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# Re-thinking tourist wellbeing: An integrative model of affiliation with nature and social connections

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## Abstract

Research on positive psychological outcomes of tourism has experienced exponential growth. However, a critical dimension of tourist wellbeing, affiliation, remains underexplored and conceptually underdeveloped. This study draws on 26 in-depth interviews with international tourists to Fiji to explore the influence of affiliation with nature and social connectedness on tourist wellbeing. Findings demonstrate the integral role of travel companionship, tourist affiliation with nature and connection with local people as critical determinants of positive psychological outcomes. An integrative model across the domains of gaze, practice and reflection is developed to demonstrate how affiliation with nature and social connectedness influence tourist wellbeing. Future research should explore the multi-sensual character and the therapeutic potential of tourist social encounters and interactions with nature and subsequent implications for tourist wellbeing.

## KEYWORDS

affiliation, connectedness, nature, social, tourists, wellbeing

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The wellbeing of global populations has emerged as a significant public concern, with the United Nations (2015) advocating for actions aligned with Sustainable Development Goal #3 to ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing across all age groups. Within the multidisciplinary focus on wellbeing, scholars have established that the social and natural environment is critical for restorative experiences and wellbeing (Gill et al., 2019; Kaplan, 1995; Whiting et al., 2017). Social connectedness plays a pivotal role in health and longevity, increasing happiness and protecting against loneliness and depression (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017). Likewise, being present in nature creates a sense of peace and calm, which enables people to recover cognitive and

emotional effectiveness (Buckley, 2022; Buzinde, 2020; Gagliardi & Piccinini, 2019).

Studies emphasise that affiliation with the natural environment and social connectedness are intricately interconnected, combining to produce positive mental health outcomes, such as improved confidence, self-esteem (Roberts et al., 2020), reduced stress (Olafsdottir et al., 2020), and lower likelihood of using medication for depression (White et al., 2021). Indeed, recent empirical work demonstrates how the connection with the natural environment has counterbalanced the lack of social connectedness and improved associated mental health issues due to isolation during the COVID-19 outbreak (Fiorillo & Gorwood, 2020).

Tourism, especially nature-based tourism, has been recognised for its therapeutic contributions to mental health (Buckley, 2020).

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Emerging research highlights that tourism offers ample opportunities for individuals to connect with nature and forge significant social relationships (Vada et al., 2020). Exposure to natural environments during travel has been found to induce a sense of tranquillity and calmness, facilitating the restoration of cognition and emotion (Buzinde, 2020). Additionally, tourism enables the creation of intimate spaces with companions, quality time spent together, opportunities for personal disclosure, and the realisation of relational benefits (Matteucci et al., 2022). Forming enduring social connections during tourism activities can provide a protective buffer against symptoms such as loneliness and depression (Moyle & Weiler, 2017).

Despite the well-established link between experiences in nature, social connectedness in tourism, and mental health benefits of individuals, the specific mechanisms by which affiliation with nature and social connections influence tourists' wellbeing remain unexplored. Consequently, this paper seeks to explore how affiliation with nature and social connectedness contribute to tourists' psychological wellbeing. To achieve the aim, as articulated in Section 2.1 the DREAMA model of wellbeing, embedded in positive psychology, was selected to guide further empirical investigation.

## 2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 | Tourist wellbeing and positive psychology

The 1970s saw the commencement of scholarly interest in wellbeing, with the early conceptualisations dominated by sociology and economics, building on the social indicators' movement (Uysal et al., 2018). Economics and sociology strived to develop a macro-level conception of wellbeing however as the area evolved, the economic scales (e.g., GNP) and social measures (e.g., social structure and crime) could not be reconciled with indicators that capture subjective wellbeing (Antolini & Grassini, 2020). Consequently, positive psychology aims to provide a conceptual understanding of the individual level of subjective wellbeing (Chang et al., 2022) with a focus on the articulation of concepts related to hedonia and eudaimonia (Uysal et al., 2018). At the same time, the focus of tourism showed a trend towards non-economic indicators such as wellbeing, quality of life, wellness and satisfaction of life (Cho, 2010; Eslami et al., 2018).

In the conceptualization of wellbeing, positive psychologists have drawn from two ancient philosophical traditions, hedonia and eudaimonia (Lambert et al., 2015). The concept of hedonia originates from the ancient Greek word 'hedone', meaning pleasure, suggesting that the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain represent the highest good and the primary driving forces behind human actions (Alizadeh & Filep, 2023). Hedonia demonstrates the pleasure aspects of wellbeing, including fun, enjoyment, happiness, life satisfaction and the avoidance of negative emotions (Rahmani et al., 2018). Aristotle's notion of 'eudaimonia' is positioned as the ultimate aim of human existence, surpassing transient feelings of happiness and joy, and signifying a profound and enduring state of fulfilment and accomplishment (Alizadeh & Filep, 2023). Centred on the pursuit of deeper

meaning, eudaimonia encompasses concepts such as personal growth, purpose in life and self-actualization (Ryff & Singer, 2008).

