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Integrative review: Vacations and subjective well-being

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ABSTRACT

Leisure engagement plays a key role in individuals' well-being. While the majority of research focuses on the health and wellness benefits of everyday leisure participation, in recent years, vacation-taking, as an extraordinary leisure type, attracts scholarly interest from various disciplines to investigate how it contributes to individuals' subjective well-being. Nevertheless, there is still no cohesive understanding of this relationship. In this integrative review, we reviewed 125 articles on this topic, paid particular attention to understanding the different ways and conditions under which people can benefit from vacation-taking, and we highlighted the potential pathways (i.e., how and why) through which leisure vacation can increase well-being. Meanwhile, we offer a future research agenda including cross-level investigations of vacationers' well-being, integrating the influences from individual, professional, and social forces.

KEYWORDS

leisure vacation; subjective well-being; hedonia; eudaimonia; leisure studies

The pursuit of a good life is a fundamental concern for leisure researchers, practitioners, and the general public across all ages. The development of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) contributes to this question by showing that one key component of good life is subjective well-being. Subjective well-being is a broad term concerning not only the absence of mental illness and negative states but also the presence of both hedonic (e.g., life satisfaction, positive affect, happiness, Diener, 1984) and eudaimonic well-being (e.g., positive relations, self-acceptance, Ryff, 1989). Subjective well-being is related to an impressive array of desirable outcomes for individuals, groups, and society including, for instance, reduced risk for coronary heart disease (Boehm et al., 2016) and premature death (Eaker et al., 1992), longevity (Diener & Chan, 2011), improved job performance (Wright & Cropanzano, 2000), and customer loyalty (Huang et al., 2019).

Importantly, individuals' subjective well-being is malleable and people can take actions to influence their own well-being (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Leisure engagement and specifically vacation-taking are prime examples of these bottom-up actions that can benefit well-being (for a meta-analysis on leisure engagement and well-being,

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see Kuykendall et al., 2015). Compared to daily leisure activities (e.g., watching TV), vacationing (a) happens less frequently, (b) people invest resources (e.g., money) for staying in a relatively unfamiliar area (e.g., a place far from home) for a limited period of time (UNWTO, 2010). Current empirical studies present evidence to support that vacation-taking positively affect subjective well-being (e.g., de Bloom et al., 2009; Su et al., 2020).

Surprisingly, the literature on how and why vacation-taking influences well-being remains incomplete and fragmented. Scholars have studied this relationship through different conceptual or disciplinary lenses (e.g., work psychology; leisure studies, Sonnentag et al., 2017; Uysal et al., 2016). Accordingly, insights are scattered across various fields of research. For instance, organizational psychologists mainly stress the work perspective and consider vacation as off-job time that provides employees with opportunities to remove stress sources (e.g., McEwen, 1998; Meijman et al., 1998). The focus is on job performance and work-related well-being and often insufficient attention is paid to the actual vacation experience. In contrast, leisure researchers tend to zoom in on the optimal experience perspective (Mannell & Iso-Ahola, 1987; Stebbins, 2007), but rarely focus on long term well-being benefits in different life domains.

Hitherto, very few studies have integrated the literature on vacation-taking and well-being. The few existing reviews either focused only on hedonic well-being and paid no attention to vacation effects on eudaimonia (e.g., Chen & Petrick, 2013) or considered the individual experience (e.g., Kay Smith & Diekmann, 2017) and outcomes of vacation-taking without attending to the context including vacation features, destination characteristics, social norms's influence. A few exceptional studies emphasize a limited number of variables from either individual or vacation context (e.g., Lehto, 2012; Vada et al., 2020). In addition, the societal context's influence has been largely ignored (Hartig et al., 2013). Without considering contextual factors, interactions between the individual and the environment, as well as the entire dynamic system may result in biased interpretations and applications in both research and practice. To this end, this current research, adopting a multilevel literature review accounting for different strains of research on the topic, both qualitative and quantitative, aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of this vacation-well-being relationship.

Our review makes important contributions to theory and practice. First, we complete and pluralize the current understanding of the relationship between leisure and well-being through the extraordinary experience perspective (i.e., leisure vacation). We identify the psychological factors explaining how and why vacation-taking impacts well-being. Second, we account for the role of vacation factors (e.g., vacation activities¹) in the vacation-well-being relationship. This current paper adds to the limited scholarship on this context aspect of the topic. We simultaneously present how, and which aspects of the vacation factors interact with psychological mechanisms to influence well-being. In this way, practitioners are also provided with more information regarding how to facilitate vacationers' attainment of subjective well-being. Finally, we identify lines for future research, such as factors beyond the individual which can shape the vacation-well-being relationship.

¹Vacation activities refer to the quality or state of being active while at the destination (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

In the following sections, we present definitions of the key concepts that are relevant to our integrative review. As subjective well-being is central to our research question, we start by defining this concept and describing theoretical models that are relevant in this regard. In the next section, we proceed to link subjective well-being to vacationing. These two sections are of key importance to our review because they portray the theoretical models that served as input for the categories of relevant variables to focus on when we reviewed and analyzed the literature.

Subjective well-being

Subjective well-being is a fundamental aspect to quality of life (Keyes, 2006). It has emerged as a scientific field since the late 1950s (Land, 1975). Nevertheless, there is no consensus on how to define or measure well-being (Huta & Waterman, 2014)—several terms including happiness and life satisfaction have been used interchangeably to reflect subjective well-being—because of this phenomenon’s intangibility, complexity, and multi-dimensionality² (Rahmani et al., 2018). In the 1980s, researchers, such as Diener (1984) and Ryff (1989), brought the study of well-being and its two traditions—*hedonia* and *eudaimonia*—into the mainstream of social psychological inquiry.

