

**DO HAPPY TOURISTS SPREAD MORE POSITIVE WORD-OF-MOUTH? THE
MEDIATING ROLE OF LIFE SATISFACTION**

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DO HAPPY TOURISTS SPREAD MORE POSITIVE WORD-OF-MOUTH? THE MEDIATING ROLE OF LIFE SATISFACTION

ABSTRACT

While the studies on customers' satisfaction and its impact on word-of-mouth are numerous, some gap remains. In particular, how leisure satisfaction can lead to travel word-of-mouth recommendation remains unclear. The purpose of this study is to investigate the mediating role of life satisfaction on the relationship between leisure satisfaction and travel word-of-mouth giving intention. A survey was conducted with a final valid sample of 389 respondents. Respondents are tourists visiting Macau for leisure purposes. The result shows that satisfaction with leisure life leads to a higher life satisfaction in general. Life satisfaction is positively associated to travel word-of-mouth giving intention. Life satisfaction fully mediates the relationship between leisure satisfaction and travel word-of-mouth giving intention. These findings have meaningful implications to destination marketers.

Keywords: Word-of-mouth; leisure satisfaction; life satisfaction

DO HAPPY TOURISTS SPREAD MORE WORD-OF-MOUTH? THE MEDIATING ROLE OF LIFE SATISFACTION

The purpose of this study is to investigate the mediating role of life satisfaction on the relationship between leisure satisfaction and travel word-of-mouth giving intention. Studies on customers' satisfaction and its impact on subsequent behavioral intention are numerous (e.g., Baker & Crompton, 2000). On one hand, researchers found that leisure satisfaction can lead to greater word-of-mouth and revisit behavior (e.g., Williams & Soutar, 2009). On the other hand, leisure satisfaction is found to be positively linked to one's life satisfaction (e.g., Neal, Sirgy, & Uysal, 1999). But some gaps remain. In particular, how leisure satisfaction can lead to travel word-of-mouth recommendation remains unclear. Indeed, several researchers highlighted a lack of in-depth understanding of word-of-mouth phenomenon in tourism research (Murphy, 2001; Simpson & Siguaaw, 2008). In this study, we proposed that leisure satisfaction does not necessitate word-of-mouth giving and one's life satisfaction plays a major role in mediating this relationship. Put it in simple words, a tourist satisfied with his/her leisure travel may or may not spread word-of-mouth because of numerous reasons. However, a happy (life in general) tourist will likely to do so.

According to Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985), life satisfaction is a cognitive judgmental process. It is a major component of subjective well-being or happiness (Diener et al., 1985). More relevant to current research is that a recent study by Mehl, Vazire, Holleran, and Clark (2010) found that an individual's life satisfaction is positively associated to the level and depth of conversations with others. To the best of our knowledge, Melh et al (2010) is the only in-depth research that examines the relationship between life satisfaction and word-of-mouth. According to the researchers, people who have higher life satisfaction tend to talk more to others and engage in more substantive conversations versus people who have lower life satisfaction. This finding may have important implications to destination marketers. It generally means that happy people are key carriers of word-of-mouth information.

Previous researchers have tried to link leisure to life satisfaction. For example, Neal, Sirgy, and Uysal (1999) developed a hierarchy model of life satisfaction in which leisure satisfaction is one of the key components leading to overall life satisfaction. They tested their model and found that leisure satisfaction indeed led to life satisfaction. However, how both

constructs interact with word-of-mouth is unknown. Naturally, in this study, we hypothesized that leisure satisfaction is positively associated to travel word-of-mouth giving intention and also to life satisfaction. Similarly, inferring from the research by Melh et al. (2010), higher satisfaction with life should also lead to greater travel word-of-mouth giving intention. Given that the relative importance of both satisfaction constructs to word-of-mouth is unclear and not previously investigated, we created a model in which life satisfaction is hypothesized to be a mediator between the other two constructs. It is so because (1) previous study by Melh et al. (2010) found a strong relationship between life satisfaction and word-of-mouth and (2) that leisure satisfaction is only one component of life satisfaction. In other words, we expect happiness with one's life as a necessary criterion for travel word-of-mouth transmission, whether or not individuals are satisfied with their leisure lives.

To test the hypotheses, a survey was conducted in Macau. Macau is a special administrative region of China. In 2011, Macau welcomed more than 28 million tourists. A total of 500 tourists were solicited to participate in the survey in late 2011. Participants were solicited at popular tourist attraction sites, cross-border gates, and one of the main ferry terminals in Macau. Trained researchers randomly approached one out of five visitors that they met.

