

# The pandemic and wellbeing: Views from tourism employees

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## **Abstract:**

This study sought to investigate wellbeing through the lens of people who have experienced the impacts of Covid-19 while working in an industry that was impacted severely by the effects of the pandemic. Study findings reveal the important and rather neglected role of the “sense of freedom” while examining, evaluating and fostering the wellbeing of individuals. This outcome has both societal, and tourism managerial implications.

**Keywords:** Pandemic, Wellbeing, Tourism

## **1. Introduction**

This study attempts to gain insights of how tourism employees perceive “wellbeing” and how their wellbeing was affected by the current pandemic. Through an examination of people’s interpretations of the world, we allow the creation of knowledge (Yachin and Ioannides, 2020; Christou, 2018) for a concept that has an intrinsic value relative to the individual (Crisp, 2017). Due to its rather exploratory nature, this empirical study does not adopt a specific framework or standpoint such as a human resource management perspective, to allow the emergence of novel perspectives and findings (Christou et al., 2019).

## **2. Literature Review**

Wellbeing has been a philosophical and sociological concern from ancient times. Much of the philosophy underpinning the conceptualisation of the concept derives from classic philosophers, such as Socrates and Plato (Stoll, 2014). The concept has been broadly described as what is ultimately good *for* a person (Crisp, 2017). Differentiations of the concept exist in the case of Subjective Wellbeing (SWB) that refers to the more hedonistic aspect of wellbeing including a person’s affecting and cognitive evaluations of life. The Psychological wellbeing (PWB) deals with the more eudemonic aspect of wellbeing consisting of six components. These are: self-acceptance, a sense of continued development, purpose in life, positive relationships, personal growth, and autonomy (Agarwal, 2021).

The importance of wellbeing is highlighted at a personal, organisational and societal level. Amongst the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the promotion of wellbeing for all, at all ages, holds a central place (WHO, 2021). The concept received increased attention by the tourism academic community mainly from a consumer-tourist, or/and destination community wellbeing perspective as a result of tourism activity (Farkić et al., 2020; Hanna et al., 2019; Suess et al., 2018; Smith and Diekmann, 2017). For instance, in a model of integrative wellbeing tourism experience, Smith and Diekmann (2017) acknowledged the triptych of pleasure/hedonism, altruistic activities, and meaningful experiences. Less attention has been

given regarding the investigation of tourism entrepreneurs/employees and wellbeing (Christou et al., 2020a; Peters et al., 2019). Nonetheless, studies have examined the concept of employee wellbeing from specific prisms, such as through an organisational human resource management perspective (Teo et al., 2020). Particularly the study of Agarwal (2021) revealed that wellbeing-based HRM practices may positively impact on employees. Nonetheless, academics call for further insights regarding the nexus of wellbeing and tourism (Agarwal, 2021; Teo et al., 2020; Suess et al., 2018; Smith and Diekmann, 2017). As Teo et al. (2020, p.8) correctly position, “considerable more attention is needed within the hospitality context, looking at sector employee wellbeing...”. This study, through its exploratory nature not only allows findings linked to employees’ wellbeing, but also seeks the emergence of new knowledge regarding the construct of “wellbeing”.

### **3. Methodology**

Though quantitative approaches have been used to examine dimensions of wellbeing, qualitative studies have proven particularly useful in gaining in-depth information regarding wellbeing and individuals (refer to Agarwal, 2021; Tuzovic et al., 2021; Hanna et al., 2019). For the purpose of this study, an interpretivist approach was used to allow people’s personal reflections (Collis and Hussey, 2014) and individual interpretations of the concept (Christou, 2018). The study took place in Cyprus- a popular tourist destination in Europe that has a mature tourism product including various level hotels and resorts, restaurants, theme parks, museums and other tourism enterprises, such as car rentals and souvenir shops. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, we targeted people working in the tourism industry in various positions while using semi-structured and open-ended questions to allow the emergence of new findings (Christou and Sharpley, 2019). In total, 50 interviews were carried out (refer to table 1) in a period of approximately three months through the use of technological means (i.e., zoom meetings) with employees who have been working in the industry from two years to nearly half a century (i.e. forty four years). A three step thematic analysis was followed (Christou et al., 2020b) that involved the assignment of conceptual codes to transcripts, followed by the assembling of findings into second-order grouping to enable understandings of people’s views and perceptions regarding wellbeing, and establishing a sense of conceptual linkages between the formed categories to ensure deliverable outcomes.