The first perspective concerns hedonia. Diener’s (1984) stance on subjective well-being has been frequently associated with the hedonistic approach. People with high well-being are those who are experiencing a high level of positive affect, low level of negative affect, and a high degree of satisfaction with life (Pavot & Diener, 2013). In contrast, traced back to Aristotle, the second view concerns eudaimonia (Waterman, 1993). This perspective suggests that leading a good, meaningful life does not necessarily mean being happy and having only positive emotions. An eudaimonic perspective indicates the process of fulfilling one’s true potential, which may also entail negative emotions, hardship, and suffering. Ryff (1989) developed a multidimensional model to reflect eudaimonia. It encompasses six dimensions—autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, positive relations, and self-acceptance—with each dimension indicating the challenges individuals encounter as they strive to fully functioning. In addition, to consolidate the wealth of information, Seligman (2011) developed an inclusive well-being model—integrated components of hedonia and eudaimonia—composed of five components: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (*PERMA model*). Together, these five indicators of well-being give rise to human flourishing. These two models of well-being formed an important building block for our new integrative model which aims to connect subjective well-being to vacation.

Vacation-taking and subjective well-being

The contribution of vacation-taking to well-being can be explained by two fundamental theories: The *effort-recovery model* (Meijman et al., 1998) and the *allostatic load theory*

²Insightful discussions regarding the benefits and critiques of different approaches (e.g., hedonia, eudaimonia) to subjective well-being are out of scope of this paper but can be found in Biswas-Diener et al. (2009) and Kashdan et al. (2008).

(McEwen, 1998). These theories explain that repeated and prolonged stress leads to a failure to respond adequately to acute stressors or to shut off the stress response, which causes chronic health issues. Vacation provides time-off from stress sources (e.g., work, stressful home, or housing situation) to experience sufficient recovery or replenish resources (Eden, 2001). Focusing on the effect of time away from work and one's usual environment, these theories represent a rather passive understanding of vacation-taking's influences.

In contrast, the *conservation of resource theory* (Hobfoll, 1989) suggests that vacation-taking not only helps individuals replenish resources but also gains more resources. Resources are conditions, personal characteristics, or energies valued by individuals and can be used to make progress toward their personal goals. Hobfoll (2002) described a phenomenon called "*resource caravans*," meaning that resources come in bundles. In the absence of stressors, people strive to obtain more resources, which creates buffers for more difficult times (ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). Thus, vacation-taking, as a context-free from usual job demands and everyday hassles, provides the opportunity to replenish as well as obtain more resources and improve well-being (Diener & Fujita, 1995).

While the aforementioned theoretical frameworks explained the positive contribution vacation-taking makes toward well-being, leisure researchers further proposed theories to explicate the process regarding how holiday-taking contributes to well-being. In the tourism literature, the *bottom-up spillover theory* (Neal et al., 1999) is one predominant theory to explain the vacation-well-being relation (Chen & Petrick, 2013). Based on consumer research (Aiello et al., 1977) and psychology (Andrews & Withey, 1976), the theory suggests that life has many separate-but-interrelated life domains (e.g., work), and global life satisfaction is influenced by the evaluations of individual life domains. In other words, the greater the satisfaction with different life domains, the greater the satisfaction with life in general. Thus, satisfying vacation experiences influence leisure life satisfaction and then impact overall life satisfaction.

The most recent theoretical framework to explain the relationship between leisure and well-being is the DRAMMA model. Newman et al. (2014) proposed that the six core psychological mechanisms: *detachment, relaxation, autonomy, mastery, meaning, and affiliation* (DRAMMA) fostered during leisure participation enhance well-being. Similarly, these four needs: relaxation, autonomy, mastery, and detachment, composing of the recovery framework proposed by Sonnentag and Fritz (2007), have been identified as factors to explain vacation's influences on well-being (Chen et al., 2020). Nevertheless, in vacation context, the applicability of this DRAMMA model needs further examination. Kujanpää et al. (2021) research on vacation-well-being indicates that not all mechanisms are strong predictors of well-being (e.g., meaning). Meanwhile, Laing and Frost (2017) found that, in the vacation context, the DRAMMA model might be extended. They pointed out that *identity* (e.g., self-understanding, Ryff & Singer, 2008) appeared to be a seventh mechanism underpinning detachment, autonomy, and mastery.

Despite the availability of several models regarding subjective well-being and leisure, a comprehensive framework explaining how specifically vacation-taking influences subjective well-being is lacking. In our review, we used both deductive and inductive coding (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) to make sense of current literature on the topic of vacation-well-being. Deductive coding was employed as we started out from these

existing models when reviewing the literature. That is, we combined categories from earlier theories from various disciplines. For instance, what Ryff (1989) called “relationships” is referred to as “affiliation” in the DRAMMA model (Newman et al., 2014) and we combined these into the category “relatedness.” Inductive coding is used when no further structure is known beforehand. Whenever a factor mentioned in the reviewed papers did not fit into these categories, we made a note of this and collected all newly emerging factors. In a second step, we went over all non-categorizable factors, merged factors that belonged together content wise, and labeled these new categories. This was an iterative process and step two was repeated until all new factors could be categorized. In this way, our new, integrative, and comprehensive model emerged.

Methods

Following Cronin and George (2020), our integrative review also adopted the systematic review approach to gather and evaluate studies so that researchers can obtain a more complete and balanced understanding of the topic. The whole process of systematic review followed the PRISMA checklist (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis, Moher et al., 2009). PRISMA provides a framework to systematically conduct and report a literature review (Figure 1). The literature searches

