

# The serious leisure perspective and tourism science

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**Abstract:** The serious leisure perspective (SLP) has been guiding theory and research in the tourism sciences for 30 years. Although an increasing number of studies have been published since its inception, no one has painted a detailed picture of how these two areas of study are conceptually linked. The SLP synthesizes three main forms of leisure, known as serious leisure (later changed to serious pursuits to include devotee work), casual leisure, and project-based leisure. As this article shows these links are many and varied and thus richly suggestive of fruitful areas for research. The SLP is the only theoretic framework in leisure studies that strives to conceptualize the entire field, using as its anchor in this instance, the set of concepts that emerged from grounded theory research. Tourism studies is regarded in the SLP as a separate applied interdiscipline to which the latter has been extended on multiple occasions.

**Keyword:** serious leisure perspective, cultural tourism, identity, casual leisure, flow, volunteer tourism

## 1. The Serious Leisure Perspective and Tourism Science

The serious leisure perspective (SLP) has been guiding theory and research in the tourism sciences for 30 years, starting with Hall and Weiler (1992) who wrote on special interest tourism and serious leisure. Despite the growing number of studies since its inception, no one has painted a detailed picture of how these two areas of study are conceptually linked. As this article shows these links are many and varied and thus richly suggestive of fruitful areas for research.

## 2. Introduction

The SLP is the only theoretic framework in leisure studies that strives to conceptualize the entire field, using as its anchor in this instance, the set of concepts that emerged from grounded theory research. The SLP synthesizes three main forms of leisure, known as serious leisure (later changed to serious pursuits to include devotee work), casual leisure, and project-based leisure. Many of the roots of the SLP date to late 1973, even though the concept itself was only formally introduced and elaborated much later by Stebbins (2007; 2015). It takes its name from serious leisure, mainly because that form was the first to be studied. Research began in 1973 on the amateurs (it examined those in classical music and was reported in, among others, Stebbins, 1976). Work continued from thereon, with more studies on other kinds of amateurs, then various hobbyists, career volunteers, casual leisure participants, and people engaged in project-based leisure. Within each form numerous types and subtypes have also emerged over the years (see figure 1).

Leisure in the SLP refers to un-coerced activity. An activity is a type of pursuit, wherein participants in it mentally or physically (often both) think or do something, motivated by the hope of achieving a desired end (Stebbins, 2020, pp. 16-19). It is a basic life concept both in leisure and beyond it. Our existence is filled with activities, both pleasant and unpleasant. Moreover, an activity is the means for having a certain leisure experience – thus when we speak of a leisure activity, we also speak of its leisure experience, whether satisfying, fulfilling, or sometimes, both.

Serious leisure is a central concept in the SLP. It refers to the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist or volunteer core activity that is highly substantial, interesting and fulfilling, and where, in the typical case, participants find a career in acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience (Stebbins, 2020, p. 20). The adjective “serious” – considered as a key behavioral tendency associated with the changes experienced by advanced industrial societies

**Citation:** Stebbins, R. A. (2021)  
The Serious leisure perspective  
and tourism science. *International  
Journal of Tourism Sciences*, 20(1),  
1-7