In the tourism research field, there has been a predominant alignment of the conceptualisation of tourist wellbeing with hedonic elements (Sirgy, 2019). However, recent scholarship is recognising tourist wellbeing as multidimensional, encompassing both pleasure and meaningful aspects (Filep & Laing, 2018). Consequently, contemporary work has emphasised the crucial necessity of adopting comprehensive frameworks that incorporate both hedonic and eudaimonic aspects of tourist wellbeing (Laing & Frost, 2017; Nawijn, 2016). Accordingly, researchers have advocated for the utilisation of hybrid models such as PERMA as a comprehensive framework to understand wellbeing in the context of tourism, due to its considerable strength in exploring numerous psychological benefits stemming from tourism experiences (Butler & Kern, 2016; Filep, 2016; Filep & Laing, 2018).

The PERMA model of wellbeing, embedded in positive psychology, combines both hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives (Huang et al., 2019) illustrating five building blocks of wellbeing: Positive Emotions (P), which encompass feelings of joy, interest, and contentment; Engagement (E), referring to a deep sense of immersion and heightened awareness in activities; Relationships (R), focusing on the quality and extent of social connections; Meaning (M), which is about finding a sense of purpose in life; and Achievement (A), representing a sense of accomplishment and success (Seligman, 2011). Similarly, Newman et al. (2014) proposed a DRAMMA model with five core psychological mechanisms that promote wellbeing: Detachment-Recovery (DR), indicating a break from work and daily stress; Autonomy (A), reflecting voluntary engagement in activities; Mastery (M), focusing on skill development and achievement; Meaning (M), related to finding purpose; and Affiliation (A), highlighting the importance of social connections. While both models have been utilised within a tourism context, they have faced criticism for providing a constrained view of the potential dimensions underlying tourist wellbeing (Nawijn & Filep, 2016), such as connection with nature (Filep et al., 2024).

In response, Filep et al. (2024) proposed a conceptual model of tourist wellbeing, termed DREAMA (Figure 1), which merged the

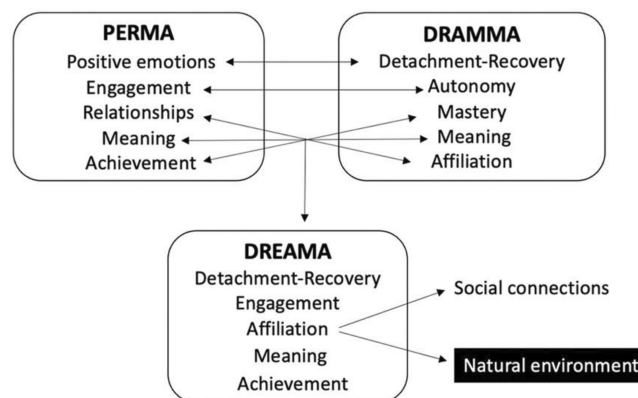


FIGURE 1 DREAMA model of wellbeing (Filep et al., 2024).

overlapping dimensions embedded within PERMA and DRAMMA, underpinned by the five building blocks of Detachment-Recovery (DR), Engagement (E), Affiliation (A), Meaning (M) and Achievement (A). The newly introduced affiliation dimension encompasses not only social connections but also tourists' relationships with natural environments, thereby broadening the conceptualization of tourist wellbeing beyond solely human-to-human interactions (Filep et al., 2024). However, despite initial conceptualisations, existing research on the affiliation dimension with nature and social connections has yet to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship types and the mechanisms through which they influence wellbeing. Achieving this requires targeted empirical inquiry (Vada et al., 2022).

## 2.2 | Connection with nature and social connectedness in tourism

Affiliation with nature is widely recognised as a crucial factor in shaping memorable tourist experiences and fostering individual transformation towards increased environmental awareness (Cornelisse, 2018). Multifaceted human-nature relationships are articulated from affective, cognitive and physical dimensions, with the basic hypothesis that spending time in nature fosters a sense of connection, leading individuals to become more concerned about and committed to protecting the natural environment (Beery & Wolf-Watz, 2014). Salubrious outcomes of affiliation with nature are garnering increasing attention (Hardiman & Burgin, 2017). Particularly, studies reveal that visual aesthetics inspired by green spaces, such as forests, grass, parks with vegetation, and blue spaces, such as lakes, rivers, and coastal regions are natural destinations associated with positive health outcomes (Gascon et al., 2015). Due to the increased opportunities for exposure to green and blue spaces in tourism, academic discourse on therapeutic tourism is growing, with studies revealing the restorative effect of nature engagement, including increased positive affect, reduced mental fatigue, stress relief, and perceived attention recovery (Buckley, 2020).