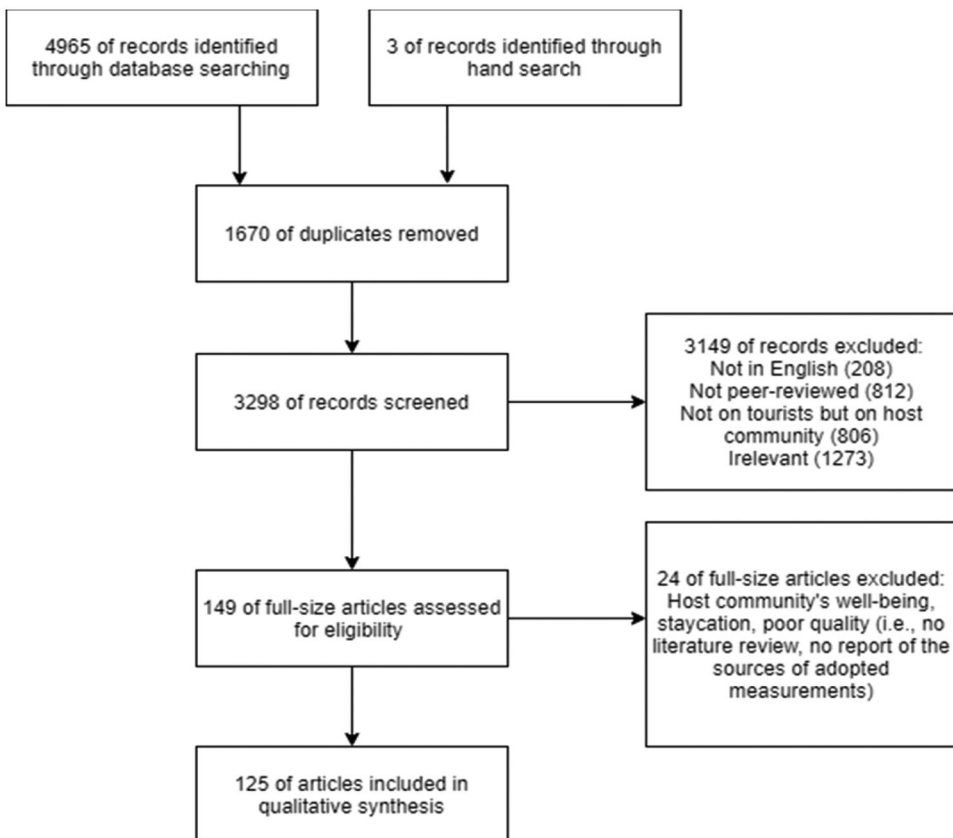


Figure 1. Summary of article search procedures.

were initially conducted in August 2018 and then updated on November 2, 2020. Literature searches were conducted in the following databases: PsycINFO, Scopus, Medline, and Hospitality and Tourism Complete. We included all the articles that were published and did not limit the time frame of our search. The search terms used: [(touris* OR vacation-taking OR vacation* OR holid* OR leisure travel) AND (happiness OR well-being OR quality of life OR QOL OR life satisfaction)]. The “*” indicates a wildcard to capture terms related to the stem before the asterisk.

Data analyses

The primary author included all the articles that were published by the search date as long as they met pre-determined inclusion and exclusion criteria: (a) written in English, (b) peer-reviewed, and (c) each article’s scope was aligned with our research purpose. For example, an article examining vacation-taking’s impacts on local communities’ well-being is excluded. Also, those papers on staycation (Sharma, 2009), that is taking off-work but staying in one’s regular environment, were excluded. Next, each article’s full content was reviewed for eligibility: research purpose and quality. This resulted in a total of 125 empirical articles in the review (Figure 1).

For articles obtained, the quality was appraised by using Kmet et al. (2004) checklist for assessing the quality of qualitative/quantitative studies. This quality assessment tool from the Standard Quality Assessment Criteria for Evaluating Primary Research Papers was chosen because it covers criteria for measuring a range of different research designs and has been used very frequently in research. The tool utilized a three-point coding system (no = 0, partial = 1, and yes = 2). Items not applicable to a particular study design were indicated as “NA” and were not taken into account in the summary score. Thus, the overall quality summary score was a percentage calculated by dividing the total possible sum for an individual study by the total sum. A score of $\geq 75\%$ indicated strong quality, a score of 55–75% indicated moderate quality, and a score $\leq 55\%$ indicated weak quality. All the papers reviewed achieved at least moderate quality.

After that, the primary author conducted an in-depth review of each article, and extracted and tabulated the following information: author, publication year, research methods, and research findings, and conducted this aforementioned deductive and inductive coding. To synthesize the findings, based on summary tables, we employed a *narrative summary approach* to present, compare, and interpret the data (Dixon-Woods et al., 2005). A narrative summary concerns “narrative descriptions and ordering of primary evidence (perhaps selected) with commentary and interpretation (Dixon-Woods et al., 2005, p. 53).” This approach is flexible in that it allows for different types of evidence (e.g., qualitative, quantitative) to be reviewed. It has been employed broadly, including in the fields of management and health (e.g., Konlechner & Ambrosini, 2019). This approach is particularly suitable for this research because of the heterogeneity of research backgrounds and methods involved in the studies reviewed.

Our search reveals interesting trends regarding research on vacation-taking and well-being. The number of studies on this topic has risen significantly in recent years, particularly since 2015 (Figure 2). However, the body of literature is dominated by examining well-being from the hedonic perspective. Although there seem to be

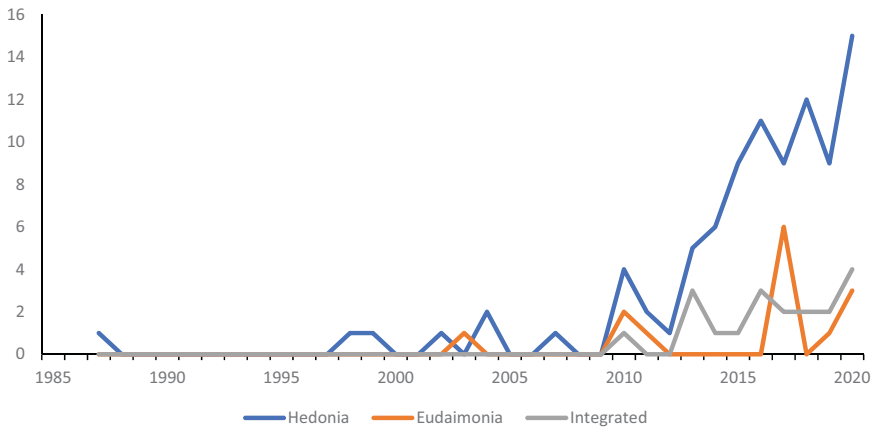


Figure 2. Number of publications on hedonia, eudaimonia, integrated well-being, and vacation across time.