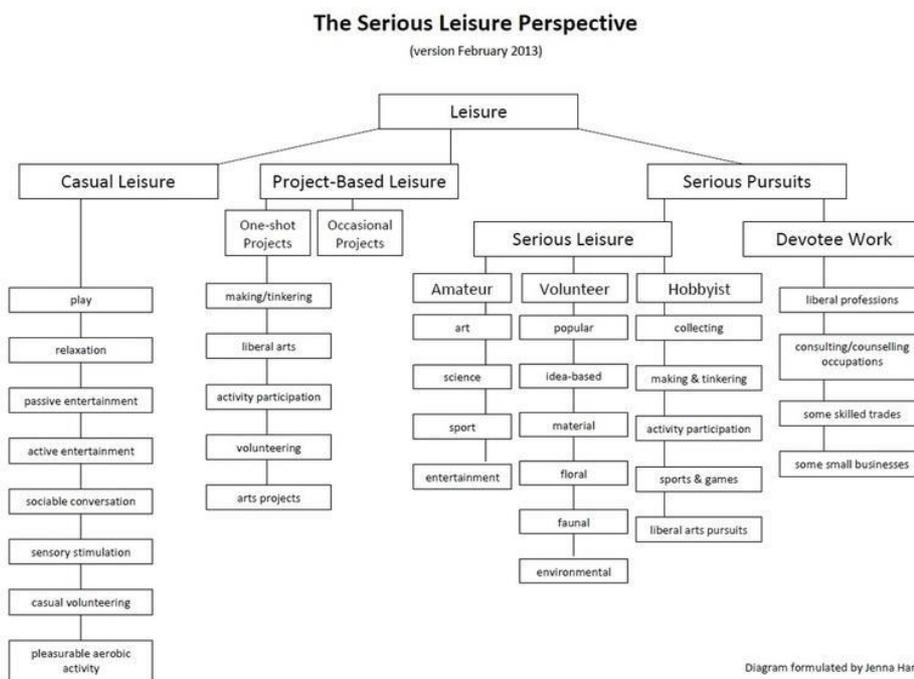
### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 12 November 2021

Accepted 25 January 2022

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(Codina, 1999) – refers to qualities such as earnestness, sincerity, importance, and carefulness. In other words, “serious” stresses important rewards (i.e., special skills, knowledge, and experience), which differ from those traditionally studied with respect to physical activity but which are precisely those that encourage time dedication, commitment, continuity and regular practice. Additionally, the SLP also includes other benefits of leisure, labelled as personal and social rewards.



**Figure 1.** The serious leisure perspective

## 2. The Serious Pursuits

*Amateurs* are found in art, science, sport, and entertainment, where they are invariably linked in a variety of ways with professional counterparts. The two can be distinguished descriptively in that the activity in question constitutes a livelihood for professionals but not for amateurs. Furthermore, most professionals work full-time at the activity whereas all amateurs pursue it part-time, except for some of those who are retired, unemployed, or employed part-time.

*Hobbyists* lack this professional alter ego, suggesting that, historically, all amateurs were hobbyists before their fields professionalized. Both types are drawn to their leisure pursuits significantly more by self-interest than by altruism, whereas volunteers engage in activities requiring an approximately equal blend of these two motives. Hobbyists may be classified in five types: collectors, makers and tinkerers, non-competitive activity participants (e.g., fishing, hiking, orienteering), hobbyist sports and games (e.g., ultimate Frisbee, croquet, gin rummy), and the liberal arts hobbies. The liberal arts hobbyists are enamored of the systematic acquisition of knowledge for its own sake. Many of them accomplish this by reading voraciously in a field of art, sport, cuisine, language, culture, history, science, philosophy, politics, or literature (Stebbins, 1994). But some of them go beyond this to expand their knowledge still further through cultural tourism, documentary videos, television programs, and similar resources.

*Volunteering* is un-coerced, intentionally productive, altruistic activity engaged in during free time. Engaged in as leisure, it is, thus, activity that people want to do (Stebbins, 2015a). It is through volunteer work -- it is done in either an informal or a formal setting -- that these people provide a

service or benefit to one or more individuals (who must be outside that person's family). Usually volunteers receive no pay, though people serving in volunteer programs are sometimes compensated for out-of-pocket expenses. Meanwhile, in the typical case, volunteers who are altruistically providing a service or benefit to others are themselves also benefiting from various rewards experienced during this process (e.g., pleasant social interaction, self-enriching experiences, sense of contributing to nonprofit group success). In other words, volunteering is motivated by two basic attitudes: altruism *and* self-interest. Volunteer tourism is, at once, a vibrant research specialty and a serious leisure pursuit (e.g., Wearing, 2001).