Nature-based tourism studies have also documented various aspects of mental clarity benefits, including enhanced perception of thought or outlook of life, improved sense of purpose and meaning in life, and shifts in worldview (Clissold et al., 2022). Consequently, connection with nature during tourism has been associated with improved functioning of individuals and a range of mental health outcomes for tourists (Buckley et al., 2019), with recent studies examining the implications for depression (Helbich et al., 2019), hypertension (Ohe et al., 2017), dementia (Wen et al., 2022) and anxiety (Maund et al., 2019). However, despite experiences in nature intricately connected with mental health benefits, affiliation with nature has not been conceptualised as an explicit component of tourists' psychological wellbeing.

Social belonging is identified as a fundamental human pursuit (Lee, Lee, et al., 2024). Recognised as a cornerstone of human existence, the need for social belonging is crucial for imbuing one's life with meaning (Gössling et al., 2018). Social connectedness refers to

the sense of closeness an individual feels with others in a social setting, and generates a sense of social belonging (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017). This connectedness spans a range of relationships, from intimate ties with family and friends to broader associations with communities (Gössling et al., 2018). Tourism provides a social environment where social connectedness with others has become a crucial part of tourists' overall experiences (Vada et al., 2022).

Tourism plays a crucial role in fostering social connectedness, particularly by enhancing the bonds between family members and strengthening connections among friends through travel companionship (Matteucci et al., 2022). Studies postulate social relationships create meaningful travel experiences through the potential to foster an authentic and emotional connection among tourists (Filep et al., 2017). Vada et al. (2022) demonstrate that travel companionship significantly influences both the creation of memorable tourism experiences and the likelihood of revisiting a destination. Social relationships between tourists and host communities have also been assessed at the collective level, with studies tending to draw on established approaches such as social exchange theory to assess residents' perceptions of the economic, environmental and socio-cultural impacts of tourism and consequent support for associated development (Moyle et al., 2010; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012). However, despite the increased recognition of the fundamental importance of social connectedness in tourism, subsequent implications for the wellbeing of tourists are yet to be explored in sufficient depth.

Consequently, drawing on DREAMA model of wellbeing, this paper specifically examines the affiliation (A) dimension, seeking to address the lack of insights into the content of the affiliation element in tourism and the mechanism through which it affects tourists' wellbeing. Synthesising data from empirical work on international visitors to Fiji, this research proposes a conceptual model detailing the dimensions and underlying mechanisms by which affiliation with nature and social connectedness contribute to tourist psychological wellbeing.

## 3 | METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 | Research context

Fiji was selected as the research context due to its potential to provide a variety of opportunities for tourists' connection with nature and social connectedness. The country has a high level of tourist arrivals, with the tourism system derived from pristine natural environments and cultural diversity (Mafi et al., 2020). Specifically, in the Pacific region, Fiji is home to the largest area of coral reefs, and the third greatest area under mangrove forest (Mangubhai et al., 2020), which nourish a wide variety of organisms and create a high nature-based tourism value destination (Singh et al., 2021). According to Fiji Bureau of Statistics (2019), the tourism sector contributed 34% of Fiji's GDP and directly employed about 150,000 workforces. It leads to a higher chance of tourists' interaction with local people. A sample of tourists to Fiji is therefore suitable for this study.

### 3.2 | Data collection

Given the qualitative nature of this study, an interpretive paradigm through an in-depth interview approach was selected to explore how tourists' interaction with nature and social connectedness contributes to their psychological wellbeing. Drawing on conceptually related studies, convenience sampling was selected to assemble informants (Hwang & Lee, 2019). Following an approach by Amon et al. (2014), participants were recruited through Facebook travel groups and the assistance from a popular island resort in Fiji. Interviews were designed to explore how affiliation with the natural environment and social connectedness influenced the wellbeing of visitors to Fiji. Interview questions were adapted from Ryff's (1989) psychological wellbeing scale and modified drawing on the recently conceptualised DREAMA model (Filep et al., 2024).

In accordance with the research aim, participants were initially prompted to share a story while describing the psychological state experienced as a consequence of their travel experiences in Fiji. Following an approach by Roberts (2020), a series of questions and probing statements were developed with the intention to elicit insights on psychological wellbeing, including though not limited to: 'how would you feel about the natural environment in Fiji?'; 'drawing on specific examples, please describe your connection with the Fijian people'; and 'can you please share a memorable experience with others around you whilst in Fiji?'. In cases where participants' initial responses lacked necessary detail ('who', 'what', 'where', 'when', and 'how'), the researcher employed a follow-up approach by asking about influential individuals during the trip, which afforded participants with an opportunity to articulate the sequence of social encounters, providing in-depth reflections on psychological responses (Roberts, 2020), as exemplified by these questions: 'do you feel that your relationships with the Fijian people make you happy? Why/why not?' and 'do you enjoy yourself when others around you are engaged in the same activities? Why/why not?'.