Questions used in the survey were developed based on past literature. Items to measure satisfaction with leisure life (three items) and satisfaction with life in general (three items) were obtained from Neal et al. (1999). Four items to measure travel word-of-mouth giving intention were adapted from Lam and Mizerski (2005). It is important to note that current study investigates word-of-mouth intention, which can be both positive and negative. A five-point scale was used for all items. Besides, participants had to answer a series of questions on demographics including age, gender, marital status, and educational level. Participants were also prompted for their primary reason for visiting Macau. The final questionnaire was translated into Chinese and then back translated to ensure consistency. It is then administrated in Chinese. Prior to the main survey, we conducted a pre-test on 20 Chinese individuals. Results from pre-test helped to refine the structure of the questionnaire and ensure that the items used were relevant.

Among 500 individuals who completed the questionnaire, 389 specified that their main reason for visiting Macau is for leisure purposes. These were selected for further

analysis. Table 1 shows a simple statistics of the sample. Initial analysis includes building exploratory factor models and conducting reliability tests. A 3-item satisfaction with life measure has a cronbach's alpha of 0.71, 3-item leisure satisfaction 0.81, and 4-item travel word-of-mouth giving intention 0.77.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Confirmatory factor analyses were then performed using AMOS 19.0 and a structural model with hypothesized paths was created. Maximum likelihood iteration procedure was used to estimate the final solution. Initial analysis found that the direct effect of leisure satisfaction to travel word-of-mouth giving intention is both significant and positive (standardized estimate = 0.63, $p < .001$). Life satisfaction is then added to the model to test for mediation. The direct effect from leisure satisfaction to travel word-of-mouth giving intention disappeared (standardized estimate = -0.09, $p > 0.05$). Indirect effect is, however, significant ($p < .001$). Leisure satisfaction to life satisfaction is loaded at 0.82, while life satisfaction to travel word-of-mouth giving intention is 0.88. R^2 for life satisfaction is 0.67, while R^2 for travel word-of-mouth giving intention is 0.65. Figure 1 shows the final structural equation model and its goodness-of-fit indices. Table 2 shows the unstandardized and standardized coefficients as well as the standard errors.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

[Insert Table 2 here]

Chi-Square/degrees-of-freedom (CMIN/DF), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), comparative fit index (CFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and Hoelter's critical N are chosen as suitable goodness-of-fit indicators to evaluate the estimated solution. Overall, the model goodness-of-fit indices show a reasonably good fit. CMIN/df = 2.53, GFI = 0.96, CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.06, and Hoelter = 226.

The result shows that life satisfaction fully mediates the relationship between leisure satisfaction and travel word-of-mouth giving intention. This implies that life satisfaction plays a crucial role in generating travel word-of-mouth. Businesses should not assume that a positive leisure experience will automatically lead to greater word-of-mouth. The overall

subjective well-being of the travelers themselves, who returned to their home country, remains an important component in facilitating greater travel word-of-mouth giving. Globally, current study infers that the level of subjective happiness may significantly moderate the level of leisure travel worldwide through the distribution of word-of-mouth. This would be an interesting area for further research. Readers must, however, be cautioned that current study focuses on a single region (i.e., Macau). Any generalization made beyond this region must take into account differences in demographics and culture of the travelers as well as the characteristics of the travel destination.

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Table 1: Sample Characteristics

<u>Question</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>%</u>
Primary purpose of your current trip	Leisure	77.8
	Business	22.2
Gender	Female	47.0
	Male	53.0
Age	20 years and under	6.7
	21 to 30	16.5
	31 to 40	27.5
	41 to 50	28.3
	51 to 60	18.0
	61 years and over	3.1
Highest educational level	Lower than primary school	1.0
	Primary school	6.0
	Secondary school	55.2
	University student	35.2
	Master or PhD	2.6
Marital status	Single	28.8
	Divorced	2.4
	Married	61.3
	Living with a partner	7.5
Occupation	Professional/Manager	23.6
	Trader/Small business proprietor	27.5
	Blue collar worker	16.4
	Public servant	5.6
	Office worker/Administrative worker	22.6
	Unemployed	4.3