### **2.1 Six qualities**

The serious pursuits are further defined by six distinctive qualities, qualities uniformly found among its amateurs, hobbyists, and volunteers. One is the occasional need to *persevere*. Participants who want to continue experiencing the same level of fulfillment in the activity must meet its challenges from time to time. Another quality distinguishing all the serious pursuits is the opportunity to follow a (leisure, or leisure-devotee work) *career* in the endeavor, a career shaped by its own special contingencies, turning points, and stages of achievement and involvement. Moreover, most, if not all, careers here owe their existence to a third quality: serious leisure participants make significant personal *effort* using their specially acquired knowledge, training, and skill and, indeed at times, all three. Careers for serious leisure participants unfold along lines of their efforts to achieve, for instance, a high level of showmanship, athletic prowess, or scientific knowledge or to accumulate formative experiences in a volunteer role. The multitude of ways that these careers also articulate with the meso and macro contexts of social life is sampled in Stebbins (2020, chaps. 5-8).

The serious pursuits are further distinguished by several *durable benefits*, or tangible, salutary outcomes such activity has for its participants. They include self-actualization, self-enrichment, self-expression, self-fulfillment, regeneration or renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, social interaction and sense of belonging, and lasting physical products of the activity (e.g., a painting, scientific paper, piece of furniture). A further benefit -- self-gratification, or pure fun, which is by far the most evanescent benefit in this list -- is also enjoyed by casual leisure participants. The possibility of realizing such benefits constitutes a powerful goal in the serious pursuits, though pure fun is the least important.

Fifth, each serious pursuit is distinguished by a unique *ethos* and *social world* that emerge in parallel with each expression of it. An ethos is the spirit of the community of serious leisure/devotee work participants, as manifested in shared context of attitudes, practices, values, beliefs, goals, experiences, and so on. The social world of the participants is the organizational milieu in which the associated ethos -- at bottom a cultural formation -- is expressed (as attitudes, beliefs, values) or realized (as practices, goals, experiences). The sixth quality -- participants in serious leisure tend to identify strongly with their chosen pursuits -- springs from the presence of the other five distinctive qualities. In contrast, most casual leisure, although not usually humiliating or despicable, is nonetheless too fleeting, mundane, and commonplace to become the basis for a distinctive *identity* for most people.

### **2.2 Casual leisure**

There are eight types of casual leisure (see figure 1). This type of leisure is immediately, intrinsically rewarding. It is also relatively short-lived, pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training for its enjoyment and fundamentally hedonic; that is, its attraction lies in the significant level of pure enjoyment or pleasure it offers. The last and newest addition to this typology -- pleasurable aerobic activity (Stebbins, 2004) -- refers to physical activities that require

effort sufficient to cause marked increase in respiration and heart rate. It refers to “aerobic activity” in the broad sense, to all activity that calls for such effort, which to be sure, includes the routines pursued collectively in (narrowly conceived of) aerobics classes and those pursued individually by way of televised or video-taped programs of aerobics. Yet, as with its passive and active cousins in entertainment, pleasurable aerobic activity is, at bottom, casual leisure.

### ***2.3 Project-based leisure***

Whereas systematic exploration may reveal others, two types of project-based leisure have so far been identified: one-off projects and occasional projects (Stebbins, 2005). In the first, people generally use the talents and knowledge they have at hand, even though for some projects they may have to seek certain instructions beforehand, including reading a book or taking a short course. And some projects resembling hobbyist activity participation may require a modicum of preliminary conditioning. Always, the goal is to undertake a one-off project and nothing more, and sometimes a small amount of background preparation is necessary for this. It is possible that surveys would show that most project-based leisure is hobbyist in character, the next most common is a kind of volunteering, and third are the arts projects.

The occasional projects seem more likely to originate in or be motivated by agreeable obligation than their one-off cousins. Examples of occasional projects include the sum of the culinary, decorative, or other creative activities undertaken, for example, at home or at work for a religious occasion or someone’s birthday. Likewise, national holidays and similar celebrations sometimes inspire individuals to mount occasional projects consisting of an ensemble of inventive elements.

## **3. The SLP and Tourism**

Cultural tourism is a genre of special interest tourism based on the search for and participation in new and rich cultural experiences, whether aesthetic, intellectual, emotional, or psychological (Reisinger, 1994, p. 24). Several cultural forms such as museums, galleries, festivals, architecture, historic ruins, artistic performances, and heritage sites routinely draw tourists. The forms are expressions or contain expressions of one or more fine, popular, or folk arts, or one or more lifestyles, for example, folk, historical, or modern. Delbaere (1994) distinguished cultural tourism and “recreational tourism.” Seen as serious leisure, the latter can be said to spring from the tourist’s desire to use a particular geographic area to express or realize an amateur or hobbyist interest. This interest is profound and requires a certain level of skill, knowledge, conditioning, or experience. The world is replete with places renowned for passions like golf, fishing, hunting, backpacking, bird watching, ocean surfing, alpine skiing, and deep-sea diving. Recreational tourism is hobbyist or amateur activity done away from home. As such the hobbies pursued there differ from cultural tourism, which is a liberal arts hobby.