Interviews were conducted online in English via Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and Facebook Messenger with the interviews lasting about 40–60 min on average. Data collection ceased at the point of saturation, with no new evidence emerging from participants (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Hennink et al., 2019). The interviews were completed between June and July 2022. The final sample comprised 26 visitors of different genders aged between 30 and 79 years old, all of whom stayed in Fiji for a duration of 7 to 14 days and were from Fiji's major market countries (refer to Appendix A).

### 3.3 | Data analysis

Prior to data analysis, an audit trail was developed to cross-check for accuracy by emailing the interview transcripts to randomly selected research participants to ensure the trustworthiness of the data (Schwandt, 2001). Drawing on the approach by Corbin and Strauss (2008), an open, axial and selective coding process was selected to construct a deeper theoretical framework. Open coding was

conducted through a line-by-line reading of interview transcripts and coding of key ideas, expressing data and phenomena in the form of concepts, while ensuring the codes were close to the real content (Williams & Moser, 2019). Fifty-one codes were generated over the open coding process. Axial coding was subsequently utilised to single out emerging affiliation themes and identify connections between open codes, with the purpose of developing core codes (Strauss, 1998). Selective coding generated a higher level of abstraction which ultimately led to the formulation and elaboration of how affiliation with nature and social connectedness contributes to tourist wellbeing (Flick, 2009, p. 310).

To ensure the credibility of our proposed model, a panel of experts consisting of three researchers (who are part of the authorship team) participated in the coding process. The researchers' positionalities should be mentioned since their prior experiences have an impact on how this study was framed (Farkić et al., 2020). The first researcher undertook the doctoral study into the conceptualisation of tourists' wellbeing on which this paper is based. The second researcher is a Fijian academic with both tourism wellbeing research and industry experience in the Pacific. The third researcher has experience in leading government-funded research projects on wellbeing of tourism stakeholders in the Asia-Pacific region. The first researcher worked on open and axial coding independently whilst the second researcher reviewed the coding results (Dillette et al., 2019). If disagreement occurred, the first two researchers negotiated with each other and occasionally needed to seek the third researcher's assessment for a consensus (Huang et al., 2019). At the third stage of aggregating theoretical models, we synthesised the theory and the themes into a coherent framework (Anicich, 2022) by consulting the studies on embodied cognition, pro-environmental behaviour and positive psychology. To preserve the privacy and anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms were applied.

## 4 | RESULTS

Emergent findings demonstrate that the affiliation dimension of tourist wellbeing is comprised of travel companionship, interaction with local people, and connection with nature. Selective coding resulted in the high-level abstraction of the three core themes of gaze, practice and reflection, which capture how affiliation with nature and social connectedness influence tourists' wellbeing. 'Gaze' refers to how tourists view people and destinations they visit, revealing that tourists travel to escape daily life and gain visual signs to fulfil their expectations of place, people, and travel. 'Practice' is an expressive, inter-subjective and poetic tourist encounter that is mediated through the way the body is engaged actively in the leisure space, which includes more explicitly moments of action. 'Reflection' involved the assessment after the trip and is related to short and long-term environmental or cultural learning outcomes, which ultimately lead to personal transformation. The ensuing discussion draws on the three core themes of gaze, practice, and reflection to develop the affiliation-mechanism model.

## 4.1 | Gaze

The theme of 'Gaze' was articulated in terms of connection with nature and people during travel, which leads to multiple hedonic outcomes such as euphoria, novelty and relaxation. Findings reveal that gaze is omnipresent, with travel providing tourists with the opportunities to 'be all together with family' (T1) or other companions and 'engage in the same activities' (T8). As participant T1 recounts, 'there are lots of opportunities for spending time together. Family time and making their holidays fun and enjoyable is what our holidays are all about' (T1). Therefore, even though respondents did not experience the euphoria of a certain activity themselves, having the opportunity to perceive their companions' sensations is also important. For example, 'our grandchildren are seeing Fiji through their own eyes. When they see something different, they say, "oh look at this"! It makes you happy that they are also enjoying this' (T2). The sense of 'happiness' (T2) is hence circulated among travel companions, which means gazing at companions experiencing positive emotions during travel results in hedonic feelings.