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Table 1 *Profile of informants (source: authors)*

Total	50
Male	28
Female	22
Age group 50+	14
Age group 30- 49	28
Age group 18- 29	8
Country of origin (in alphabetical order)	Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Russia, Serbia, and U.S.A.
Sub-sector/occupation (in alphabetical order)	Administration; Accounting (in Hospitality); Bar; Cost control; Events co-ordination; Food and Beverage; Guest Relations; Hotel/Operations Management; Kitchen; Human Resources (hospitality); Housekeeping; Marketing; Purchases; Reception; Restaurants; Reservations; Security; Spa; Technical department
Years in the tourism sector (10 or less)	14
Years in the tourism sector (11- 20)	21
Years in the tourism sector (21- 30)	8
Years in the tourism sector (more than 31)	7

### 4. Results

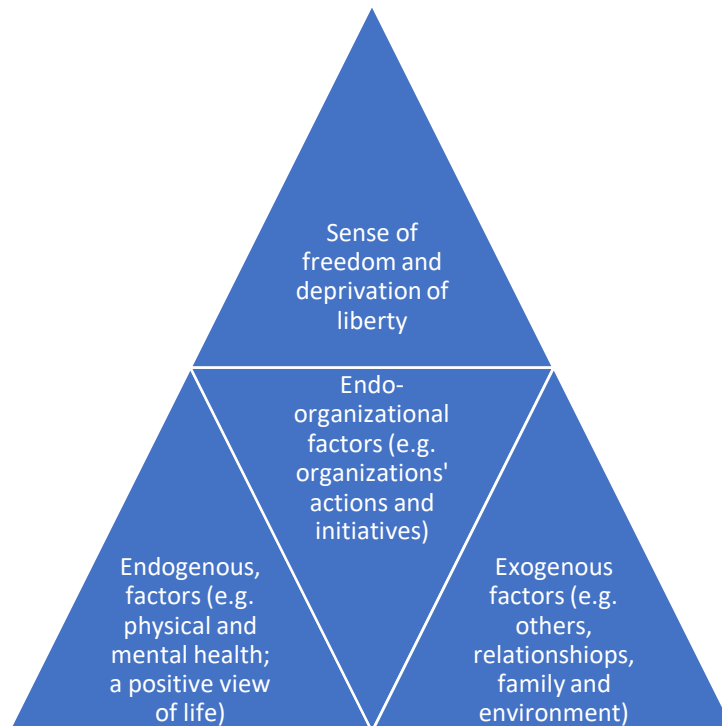
All participants understand that wellbeing primarily involves someone’s physical (but also, mental) “health”, and then economic status, personal and family “happiness”, and personal “freedom”. As they stressed, all these are elements that constitute to an individual’s wellbeing, while they have been negatively affected by the pandemic. All of them perceive that the wellbeing of a person is negatively affected when he/she feels that he/she is deprived from his/her health, job, happiness and freedom. All participants agree that the impacts of Covid-19 over the tourism industry have been negative and devastating. Amongst other impacts, they stressed the fact that there is less contact between service providers and customers while the “trust” element between the two parties has been negatively influenced. Certain interviewees referred to a deterioration of “quality” aspects of service provision due to physical distance and personal contact. The vast majority stated that they remained unemployed during the crisis or worked only for a few months for the whole 2020. This affected their financial obligations and psychology while making reference to feelings of “insecurity” and “fear”. An interviewee (Isabel, 29) echoes this by stating: *“It (pandemic) has affected me to a great extent!... It has created for me uncertainty and insecurity regarding whether I will return to my job... In regards to my personal life, I cannot go out, see my friends... It’s a long time in inaction. Its unbearable!”*