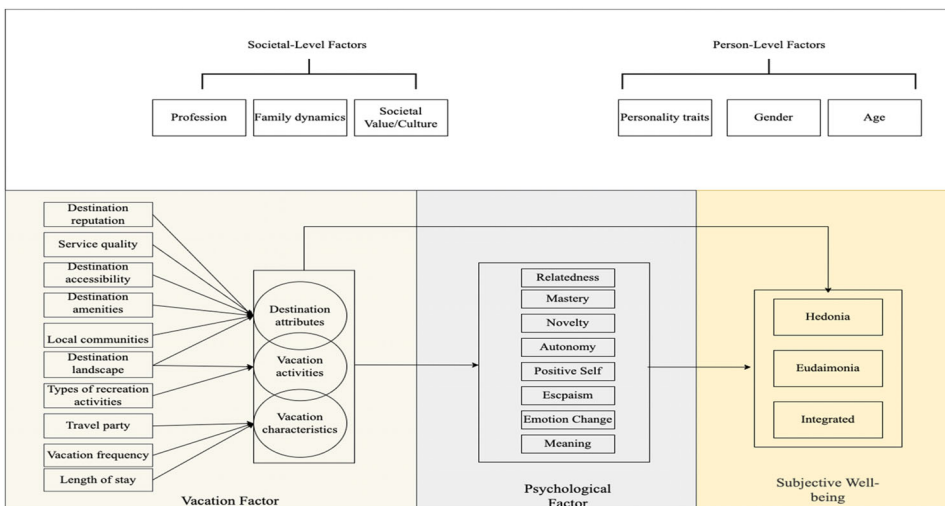


Figure 3. An integrative model explaining the relationship between vacation-taking and subjective well-being.

increased efforts in studying eudaimonic well-being or taking an integrative perspective after 2010, the quantity of papers on this topic remains very small.

Results

Based on the review, we generated the framework (Figure 3) explaining how vacation-taking influences well-being. We discuss the framework in detail in the following sections from the left side to the right side.

Table 1. Summary of results on the influence of vacation factors on subjective well-being.

Vacation factors	Hedonia	Eudaimonia	Integrated
Destination attributes			
Accessibility, amenities, and local communities	+ Reitsamer & Brunner-Sperdin, 2017 + Oliveira et al., 2018 + Kang, 2020 + Mayer et al., 2020 + Wang et al., 2020 + Wu et al., 2017		
Service quality	+ Lee, Lee, et al., 2018 + Neal et al., 2007 + Su et al., 2015 + Sthapit et al., 2019 + Kang, 2020 + Thal & Hudson, 2019 + Su et al., 2015		+ Chen & Li, 2018
Service fairness			
Vacation activities			
Taking photos	+ Gillet et al., 2016		
Wellness activities	+ Kim et al., 2016	+ Bandyopadhyay & Nair, 2019 + Dillette et al., 2020	
	+ Luo et al., 2018 + Lin, 2013 + Lin, 2014 + Thal & Hudson, 2019		
Cognitive activities	+ Melon et al., 2018		
Social activities	+ Melon et al., 2018		
Hiking/outdoor activities	+ Lee, Lee, et al., 2018	+ Chen & Huang, 2017 + Myers, 2010	
	+ Buckley & Westaway Oam, 2022		
Festivals	+ Kruger et al., 2014 + Kruger et al., 2013 + Lee, Manthiou, et al., 2018		
Volunteering activities		+ Broad, 2003 + Lo & Lee, 2011	
Purchase/consumption	+ Lee & Oh, 2017		
Cuisine activities	+ Lin, 2014; + Lyu et al., 2018 + Sthapit et al., 2016		
Co-creation activities	+ Mathis et al., 2016 + Dekhili & Hallem, 2020 + Sthapit et al., 2019 + + Chen et al., 2018	+ Filep et al., 2017	+ Buonincontri et al., 2017 + Eusébio et al., 2016
Work-related smartphone use			
Phone use	– Ayeh, 2018		
Vacation characteristics			
Vacation frequency	+ Bai et al., 2017 + Kroesen & Handy, 2014 + Mitas & Kroesen, 2019 + Melon et al., 2018 Nawijn, 2011		
Preferred travel party/travel group composition	+ Nawijn & Peeters, 2010 + Nawijn, 2011		
Colleagues as travel party	– Nawijn, 2011		
Length of stay	+ Wei et al., 2017 o Chen et al., 2016 o Nawijn, 2011		

Note. “+” indicates positive relationship; “–” indicates negative relationship; “o” indicates no significant relationship.

Vacation factors and subjective well-being

We identified ten factors from vacation-context influencing subjective well-being. They are grouped into three sub-dimensions: *destination attributes*, *vacation characteristics*, and *vacation activities* (Table 1). Although there exists some overlap among them, the factors have been mainly treated in a separate fashion in the studies reviewed. Identifying these factors and their impacts on well-being helps practitioners effectively design health and wellness destinations (Uysal et al., 2020).

Destination attributes

It entails *destination amenities*, *accessibilities*, and *the environment*. Reitsamer and Brunner-Sperdin (2017) describe that the amenities and the accessibility of a destination facilitate tourists to make sense of destinations, which are positive predictors of hedonic well-being. This may be because individuals need for information has been satisfied (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). Similarly, Oliveira et al. (2018) found that for seniors, esthetics (amenities) of the destination are positively related to well-being.

Service quality is related to both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being (e.g., Chen & Li, 2018). When vacationing, individuals are largely influenced by their contact with service providers (e.g., restaurant personnel, cab drivers). When individuals feel that they received high-quality service, they feel happier (Su et al., 2015). This is because high quality service fulfills consumers' need for social value (Chen & Quester, 2006), making them feel they have been treated fairly and with respect, which improves well-being (e.g., Mathwick et al., 2001).

