

Tourist encounters with places associated with longevity and reflections from Mediterranean blue zones: An environmental psychology and Attention Restoration Theory perspective

Abstract

The primary aim of this research is to investigate the previously unexplored aspects of places linked to longevity, as perceived by tourists, by using the theoretical frameworks of environmental psychology and Attention Restoration Theory. Information was extracted in the form of experiential reviews from visitors to the Mediterranean “blue zone” islands of Sardinia in Italy and Ikaria in Greece. An initial cluster analysis was conducted using an Artificial Intelligence (AI) system. Subsequently, the research team performed a thematic analysis to further explore specific predominant clusters and identify key themes that emerged within them. Findings betray the important construct of nature in places associated with longevity. The study demonstrates the significant role of the natural environment and its interconnected components as a central and largely acknowledged point of reference for tourists, even in places that boast a multitude of attractions and services beyond their natural surroundings. Furthermore, the adopted amalgamation of theoretical lens exposes the significance of visitors’ “attention” in delivering insights of places. Finally, the combination of cluster and thematic analytical techniques used in this study act as a guide for further implementation by future researchers who deal with large amount of data that have nonetheless qualitative significance attached to them.

Introduction

The longevity of people may be subject to various factors, such as, genetics, personal lifestyle choices, access to healthcare services, social interactions and emotional support (Longo and Anderson, 2022; Dominguez et al., 2021). Nonetheless, there are contradictory views on whether the natural environment, contribute to people's longevity. It is widely accepted that tourism can expand people's access to well-being opportunities (Zheng et al., 2022). Yet, tourists’ encounters with places associated with longevity has escaped the attention of researchers despite the fact that tourists may provide insights of the value of such places. Hence, the aim of this study is to examine, from tourists’ perspectives the dynamics of places associated with longevity through the lens of environmental psychology and Attention Restoration Theory.

Literature Review

Environmental psychology investigates the dynamic relationship between people and the environments in which they find themselves (Neuhofer et al., 2021). As part of environmental psychology, Attention Restoration Theory postulates that being exposed to natural environments may restore and improve cognitive functioning, attention, and overall well-being (Gill et al., 2019). Despite this, when tourists travel to new places they navigate the unfamiliar terrain, gaining insights beyond the glossy facade of the place. They interpret landscapes (Pung et al., 2020) and are able to notice subtle cues and energy that radiate from the environment of a place. They can observe and interacting with the natural environment and the people who live

there (Hanna et al., 2019), allowing them to cultivate an appreciation of the complexities of the place. In addition to that, when tourists are attuned to their intuitive senses, they are able to capture the energetic imprint of a place (Su and Zhang, 2022), while this realization offers a profound understanding of the sentiments, values, and shared experiences that have contributed to the evolution and dynamics of a place.

Methodological approach

An important dimension of Attention Restoration Theory is the element of “attention” which may be understood as the mental process of paying close focus to specific stimuli. People’s attention has a tendency to be drawn naturally toward stimuli that stimulate their attention when they enter new spaces (Azriel and Bar-Haim, 2020). Such vital information may be e-shared in the form of experiential comments on social platforms, providing hence valuable insights (Christou et al., 2023). For the purpose of this study, members of the research team accessed and downloaded from Google Maps all comments shared by visitors in two distinct places; The Mediterranean islands of Sardinia (Italy) and Ikaria (Greece) are regarded as “Blue Zone places” that have been associated with longevity. Data were pre-processed and a remaining 4,046 reviews were analyzed using a specific Artificial Intelligent (AI) system (“Infranodus”). Cluster analysis performed by the program was followed by thematic analysis by members of the research team, to delve deeper into specific/predominant clusters in order to identify key themes present within them.

Findings

An overview of the expressed by visitors’ terms and their inter-connection reveals a strong reference to the “islands” and their “beautiful”- landscape, nature and surroundings (figure 1). Six indefinable clusters are observed following the cluster analysis. The first three and predominant ones, acknowledge the specific islands as places of splendid nature, beautiful surroundings, and dramatic landscapes. The thematic analysis results in four distinguishable themes that are nonetheless connected through the notion of “nature” (figure 2).