McKercher (2002) framed his two-dimensional model of cultural tourists according to the SLP. The “purposeful cultural tourist” is engaged in serious leisure, whereas tourists of the “incidental,” “casual,” and “sightseeing” varieties are classifiable as participating in casual leisure. His fifth type, the “serendipitous cultural tourist,” unexpectedly finds a deep (serious) interest in a cultural attraction, which might be understood as a spontaneous leisure project. McKercher tested his ideas on a sample of tourists visiting Hong Kong, whose responses to his survey lent empirical support to the model. Tourism is one of the most heavily researched of the SLP extensions, as evidenced by 105 theoretical and empirical references in the SLP website Bibliography (Tourism and Event Analysis). The majority of these bear on serious leisure, with many of them examining one or more kinds of adventure tourism. Bailey and Fernando (2012) provide the only study of

tourism as project-based leisure. See Tsaur and Huang (2018) for their scale separating casual and serious leisure participation in tourism.

Whereas the cultural dabbler is no hobbyist, the cultural tourist certainly is. The latter comes in two types. To the extent one is blessed with sufficient time, money, and inclination, one can be both. The general cultural tourist makes a hobby of visiting different geographic sites such as countries, cities, and regions, taking in there some of the cultural forms mentioned above. The career of this hobbyist develops along the lines of accumulated knowledge and experience, which seem to get incorporated in an ever-expanding set of personal generalizations about foreign cultures. This growing cultural knowledge is augmented by a growing practical knowledge, including how to interact with local people and attend to everyday needs in unfamiliar settings. Both cultural and practical, this tourist's stock of knowledge is eclectic, typically composed of ideas about local arts, folkways, lifestyles, and histories, occasionally broadened by comparing them with geographic sites visited earlier.

The general cultural tourist is possibly more prevalent than the specialized cultural tourist, who focuses on one or a small number of geographic sites or cultural entities. This tourist repeatedly visits a particular city, region, or country in search of a broad cultural understanding of the place, or goes to different cities, regions, or countries in search of exemplars of, for instance, a kind of art, history, festival, or museum. Both types of cultural tourist are inclined to eschew the commercial husk surrounding their subjects of study.

### ***3.1 Identity and tourism***

As John Urry observes, the last of these rewards is especially significant for tourists in the postmodern age. He asserts that "identity is formed through consumption and play. It is argued that people's social identities are increasingly formed not through work, whether in the factory or the home, but through their patterns of consumption of goods, services and signs" (1994, p. 235). According to Urry, tourism in the postmodern age has become a main pattern of consumption. Nevertheless, he fails to note that tourists' identities can vary by type of tourism. Thus, if cultural tourism is a form of serious leisure whereas mass tourism is a form of casual leisure, then the first, being far more exclusive than the second, must also offer far greater scope for distinctive self-identification. Why should cultural tourism generate especially distinctive identities? The answer to this question lies in the fact that all serious pursuits, this type of tourism included, root in the aforementioned six distinguishing qualities separating it from casual leisure, a variant of which is mass tourism.

But it is the sixth quality that is of most concern here: the special identity that comes with pursuing the hobby of cultural tourism. This identity is special because it is based on the other five qualities, none of which is found in casual leisure and mass tourism. Casual leisure, although hardly humiliating or despicable, is nonetheless too fleeting, mundane, and commonplace for most people to find much of an identity within it. Thus, when Urry observes that modern identities are formed through play and consumption and expressed at times in touristic activity, one must always ask whether the tourism in question is mass or cultural. It is argued here that the identity base of these two is substantially different, giving those who go in for the latter an identity of far greater depth and complexity than the identity available to those who go in for the former (e.g., Green & Jones, 2005).