Vacation characteristics

Several studies attempted to determine how *travel frequency* and *length of vacation* can influence well-being. At a very basic level, it is possible that when people take longer vacations or more frequent vacationing, they may obtain more unwinding opportunities (Etzion, 2003). However, current literature on this hypothesis displays mixed results. Chen et al. (2016) found that people who took vacations 8 days or longer reported higher life satisfaction than those who had shorter vacations (i.e., 3–7 days). However, Nawijn (2011) did not find a significant relationship between the length of stay and life satisfaction. Similarly, Wei et al. (2017) revealed that having a longer vacation time did not lead to more happiness. For travel frequencies, although Kroesen and Handy (2014) detected a positive effect on life satisfaction (Kroesen & Handy, 2014), Nawijn (2011) found no correlation between travel frequencies and life satisfaction.

As part of wider efforts to understand how trip frequency or length of stay influences well-being, researchers examined whether these factors could function as a moderator in the relationship between tourism satisfaction and well-being. Chen et al. (2016) detected that the length of stay moderates the relationship between tourism satisfaction and Subjective well-being. Thus, for those who stayed longer at a destination, high travel satisfaction leads to higher well-being. However, Chen et al. (2016) reported that trip frequency, i.e., the number of vacations per year, did not moderate this aforementioned relationship. In other words, for people who are more frequent travelers, travel satisfaction does not guarantee an increment in their subjective well-being.

Table 2. Summary of research on psychological factors and subjective well-being.

Factors (and subdimensions)	Hedonia	Eudaimonia	Integrated
Relatedness			
Building connections with local communities		+ Filep et al., 2017 + Broad, 2003	
Love and relationships	+ Wang, 2017 + Buckley & Westaway Oam, 2022 + Cai et al., 2020 + Gilbert & Abdullah, 2002	+ Quinn & Stacey, 2010 + Kim et al., 2015 + Lo & Lee, 2011 + Matteucci & Filep, 2017	
Interpersonal conflicts	– Mayer et al., 2020	– Buzinde, 2020 – Su & Zhang, 2022	
Nature connectedness	+ Kim et al., 2015 + Lee, Lee, et al., 2018		
Spiritual connection	+ Bandyopadhyay & Nair, 2019 + Dilletta et al., 2020		
Mastery			
Overcoming and negotiating risks	+ Buckley & Westaway Oam, 2022	+ Myers, 2010 + Matteucci & Filep, 2017	+ Mirehie & Gibson, 2020 + Wolf et al., 2015 + Cai et al., 2020 + Cai et al., 2020
Learning skills/knowledge	+ Wang, 2017 + Kruger et al., 2014	+ Buzinde, 2020 + Chen & Huang, 2017	
Novelty-seeking			
Trying something new	+ Kim et al., 2015 o Drewery et al., 2016	+ Knobloch et al., 2017 + Quinn & Stacey, 2010	
Autonomy			
Control	+ Chen et al., 2016		
Empowerment	+ Dekhili & Hallem, 2020		
Perceived freedom	+ Sedgley et al., 2018		
Intrinsic motivation	+ Kruger et al., 2015 + Thal & Hudson, 2019		
Escapism			
Slowness/alternative lifestyle		+ Su & Zhang, 2022	
Escape	+ Wang, 2017 + Lyu et al., 2018 + Sedgley et al., 2018 + Gilbert & Abdullah, 2002		
Detachment	+ Floros et al., 2021 + Kujanpää et al., 2021		
Emotion change			
Hedonism	+ Sthapit & Coudounaris, 2018		
Comfort	+ Wang, 2017		
Serendipity	+ Kwon & Lee, 2020		
Emotional attachment			+ Mirehie & Gibson, 2020 + Wolf et al., 2015
Emotion regulation: cognitive reappraisal		– Gao et al., 2018	
Emotion regulation: emotion sharing	+ Gao et al., 2018		
Authentic pride	+ Loureiro et al., 2019		
Relaxation	+ Chen et al., 2020 + Floros et al., 2021 + Bai et al., 2017 + Gilbert & Abdullah, 2002		
Negative emotions		– Knobloch et al., 2017	
Meaning			
Meaningfulness	+ Sthapit & Coudounaris, 2018		+ Mirehie & Gibson, 2020 + Dilletta et al., 2019
Positive self			
Self-knowledge	+ Dilletta et al., 2020		

(continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Factors (and subdimensions)	Hedonia	Eudaimonia	Integrated
		+ Chen & Huang, 2017; Floros et al., 2021	
		+ Matteucci & Filep, 2017	
		+ Voigt et al., 2010	
Self-esteem	+ Wang, 2017 + Cai et al., 2020		

Note. “+” indicates positive relationship; “-” indicates negative relationship, “o” indicates no significant relationship.

Vacation activities

Vacation activities refer to the quality or state of being active while at the destination (“Activity,” n.d.). The review identified activities that have been studied with well-being, including wellness activities (Kim et al., 2016) and event or festival participation (Kruger et al., 2013). Cuisine experience as well as co-creation activities are relevant to both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being (e.g., Dekhili & Hallem, 2020). Depending on the qualities of the activity, they can be classified as serious or casual leisure activities (Stebbins, 2007).

Psychological factors and vacationers’ subjective well-being

Based on theories on mechanisms that explain why leisure affects subjective well-being, as well as our review findings (see Table 2), we built a model of factors that transmit vacation effects on subjective well-being. According to the existing theories, we could deduce the following factors: relatedness, mastery, autonomy, and meaning (based on the DRAMMA model by Newman et al., 2014, and models of well-being proposed by Ryff and Keyes (1995) and Seligman (2011). Newly added factors based on our coding and syntheses were: escapism, emotion change, novelty, and positive self (Table 2). Each of them is explained in detail below.