Emergent findings revealed that travel creates a space for tourists to passively participate as the audience, appreciating natural beauty, which evoked a sense of 'peace' (T16) and 'relaxation' (T13). The critical importance of aesthetic experiences arises from a deep observation of the natural environment, for example, 'when I'm on a boat and the sun is reflecting on the water, it's beautiful' (T6). The natural aesthetic experience evokes feelings of 'being in the moment' (T8) because 'the relaxed atmosphere slows everything down and makes you enjoy the moment' (T8). Gazing at the natural beauty is hence connected to the hedonic aspect of wellbeing such as relaxation.

Additionally, tourists enrich their knowledge about different cultures, traditions, and lives in destinations by observing how local people 'cook on an open fire', how they 'weave a basket', how they 'speak a different language' (T4), and how they 'make root vegetables into medicine' (T7), through which values are embodied. The authentic experiences derived from 'getting a little glimpse of everyday life in Fiji' (T14), because 'that is the real Fiji' and also 'the best part of tourism experience' (T14). 'These activities further my knowledge' and consequently 'add to your wellbeing' (T6).

## 4.2 | Practice

The theme of 'Practice' emerged with the physical body and multiple senses engaged in the interaction with companions and local people, as well as affiliation with nature. For instance, the strong longing for detachment from daily life is frequently articulated by tourists because 'we are a very busy family' (T8) and 'our job is stressful' (T11), hence 'having downtime with the family is really important' (T8). Travel creates a space where tourists can temporarily escape from daily life, fostering more physical and linguistic interaction with

family and friends. For example, it allows the 'busy couple' to 'enjoy each other in the sunshine and feed the fish then call each other over to look at them...it's very much about the downtime and having fun with family' (T8), and also allows another 'stressful couple' to 'forget about home life and renew our vows' (T11). From this, 'practice' with travel companions enhances a sense of intimacy, a feeling of restoration and strengthens their bonding, which is 'important to our health and wellbeing' (T9).

Encounters with nature elicit a consciousness combined with the stimulation of the sensuous body in a way that individuals get to feel their senses more acutely. Informants articulate their multiple senses as a bridge for the authentic experience. For example, 'from the minute you step off that plane, you've got that humidity, that smell... It's tropical' (T15). In addition to this olfactory sense, other sensory awareness such as sight, touch and taste were activated when 'we went swimming in the river, horseback riding to a waterfall' (T5), and tried the local herb leaves which 'looks horrible, and tastes horrible as well, but only in Fiji I can get this stuff' (T7). And 'because it's a little bit different, we are happy to do that' (T7). It is the sensory experience when connecting with the natural environment that points to a sense of presence and in 'what to me a true Fiji experience' (T5), the authentic experience that leads to momentary happiness.

A sense of belonging was undoubtedly reinforced by tourists' interaction with local people, because 'when you feel like you are amongst friends the whole time, it just makes the holiday so special and enjoyable' (T8). The friendliness of local people also stimulates tourists' feeling of 'safe' (T11): 'I feel safe cause everybody is friendly' (T11); 'relaxation' (T7): 'I feel my whole body relax like I'm coming to a place where is no more stress, and everyone is so friendly. They are so nice like they want to kiss everybody' (T7); 'calm' (T12): 'the slow-paced, very friendly, happy people just calm me down and I was really happy with that' (T12); and 'welcome' (T8): 'I think it's just their friendliness and how well they welcome us is amazing' (T8). The positive emotional connection encourages deeper interaction and 'regular contact' (T9) with local people after travel. Life-long friendships were also established as 'I keep regular contact with these people, and I've actually got a good girlfriend that named her child after me' (T9). There are also regular conversations as 'I still speak to him every now and again on Facebook. Hopefully he is still there when I go back to Fiji' (T8). It facilitates the formation of new friendships, broadens their social network and confers deeper meanings to the trip: 'it's the connection with the people that transforms a holiday from being just a destination to being something so much more' (T5), which lead to the eudaimonism aspect of wellbeing.

## 4.3 | Reflection

'Reflection' is derived from tourists' active thinking towards human, nature and place, which point to a series of long-term eudaimonic themes associated with wellbeing, such as self-growth, self-discovery



and transformation. Co-creating memories between tourists and their companions is a vital theme during travel. For instance, when 'I taught my son how to snorkel', the shared memories are created. 'When I said to all who taught you snorkelling, they mentioned our life events or memories that we have about Fiji. The youngest one remembers the mud bath like we chasing him with mud and putting mud on him. That's really memorable' (T1). Shared memory is the source of momentous life events and nostalgia, which has the potential to generate increase self-regard and bolster a sense of social connectedness. As articulated by participant T8, 'it's something that my kids will always remember when Michael made us lunch from the sea. He didn't have to come out and do that for us, but he did. And it's a memory we would never, ever forget, and makes us feel really special' (T8). As the memorable picture 'doesn't stop at the end of the holiday, the memories do affect your wellbeing overall' (T1).

