place as experiential knowledge holders whose expertise will continue to be relevant in an increasingly automated world. My hope is that this manuscript will inspire seasoned scholars and graduate students to pursue the aforementioned avenues. Doing so will aid in the building of theoretical foundations that explicate tourism phenomena and that contribute to global debates on well-being and what it means to live a good life.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Christine N. Buzinde: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing.

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