Relatedness

The need for social connection has been highlighted in the majority well-being theories (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Seligman, 2011). Leisure travel provides the opportunity to build or strengthen social bonds. Kruger et al. (2014) found that those who travel with the motive to enhance relationships obtained more positive emotions after vacation-taking. Leisure activities, including photographs-taking, increase people’s happiness when these photographs are taken for the reason of relationship-building. This is because people share and talk about their photographs with friends/families after travel, which reinforces the social bonding and increase well-being (Gillet et al., 2016). Building relationships with local communities enhances well-being too. Broad (2003) found that one reason that volunteerism induces personal change is that it facilitates people to develop new relationships at the destination. Lo and Lee (2011) observed that volunteers obtained the opportunities to engage in direct and profound social interaction with local communities or their travel group friends, which turned into long-term relationships.

Despite the need to affiliate with living beings, individuals possess an innate need to feel connected to nature (e.g., the biophilia hypothesis, Kellert & Wilson, 1993). This connection can be described as a sense of meaningful involvement with something larger than the self, which is positively related to the eudaimonic aspect of well-being (Nisbet et al., 2011). Outdoor trips (e.g., nature-based-tourism, whale-watching) supported individuals' need for nature (Kim et al., 2015).

Mastery

The need for mastery or competence is an important psychological need which impacts people's well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002) and serious leisure (Stebbins, 2007) tap into the mastery experience. When people experience a state of flow, they are engaging in an activity that produces optimal challenges. However, given that their skills match the challenges rendered by the activity, these individuals entered a state of total concentration and absorption, which lead to optimal experience and well-being (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Tsaur et al. (2013) found that flow experiences happen among mountain climbers positively impact happiness. In addition to promoting happiness through flow experience, individuals' serious efforts and commitment to leisure activities (e.g., volunteerism, backpacking) is closely related to self-actualization and well-being (Stebbins, 2007).

Novelty

Seeking new experiences is essential for humans to survive as one need continuous innovation and evolution in the developmental processes (e.g., negentropy, Deci & Ryan, 1991). This is one main reason for people to travel as well, as vacation provides people with experiences different from daily life (Lee & Crompton, 1992). For example, the informants in Quinn and Stacey's (2010) research described that on holiday they tried out new activities that generally not available in their home environment which increased their well-being. Similarly, in Kim et al. (2015) study, they found that vacationers reported that satisfying their need for novelty was positively correlated with subjective well-being.

Autonomy

Autonomy is at the heart of leisure (Iso-Ahola, 1980). As indicated by the leisure compensation theory (Chick & Hood, 1996), individuals can suffer a loss of autonomy in the workplace and choose leisure activities to regain autonomy. Autonomy is one of the three basic psychological needs for subjective well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Chen et al. (2020) reported that autonomy is the requisite in the link between tourism experiences and life satisfaction. Autonomous motivation—when people engage in activities out of own volition and choice—is another way of describing autonomy. Autonomous motivation is positively related to tourists' life satisfaction. Kruger et al. (2015) reported that people with intrinsically motivated goals have a high level of involvement with travel activities, which magnifies feelings of satisfaction with travel and spillover to overall life satisfaction. Meanwhile, such kind of travel motivations are less likely to be

influenced by negative experiences because people with autonomous motivation to travel are more focused on their end goal (e.g., enjoyment).

Escapism

One fundamental travel motivation is the need of *escaping* from daily routine (Iso-Ahola, 1982). Escaping from work allows individuals to replenish resources that were depleted from dealing with job demands (Meijman et al., 1998). Therefore, escapism bears resemblance to psychological detachment from work which has been identified as an important factor in recovery research (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015). However, escapism is broader, because people may also (want to) escape and mentally disengage from other life domains (e.g., care-taking responsibilities for elderly parents or children, home care). Leisure travel also helps individuals disconnect from pressures from private lives. Kirillova and Lehto (2015) maintained that a destination represents *liminal zones* in which people temporarily suspend routine social orders, norms and make such environment inductive to liberation and acting out one's authentic self. Luo et al. (2018) found that the escapist experiences positively improve life satisfaction.

Emotion change

Emotions arise when one attends to and evaluates a situation that is relevant to current goals (Lazarus, 1991). When people are traveling, it is possible that more diverse emotions are elicited than when at home (e.g., the experience of awe, Moal-Ulvoas, 2017), as people engage in new activities, discover strange places, and meet unfamiliar people. Leisure travel has been characterized as an “emotionally charged consumer episode” (Malone et al., 2014, p. 241).

Emotions can be studied from these two perspectives: distinct-state (e.g., basic emotions, Roseman et al., 1994) or dimensional approach (e.g., the circumplex model, Yik & Russell, 2001). We identified discrete emotion experiences inducing well-being including *hedonism* (Sthapit & Coudounaris, 2018), *serendipity* (Kwon & Lee, 2020), *relaxation* (Bai et al., 2017), and *authentic pride* (Loureiro et al., 2019). Hedonism considers the playful and enjoyable emotional value of the consumption experience is an integral part of the leisure experience (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). Thus, it determines individuals' well-being.

Serendipity refers to unexpected and novel moments (Cary, 2004) which is positively related to life satisfaction (Kwon & Lee, 2020), as the true joy of traveling lies in those unexpected moments (Tung & Ritchie, 2011). Authentic pride concerns accomplishment and self-esteem (Tracy et al., 2009). Loureiro et al. (2019) reported that authentic pride lifted cruise trip tourists' well-being. While the categorical approach describes vacationers' discrete emotion experience, the dimensional approach captures emotion changes. Individuals themselves can proactively manipulate and make changes to emotions (Gross, 1998). For example, vacationers can down-regulate negative emotions (Gao et al., 2018) and up-regulate the duration and intensity of positive emotions (Yan & Halpenny, 2022).