Reflection also derives from interaction with nature. For example, when people see 'villages that have been relocated due to climate change' (T6), they discern that 'the climate change is 100% happening' (T6), and it generates their 'respect for the environment' (T6). The emotion of awe is hence inspired and then their attention is less focused on the self, but rather on the power of nature. There was also the awareness that 'there is more damage than people realize. There is a massive problem with overfishing and damage to the mangroves' (T17), and 'people get affected more by flooding due to the environment being mucked around' (T6). It evokes their environmentally responsible consciousness, such as the awareness to reduce 'single-use bottles' and not 'waste food' (T6). The sense of awe hence subordinates personal concerns towards more collective dimensions of personal identity, which constitutes a dimension of eudaimonic wellbeing.

Immersion in the local community and socialisation with local people generate learning opportunities for tourists to know different cultures and virtues, which leads to self-reflection and potentially causes personal transformation. For instance, after a natural disaster, the informants still see 'a smile on their faces' and they 'live in the moment and everything that they had' (T5). It induces the participants' reflection on their own life attitudes through 'seeing the attitude of the Fijians. They did not get a lot but they are really happy. It shows you how other people live and now you should be grateful' (T12). Some participants felt 're-strengthened' (T14) through visiting Fiji: 'I've seen the good, the bad, the ugly and the extreme poverty in Fiji, but they are really happy and satisfied and they feel rich if their children are well taken care of because their family is a strong unit. I came away feeling refreshed and rejuvenated. I've come away with some sort of lesson that has improved my life' (T14). The 'lessons' (T9) they learned from the local people include 'it reminds us of what is important and what isn't important' (T14); 'it taught me you need to be selfless, and what it means to be a good person' (T5); and 'you got to learn acceptance and deal with people' (T3). With these changes in mind, 'I'd go home feeling so much happier, content and replenished' (T5). The reflective and transformative experiences ultimately contribute to a eudaimonism level of wellbeing.

## 5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

### 5.1 | Discussion

Through the iterative analysis of data, the present empirical study identified three dimensions of affiliation described by respondents to have a profound impact on their overall sense of wellbeing, including travel companionship, tourist-nature relationship and connectedness with local people. As a fundamental and intrinsic human desire (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), the positive psychological outcomes associated with social relationships have been extensively discussed in the tourism literature, mainly concerning host-guest relationships and companionship (Bimonte & Punzo, 2016; Su et al., 2020; Vada et al., 2020). Tourism scholars have also reported the wealth of opportunities for human contact with nature and resulting mental and physical benefits, predominantly in the context of parks and protected area research (Buckley et al., 2019; de Freitas Coelho et al., 2018). However, social relationships and affiliation with nature have not been systematically integrated into a framework, which adds much-needed depth to a critical underexplored dimension of tourist wellbeing. The results of this qualitative study revealed gaze, practice and reflection as the critical underlying mechanisms with the propensity to explain how travel companionship, tourist-nature relationships and connectedness with local people contribute to tourist wellbeing.

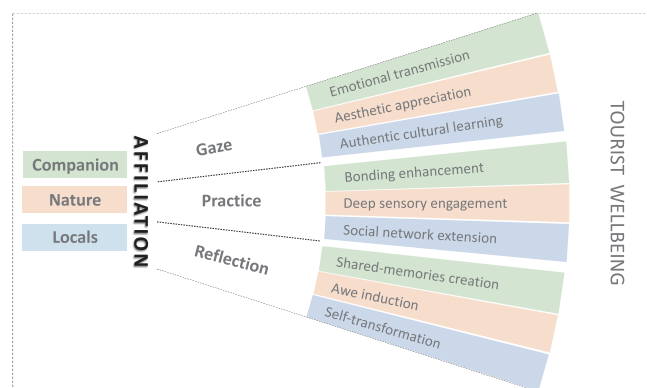
Prior studies have highlighted how companionship enhances tourists' perceived benefits from travel (Su et al., 2020), including facilitating memorable experiences, strengthening friendships and inspiring intentions to revisit (Choo & Petrick, 2015; Gracia & Urbistondo, 2020; Vada et al., 2022). This research extends the understanding of the tourist gaze (Urry & Larsen, 2011) by including travel companions as objects of the gaze, revealing a dynamic process in which positive emotions are transmitted between travel companions through shared interactions. Emergent findings respond to postulations evident in prior research which predominantly focus on tourists' interactions with providers and hosts, thereby neglecting travel companions (Li et al., 2023). Analysis revealed interactions with travel companions have demonstrated capacity to enhance bonds between family members, partners and friends. This facilitates the creation of shared memories, potentially leading to a sense of social connectedness after a critical reflection, which constitutes the social dimension of wellbeing (Jepson et al., 2019).