Mass tourism, by its very definition, is socially, financially, and geographically accessible to great numbers of people, as seen for example in much of guided tourism, camper tourism, and psychocentric tourism (Plog, 1991, pp. 62-64). It is largely casual leisure. By contrast, the objects attracting the cultural tourist are socially and psychologically much less accessible, for they require the development of certain tastes (e.g., in art, food, music, or architecture), acquisition of certain

kinds of knowledge (e.g., a foreign language, the history of a region or country), or development of particular social skills (e.g., how to talk with the locals, how to act properly according to local norms). In short, the identity that comes with cultural tourism differs significantly from the one that comes with mass tourism. In the 21st century the two diverge according to the six qualities that demarcate serious leisure.

### ***3.2 Tourism and flow***

Some people seek flow in tourism doing so, however, as recreational rather than as mass or cultural tourists (Ryan, 2003; Ryan & Glendon, 1998, p. 171). The SLP can shed further light on how flow is experienced here since flow can only be experienced in activities during which the participant meets a manageable physical or mental challenge (component 1). Examples of the physical variety are legion: traveling somewhere to downhill ski, white-water kayak, ascend a mountain face or summit (technical climbing), SCUBA dive and wave surf. All are hobbies. In particular, all meet the aforementioned six distinguishing qualities of the serious pursuits, the most critical in this discussion being those of skill/knowledge, effort, and perseverance on which the first component of flow is predicated. And it follows that none of these activities pursued at this level can be considered casual or project-based leisure.

Some project-based tourist activities might seem to generate flow, though in reality they fail to do so, because the participant is insufficiently skilled or informed. Thus, Grade 1 and 2 white-water rafting with a guide in the stern is not a hobby, nor is snorkeling (as opposed to SCUBA diving), casual mountain climbing (e.g., Fuji, Kilimanjaro), horseback riding (e.g., with horse and guide supplied by a ranch) or hiking on easy terrain. Physical leisure projects may require a certain level of conditioning, but little out of the ordinary in the way of skills or knowledge. This is not the kind of soil in which flow can take root.

### ***3.3 Other SLP studies on tourism***

More recently eight other SLP links to tourism have taken root. Each revolves around a particular serious leisure activity or class of activities. Sport, which centers on interhuman competition, is prominent in this area of tourism research, especially running and cycling. Several nature challenge activities have also been explored, they being essentially non-competitive pursuits designed to master a feature of nature like riding ocean waves (e.g., surfing – Sotomayer & Barbieri, 2016) and climbing mountains (Stebbins, 2015b). Yoga, an activity that conditions both body and mind, is sometimes pursued as a genre of special interest tourism (e.g., Patterson, Getz, & Grubb, 2016). Note that some of the SLP activities mentioned in this paragraph are conceived of as adventure tourism (e.g., Beedie, 2008).

Turning to the cultural side of tourism, it is evident that wine and food tourism is also well represented by way of the SLP (e.g., Brown & Smith, 2010; Robinson, Getz, & Dolnicar, 2018). Both are commonly offered at tourist events and festivals (e.g., Getz, 2008). Festivals are ordinarily concerned with the arts, as in music, literature, and ceramics (e.g., Hollands, 2010), and are main attractions for touring aficionados. Finally, learning a foreign language is conducive to touring in search of a linguistic immersion in it and the culture in which it is embedded (e.g., Carvalho, 2021).

## **4. Conclusions**

This article has focused on the main links between the SLP and tourism studies. Meanwhile, many other possible links remain to be more deeply established, in that several types of tourism are common, but at best, still only minimally examined from the angle of the SLP. The types include travel to pursue interests in genealogy, heritage sites, great cities, canal and river scenery, religion

(pilgrimages, places, buildings), and dark tourism (e.g., crime scenes, genocide sites, concentration camps). The role of tourism among retirees and the elderly is another fecund area of SLP-related research (e.g., Nimrod, 2008), with ties to the study of leisure and the life cycle. The goal here is to determine through research how the tourist becomes interested in the activity and how it meets the criteria of casual, serious, or volunteer leisure, helping thereby to explain its appeal to that person.

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