Positive self

In our review, positive self-concerns the process of increasing self-knowledge (i.e. the extent to which a person's self-belief corresponds to what one is actually like, Tenney et al., 2013) and self-esteem. These factors are essential to individuals' well-being, particularly from the eudaimonic perspective (Waterman, 1993; Waterman et al., 2008). MacCannell (1989) maintains that one main component of tourism consumption involves a search for the authentic self. MacCannell (1989) further explains that the modernity made individuals' experiences become fragmented through processes, such as job specialization. The resultant alienation of individuals from society and nature can be overcome by tourism, which is a way of gaining a bigger connection with the world. Voigt et al. (2010) observed that participants find authentic self through spiritual retreat. Chen and Huang (2017) also report that backpacking activities (e.g., budget accommodation) increased individuals' self-knowledge. Moreover, Cai et al. (2020) reported that vacation-taking increased self-esteem—individuals' overall evaluation of their worth and competence (Weiten & Halpern, 2004). This is because participants reported that they became more considerate of their partner while traveling than at home. In turn, they took pride in being a better partner, which helped them build a positive sense of self-regard.

Meaning

Meaning has been considered as an important psychological need promoting well-being (Seligman, 2011). Iwasaki (2008) proposed that meaning refers to the process through which individuals gain something important or valuable in life and leisure provides the pathway for participants to create meaning. Many forms of vacation activities are relevant to people's pursuit of meaning in life. For example, a family vacation provides a space for individuals to share time with family members enhancing connections with each other (Kelly, 2022). People obtained self-development benefits from their backpacking activities (e.g., self-confidence, Hsu et al., 2017). Dark tourism (e.g., visiting war zone, de Rond & Lok, 2016) or voluntourism (Han et al., 2020) provides a transformative experience.

To conclude, vacation-taking influences subjective well-being through the following mechanisms: *relatedness*, *autonomy*, *mastery*, *novelty*, *positive self*, *emotion*, *escapism*, and *meaning*. Similar to the DRAMMA model, relatedness, autonomy, mastery, and meaning have been identified in our review. However, we expanded the meaning of relatedness by considering individuals' need for natural relatedness. We identified emotion change, escapism, novelty, and positive self as additional factors mediating the vacation-well-being relationship.

Integration with research on vacation context and psychological factors

Based on review findings, in this section, we integrated current research to explain why and how vacation influences well-being through considering the relationship between vacation factors and psychological mechanisms (Table 3). More specifically, vacation-context factors, such as *environment and landscapes* are the starting point in the process of well-being increment. Thus, destinations with restorative properties, e.g., individuals

Table 3. Sample studies illustrating the relationship between vacation factors and psychological mechanisms.

Factor	Focal dimension	Theoretical perspective	Example
Vacation characteristics	Environment and landscape Local communities	Attention restoration theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact on relatedness and mastery (Lyu et al., 2018) • Impact on relatedness, mastery, and self-evaluation (Filep et al., 2017)
Vacation activities	Creative leisure	Serious leisure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact on autonomy, relatedness, and mastery (Huang et al., 2019)
	Volunteerism		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact on relatedness, mastery, positive self, escapism (Lo & Lee, 2011).
	Wellness tourism	Casual leisure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact on autonomy, relatedness, and positive self (Dillette et al., 2020)

Note. Supplementary Data for more information on vacation factors and psychological mechanisms.

are able to experience a sense of being away, fascination, extent, and compatibility (e.g., the attention restoration theory, Kaplan, 1995), are more likely to contribute to well-being. Such destinations—often natural environments—fulfill individuals' need for escapism, relatedness, and mastery (e.g., Su & Zhang, 2022).

Different types of destination activities can trigger specific psychological factors. For example, Huang et al. (2019) reported tourists' participation in creative activities (e.g., learning local culture) increased autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Similarly, volunteer tourism enhanced autonomy, relatedness, and self-evaluation. This difference could be explained by whether the nature of the activity is a serious or causal leisure pursuit (Stebbins, 2007). Serious leisure activities are usually those providing opportunities to increase knowledge, skill development, or identity development. Such kind of activities lead to competence and meaning. However, casual leisure activities require little or no special training to enjoy it, such as nature-based tourism, and tend to induce escapism and hedonic enjoyment (Derom & Taks, 2011).

Discussion

Current research displays positive correlations between vacation-taking and well-being. Although scholars have been increasingly exploring why and how vacation-taking is beneficial, research on this topic is fragmented across research fields. To advance this growing research area, we reviewed extant literature on the topic and built an integrative framework explaining the relationship. We encourage future researchers to test the framework, not exhaustively but selecting dimensions that suit their expertise and interests. Below, we discuss the theoretical and practical contributions as well as future research directions that can advance the research field.

One contribution is that, through reviewing current literature on vacation-well-being, we identified psychological factors that potentially mediate the relationship. Vacation-taking triggers individuals to have certain psychological experiences which in turn increase subjective well-being. These factors partly overlap but are distinct from factors suggested by current theories—including the DRAMMA model and meaning-making pathways (Iwasaki, 2008)—explaining leisure and subjective well-being. For example,

escapism, one fundamental leisure need (Iso-Ahola, 1982) is lacking from earlier models on well-being and leisure benefits. Vacations have been described as a “liminal zone” (Kirillova & Lehto, 2015) in which people “let their hair down,” suspend routines, norms, and social roles to a greater extent than in their home environment. Previous models also neglected the emotion aspects of vacation-taking. It is likely that vacations as an emotion-laden context bring about more intense changes in emotions than shorter leisure episodes in one’s regular environment (Mitas et al., 2012). Thus, these factors documented in our model complement current understandings of leisure and well-being through the leisure vacation (extraordinary activity) perspective.

Another contribution is that we shed light on the importance of integrating both perspectives—vacation factors and psychological factors—in one model. Extant research mainly focuses on either vacation factors (e.g., activities) or psychological mechanisms; very few consider them simultaneously. However, understanding the relationship between these two contributes to a more nuanced understanding regarding why and how certain vacation features and activities can influence well-being. For example, taking photos positively influence hedonic well-being when it fulfills the need for affiliation (Gillet et al., 2016). For practitioners, this information can help to design increasingly effective visiting environments to benefit customers.