Figure 1. Overview of terms

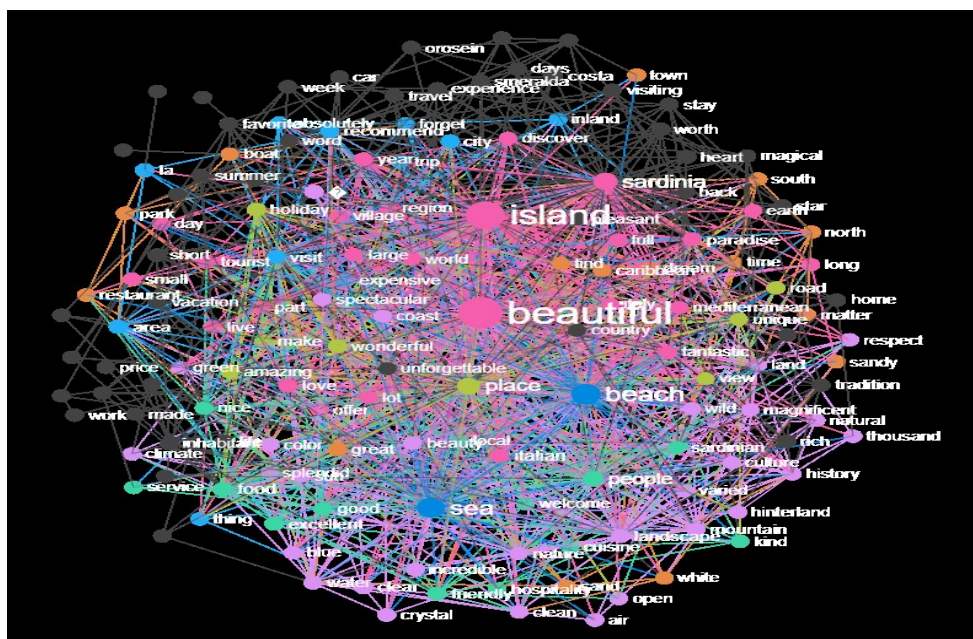
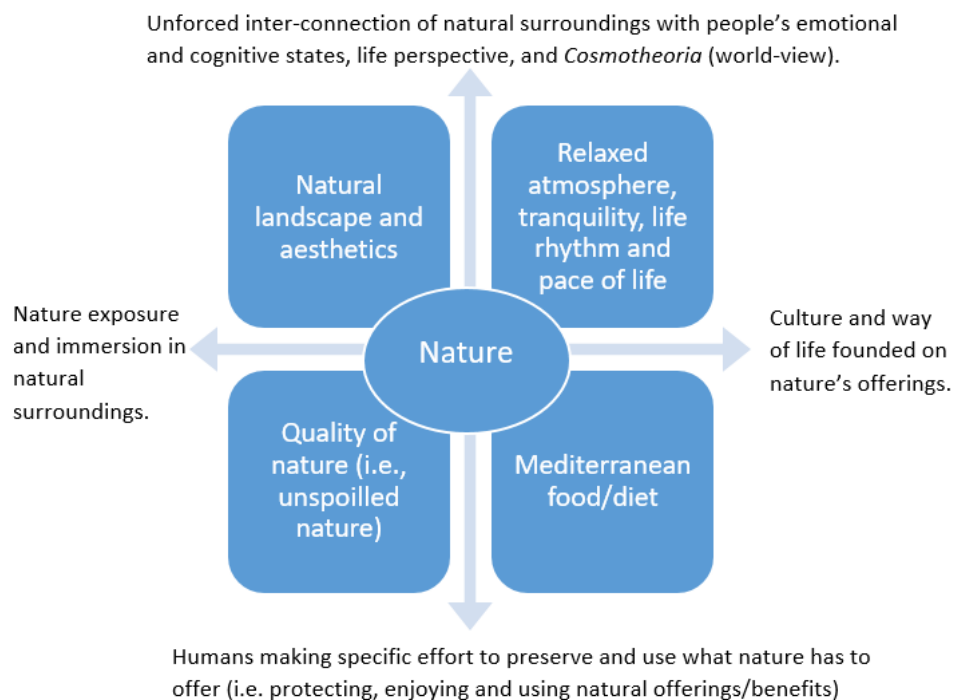


Figure 2. Nature dynamics within the context of place and longevity



Discussion and conclusions

The importance of the study rests on four main pillars. First, it has provided insights of how the natural environment and its various elements act as a pivotal and largely communicated point of reference by tourists, even in places that have much more to offer to their visitors (i.e., archaeological/cultural sites, customs, cuisine, architecture, and services). Second, it has investigated a phenomenon/linkage that has escaped the attention of the tourism research community. Third, through the adopted theoretical lens it has exposed the significance of visitors' "attention" in delivering insights of places. Fourth, it has used a combination of analytical techniques (i.e., cluster and thematic) that may be further implemented by future researchers dealing with large amount of data that have nonetheless qualitative information attached to them.

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