Although the interrelationships between nature, tourism and mental health are reported in tourism discourse (Vada et al., 2020), the relationships are not all straightforward and need to be further clarified (Buckley, 2020). Furthermore, the findings of this study point to the intrinsic character of the tourist-nature connections and delineate new pathways to tourist wellbeing, including aesthetic appreciation (gaze), deep sensory engagement (practice) and awe induction (reflection). This finding lends support to the belief in the conceptually related fields of leisure studies and sustainable tourism, which highlight that active engagement with the environment can foster a

heightened appreciation of nature (Hanna et al., 2019), which in turn generates hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing outcomes, such as relaxation, a sense of presence and a collectivist level of self-identify. This research moves beyond initial conceptualisations in the tourism field, elucidating the mechanisms through which tourists establish a profound connection with nature, resulting in a range of wellbeing benefits.

Tourism involves a significant interaction between locals and tourists (Bimonte & Punzo, 2016); however, this interaction has predominantly been examined across the topics of social interaction, economic exchange, and community sustainability (Khanom et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2017). There are limited studies exploring the positive psychological outcomes of the interactions between locals and tourists on the tourists themselves (Giampiccoli et al., 2022; Nawijn & Mitas, 2012; Ozanne & Prayag, 2022). This study reveals that tourist gaze on the inhabitants' lifestyle promotes opportunities for authentic cultural learning and subsequently further interaction with locals in a genuine way sparks the establishment of meaningful life-long friendships. Self-transformation may result through reflection on the various values and lifestyles of the local residents. The finding is aligned with the argument that the development of relationships contributes to psychological wellbeing (Keyes et al., 2002). It also extends the understanding of deep immersion in local culture beyond cultural shock decrease (Nyaupane et al., 2008) toward self-reflection outcomes, such as value transformation and resilience to adversity, which constitutes the vital theme of eudaimonic wellbeing.

By integrating the emergent findings with discussions in conceptually related studies, this research introduces the affiliation-mechanism model of tourist wellbeing, as depicted in Figure 2. This model outlines three types of relationships that tourists develop with companions, nature and locals, and the underlying mechanisms that enhance wellbeing. As illustrated in Figure 2, on the left are the three dimensions of tourist affiliation, i.e., Companions (labelled as green), Nature (labelled as orange) and Locals (labelled as blue), which generate effects on tourist wellbeing through the pathway of (1) Gaze, (2) Practice and (3) Reflection.



**FIGURE 2** Affiliation-mechanism model of tourist wellbeing.

## 5.2 | Theoretical contribution

The affiliation-mechanism model advances the conceptual understanding of travel companionship beyond the catalyst toward the carrier of tourist wellbeing. This extends prior psychological studies on psychological interconnections of happiness, demonstrating how in tourism, happiness can be transmitted from person to person through meaningful interactions with travel companions (Fukushima et al., 2021). The present study also contributes to integrating the natural aesthetic element into the conceptualisation of tourist wellbeing. The human desire to interact with plants and animals for wellbeing is extensively discussed in the literature on gardening (Gross & Lane, 2007), companion animals (Walsh, 2009), and natural therapy (Annerstedt & Währborg, 2011), however has been appraised in tourism studies from seemingly narrow perspectives, such as the experience of sightseeing in nature (Zhang et al., 2014). This study complements the research in this field by emphasising the role of the body and multi-senses (e.g., smell, watch, listen, taste, touch) of tourists in experiencing wellbeing, thus responding to the criticism on the notion of the tourist gaze for simplifying travel to visual experience (Larsen & Urry, 2011).

This study advances the conceptualisation of the DREAMA model (Filep et al., 2024) by deconstructing the affiliation dimension of wellbeing into three interrelated levels with empirical evidence demonstrating that the relationship with travel companions, connection to nature and engagement with local people are critical for tourists' wellbeing. The finding also responds to the critique on the absence of tourist-nature relationships in conceptualising tourist wellbeing identified in previous conceptual research (Filep et al., 2024). Furthermore, this study deepens our understanding of tourist wellbeing by providing evidence that tourist-nature connection potentially stimulates tourists' awe toward nature, which has the potential to generate environmentally responsible behaviours (Wang & Lyu, 2019). This finding is instructive especially against the backdrop of unprecedented climate warming and its irreversible effects (Masson-Delmotte et al., 2021). The sense of altruism and collectivism generated from awe not only contributes to individual wellbeing but also to the sustainability of the environment.

## 5.3 | Managerial implications

The present research underscores the practical significance of fostering tourist-nature relationships to alleviate the risk of decreased wellbeing caused by social isolation due to factors such as pandemic-related quarantine measures, heightened digital engagement among young adults, and retirement transitions experienced by the ageing populations (Chang et al., 2022; Gong et al., 2023; Li et al., 2024). Consequently, tourism operators are encouraged to create packages that integrate connection with the local community and nature experiences. Activities might include traditional fishing, indigenous storytelling, or culinary tours featuring foraged ingredients. This integration can potentially deepen the meaning derived from tourism experiences,

and enhance tourists' connection with both the natural environment and the local community, thereby enhancing their psychological wellbeing.