Limitations and future research

Our review has limitations. First of all, given this research field is still emerging, the number of studies that we could obtain is small, which contributes to the issue of high heterogeneity in this research. For example, the examined research has diverse research designs—quantitative and qualitative designs; the researched population covers people from both Eastern and Western countries. With this type of data, it is difficult to arrive at reliable predictions, e.g., the optimal days/types of vacation that can benefit well-being. Similarly, although we categorize vacation activities, destination attributes as different category, the resulting overlaps among them may also increase the prediction complexity. Future research should be conducted to address this challenge. Second, the majority of studies were cross-sectional. This makes it difficult to ascertain how vacation-taking causes psychological factors and then leads to increased subjective well-being. For future research, it is important to have more experimental and longitudinal research to draw more rigorous conclusions.

In addition, there are disputes within the literature regarding the concept of subjective well-being. For example, although there are these philosophical differences between both hedonic and eudaimonic approaches to subjective well-being (Huta & Waterman, 2014), researchers speculate that statistically these two concepts might reflect the same overarching well-being construct (c.f. Disabato et al., 2016). Not to mention that, with the interchangeably used terms to measure subjective well-being, this field may fall prey to the jingle-jangle fallacy (Kelley, 1927; Thorndick, 1904).

To advance research on vacation-taking and subjective well-being, we propose that future research considers exploring the person-level and/or societal-level moderators. At the person-level, personality traits should be considered. Chen and Yoon (2019) observed that people with the trait of novelty-seeking are happier and travel more;

moreover, they found that such top-down effect might be stronger than the bottom-up influence of vacation on well-being. Nevertheless, personality traits—shaping behaviors—have been rarely linked with vacation research. In future research, we propose that several leisure-related personality traits shaping leisure enjoyment and decision-making could be considered in vacation-well-being literature. These traits include *playfulness* (Proyer, 2014), *sensation-seeking* (Zuckerman, 2007), *self-as-entertainment* (Mannell, 1984), and *autotelic personality* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Until now, vacation research mainly focuses on the individual-level, with a few exceptions that examined the friendship dynamics' influence on vacation experiences (Matteucci et al., 2022). However, the context (e.g., culture) shapes vacation behavior, too. Thus, to advance vacation research in a more meaningful way, future research should consider taking a multi-level perspective (e.g., testing the cross-level relationship between individuals and the nested levels above). We propose future research could look at these three levels: culture/society, profession, and family; the context of a particular society can influence whether one finds their vacation enjoyable or not. Current research indeed suggests that national cultural norms shape individuals' leisure behavior (Walker et al., 2020). In a society in which work is central to the identity (e.g., the Protestant Work Ethic, Miller et al., 2002), it is considered a deviation from the norm to stay away from the work force for a long time (Snir & Harpaz, 2002). In such kind of culture, people are less likely to value leisure. For example, Lipman (2018, 2019) described that Americans are “vacation-phobic” and many employees experienced “vacation shaming” from colleagues or leaders.

Moreover, in the list of articles being reviewed, none were conducted to differentiate the influence of *profession*. However, the unemployed usually display a lower baseline of happiness than those full-time workers (Lucas et al., 2004). Vacation-taking exerts limited contributions to the unemployed, given leisure is hard to fulfill people's need for social institution (e.g., structure, collective efforts, Jahoda, 1981). Moreover, knowledge workers, college students, as well as shift workers can have different vacation-taking experiences too, e.g., shift workers experience more structural constraints. Individuals who experience structural constraints (e.g., disabled, low income) are under-represented in the vacation-well-being literature. We also need to acknowledge that, through our literature research, we identified a few papers focusing on social tourism initiatives (e.g., McCabe & Johnson, 2013) targeting to engage this groups of people.

Individuals' leisure attitudes and behaviors can be shaped by interactions with family members (Cotte & Wood, 2004). Nevertheless, *family-level* factors shaping vacationers' well-being has received little attention; this may be explained by researchers' focuses on the examination of individuals' role as a tourist but ignored family roles (for notable exceptions, see for instance Shaw et al., 2008. Some relevant family-level factors to be tested include *family-leisure conflicts* (Goff et al., 1997) and *relationship closeness* (de Bloom et al., 2012; Shahvali, 2021). Currently, there is a little empirical attention to understand these cross-level relationships between vacation and well-being. Multilevel research designs could move the research field forward in a meaningful way as more solid conclusions can be drawn regarding how, when, and which culture could regulate individuals' process regarding obtaining health and wellness benefits. Still, we also acknowledge the labor-intensive nature of collecting data that spans multiple levels (e.g., workers, their families, their companies, and wider society). We added these levels to our integrative model to encourage future research.

Although we focused on the benefits of taking vacations, there are also a few studies examining stress around vacationing. For example, Nawijn (2011) delineates how work stress (e.g., traveling with coworkers) spills over from work to the vacation context and Chen et al. (2018) studied work-related smartphone use on vacation. Vacation stress can also emerge from vacation activities: Gao et al. (2018) studied tourists' stress (e.g., environment, travel partners, etc.) and potential coping strategies. These studies suggest that investigating stressors during vacation is essential.

Conclusion

As the literature on vacation and well-being grows and evolves, building a comprehensive understanding of the relationship is warranted. Our review contributes to this understanding by mapping out how and why vacation-taking contributes to subjective well-being. In addition to examining the vacation experiences occurring within each individual, we also encourage future research to adopt a cross-level approach to study the vacation-well-being relationship. Personality characteristics as well as shared norms and values could shape vacationers' joint holiday experiences and behaviors. By understanding the relationship from a richer and more dynamic perspective, practitioners, e.g., managers and policy makers, can design and shape an environment granting individuals opportunities to experience pleasure and achieve meaning in life.

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Ethical approval

This is a literature review study conducted during the period while the primary author was employed by the University of Alberta. According to the University of Alberta's Research Ethics, this study is exempt from ethics review because it relies exclusively on publicly accessible information.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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*The asterisk indicates studies included in the literature review.

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