Table 2: Unstandardized and Standardized Coefficients for Final Model

	Description			Unstandardized Estimate	Standardized Estimate	Standard Errors (S.E.)	<i>p</i>
Measurement Model	WOMGiving	→	q9	1	0.59		
	WOMGiving	→	q10	1.21	0.68	0.08	***
	WOMGiving	→	q8	0.92	0.63	0.12	***
	WOMGiving	→	q7	0.83	0.52	0.12	***
	LifeSat	→	q6	1	0.52		
	LifeSat	→	q5	1.15	0.61	0.12	***
	LifeSat	→	q4	1.87	0.80	0.20	***
	LeisureSat	→	q3	1	0.66		
	LeisureSat	→	q2	1.04	0.86	0.08	***
	LeisureSat	→	q1	0.97	0.82	0.07	***
Structural Model	LeisureSat	→	LifeSat.	0.40	0.82	0.05	***
	LifeSat	→	WOMGiving	1.33	0.88	0.32	***
	LeisureSat	→	WOMGiving	-0.07	-0.09	0.13	0.61 (n.s.)

Note: *** - $p < .001$; n.s. means ‘not significant’; N = 389
 CMIN = 72.32, df = 29, CMIN/df = 2.53, GFI = 0.96, AGFI = 0.93, CFI = 0.97,
 RMSEA = 0.06, Hoelter = 226

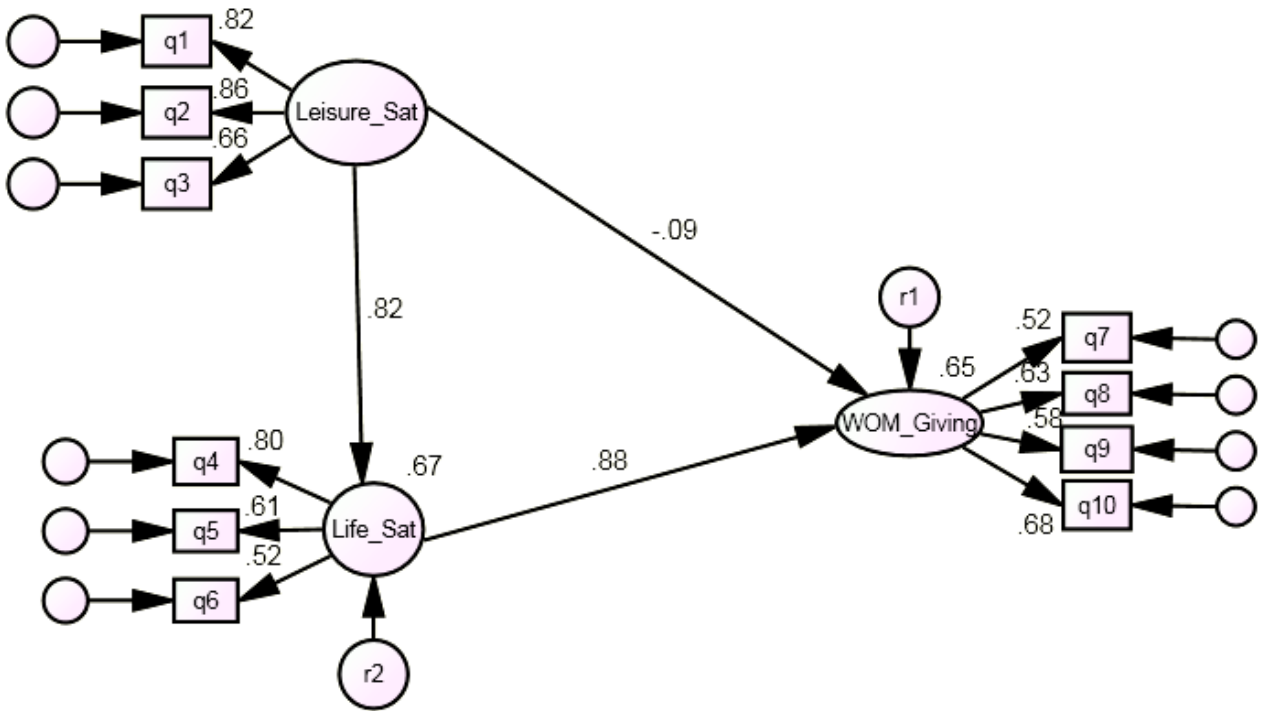


Figure 1: Structural Equation Model with Life Satisfaction as a Mediator