Tourism destinations are recommended to incorporate strategies to foster tourists' affiliation with companions into the design of tourism offerings. Incorporating accessible facilities in destination planning is critical, particularly to accommodate families with children and elderly tourists, ensuring the safety of collective tourism participation and the quality of companionship. By implementing measures to enhance tourist wellbeing, destination loyalty and revisit intentions can be augmented (Vada et al., 2022). This underscores the reciprocal relationship between tourist wellbeing and destination sustainability, wherein investments in enhancing tourists' affiliation with nature, companions and the local community yield long-term benefits for tourism stakeholders.

## 5.4 | Limitation and future research

This research is limited by participants which predominantly consisted of Western international tourists visiting Fiji. Although the profile was consistent with the target market and actual visitors to Fiji across a broad spectrum of age groups and different genders, future work may benefit from a critical examination of travellers from diverse demographic and cultural backgrounds. Accordingly, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the intricate relationships between the demographic profiles of tourists and the wellbeing benefits they derive from travel, future research needs to investigate the influence of nuanced demographic factors, such as race, ability, and cultural background on wellbeing. By incorporating an extensive array of demographic variables, researchers can develop a multifaceted picture of how various aspects of individuals' identities intersect with their travel experiences and subsequent wellbeing outcomes. Furthermore, this study focused on the wellbeing of tourists visiting Fiji, which is a developing island destination in the Pacific. Given Fiji's heavy dependence on the tourism industry, residents often confront challenges catering to international tourists seeking an authentic Fijian experience. Residents run the risk of feeling alienated, stereotyped, or objectified through being to object of the tourists' gaze (Phillips et al., 2021). Consequently, there is a need for additional research to delve into the wellbeing of residents in destinations heavily reliant on tourism such as Fiji. Such research can further unfold the nuanced and intricate dynamics that shape the interactions between residents and tourists and the subsequent psychological wellbeing outcomes.

To enhance the capacity of further investigations to analyse with a critical lens, future studies should expand to other settings affected by tourism development, which could provide valuable insights into the effective application of the proposed model. The adoption of longitudinal methods—pre-post travel interviews—holds promise for uncovering the longer-term wellbeing outcomes of travel affiliation. As the tourism industry continues to evolve with the integration of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics

(Samala et al., 2022), research on the positive psychological outcomes of natural and social connectedness can advance to include virtual tourism experiences (Lee, Filep, et al., 2022), particularly for disadvantaged or vulnerable populations who may not always be able to travel easily. This study further contributes to a burgeoning research agenda that perceives tourism as a therapeutic instrument (Wen et al., 2022), recognising the potential of interpersonal and nature-human interactions to enhance psychological health. Correspondingly, future studies should consider how travel improves the symptoms of mental disorders, such as depression, anxiety, and dementia, which can potentially reduce the social and economic costs caused by poor mental health. The result will potentially contribute to the achievement of sustainable development goals (SDGs), specifically SDG3 to improve the health and wellbeing of the global population (United Nations, 2015).

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Research data are not shared.

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## APPENDIX A: PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

Interview code	Gender	Age	Marital status	Country of residence	Length of stay in Fiji
T1	Male	35	Married	Australia	8–14 days
T2	Female	49	Married	New Zealand	8–14 days
T3	Male	49	Married	New Zealand	8–14 days
T4	Female	73	Married	New Zealand	8–14 days
T5	Male	71	Married	Australia	8–14 days
T6	Male	50	Married	Australia	8–14 days
T7	Male	58	Married	Australia	8–14 days
T8	Female	50	Married	Australia	8–14 days
T9	Female	45	Married	Australia	8–14 days
T10	Female	48	Married	Australia	8–14 days
T11	Female	46	Married	Australia	8–14 days
T12	Female	23	Married	Australia	8–14 days
T13	Male	70	Married	Australia	8–14 days
T14	Female	46	Divorced	Australia	8–14 days
T15	Male	79	Married	Australia	8–14 days
T16	Female		Married	Australia	8–14 days
T17	Female	30	Married	Australia	8–14 days
T18	Male	44	Married	Australia/Fiji	8–14 days
T19	Female	48	Married	Australia	8–14 days
T20	Female	57	Married	Australia	8–14 days
T21	Female		Single	United Kingdom	14–21 days
T22	Female		Married	Australia	8–14 days
T23	Female	55	Married	Australia	8–14 days
T24	Female	52	Married	Australia	8–14 days
T25	Female	68	Married	Australia	8–14 days
T26	Female	63	Married	Australia	8–14 days