Self-Determination Theory and Wellness Tourism: How do Wellness Facilities Contribute to Wellbeing?

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Abstract
The purpose of this dissertation study was to assess the extent and manner in which wellbeing is supported in the context of a wellness facility (destination spa / lifestyle retreat). In particular, the study considered which characteristics of a wellness facility are uniquely beneficial beyond engaging in healthful eating and exercise as a matter of routine, or benefits associated with a leisure vacation. Self-determination theory (SDT), an organismic theory of human motivation was used as a theoretical framework. The research consisted of two studies both of which were conducted onsite at a wellness facility in southeastern United States. The first, a qualitative study, was conducted to determine the applicability of SDT for measuring wellbeing as the outcome of a wellness vacation. Following, a quantitative study was undertaken that measured relative changes in wellbeing pre and post-vacation. In addition, two structural equation models were proposed to describe the manner in which psychological wellbeing may be supported. Overall, study results suggest that wellbeing is enhanced overall. All hypothesized precursors to wellbeing in study models were also significant. Theoretical as well as managerial implications for the structure of wellness facility programs and operations were discussed.