Nonetheless, around 20 (out of 50) interviewees commented on some of the positive effects of the pandemic, such as the fact that they were able to spend more quality time with their families. This, as they stressed was particularly important for them since the nature of tourism employment requires from them to work during night shifts, holidays and for long hours. There were informants who stated that their organisation did nothing to protect them, and others who stated that the organisation made efforts to secure the wellbeing of its employees (e.g. not firing them, or providing them with a bonus during the Christmas period). Rather promising and somehow unexpected is the fact that almost all informants (44 out of 50) stated that they will not change occupation or change their career, with comments being made such as “love” (for their job), and “joy” of providing hospitality and help towards others (guests).

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

The study comes as a response to researchers who call for further insights regarding the nexus of wellbeing and tourism (Agarwal, 2021; Teo et al., 2020; Suess et al., 2018). Wellbeing continues to be of utmost importance for individuals and is further stressed in an era in which those who work in the tourism sector have to deal with increased challenges and enormous psychological and physical pressures. Participants made reference to wellbeing aspects that cover both subjective- hedonistic and psychological- eudemonic differentiations of the notion (Agarwal, 2021). They referred to various endogenous (i.e. personal), endo-organizational (i.e. human resource management policies), and exogenous (i.e. environmental) factors that affect their wellbeing. Their “love” for their job that entails a sense of “offering” towards others/society is remarkable and ought to be stressed. The interpretivist and exploratory nature of the study revealed the construct of “freedom” that was attached to the notion of wellbeing by informants. Perhaps this outcome wouldn’t have been given such an emphasis by them prior to the pandemic. That is, the pandemic resulted in travel restrictions, lockdowns and restrictions on movements. Because of these restrictions, informants conceive that they have been deprived from “freedom” and “liberty” to act in certain ways (e.g. to travel, keep distance from guests and having to wear masks). Eventually, this has affected their overall wellbeing. They do acknowledge that the necessary measures/restrictions have secured the physical wellbeing of themselves and others (i.e. co-colleagues and customers). Yet, they perceive that these have negatively affected their psychological and social wellbeing since they regard these as aspects that have caused negative impacts on their psychology and social interactions. These outcomes have contributed towards the creation of a simplistic and useful diagram (Refer to diagram 1).

**Figure 1.** The pyramid of wellbeing as informed by tourism employees during the pandemic (source: authors)



The findings of this study do not challenge the use of necessary (travel, and social distancing) restrictions for the health and wellbeing of themselves and others. Even so, the outcomes reveal a possibly neglected issue, that of the sense of “freedom” and its withdrawal from people. Therefore, it is suggested that the UN Sustainable Development Goals of WHO consider the implications of freedom deprivation while examining, evaluating or attempting to foster the wellbeing of people. This study reconfirms actions of previous research related to the fostering of wellbeing of individuals (Agarwal, 2021; Smith and Diekmann, 2017). Despite these (and as a novel outcome of this study), tourism stakeholders (such as managers) have an important role to play while trying to target “freedom/liberty” related issues for the wellbeing of their employees. This may be translated as a further sense of freedom for their employees, in terms of (e.g.) further free time to spend with their families, flexibility in decision making, empowerment, autonomy in delivering views, a sense of liberty to express complaints and concerns, and even rewards that come in the form of “travel”. A limitation of the study is that the number of informants did not allow differences/comparisons to emerge based on sub-groups (i.e. age and years of service in the field). As a final note, further research is recommended regarding the nexus of tourism and wellbeing in a post-covid era.

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