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Outdoor tourism to escape social surveillance: health gains but sustainability costs.

Abstract

We analyse motivations and perspectives of outdoor tourists and tourism stakeholders in the Islamic Republic of Iran. We use semi-structured qualitative interviews, and interpretivist grounded theory, with basic and axial coding and fine-scaled differential narrative analysis. We distinguish three principal tourist segments, seeking: exhilaration through adventure; enjoyment of nature; and escape from cultural restrictions and associated social surveillance. The nature and adventure segments behave as ecotourists, and gain improved eudaimonic wellbeing. Nature tourists gain psychological restoration through calm and tranquil nature contemplation. Adventure tourists gain psychological recharge through challenge and achievement. The escape segment, in contrast, aims for hedonic wellbeing, is heedless of its social and ecological impacts, and does not behave as ecotourists. It adopts an ecotourism disguise, to avoid being observed as it flouts expected cultural norms. It uses unauthorized and clandestine logistics providers, creating substantial management obstacles for authorized commercial outdoor tour providers. Temporary escape from social surveillance generates mental health gains as a psychological safety valve for the tourists concerned, but their behaviour imposes unsustainable costs on local communities, natural environment, nature and adventure tourists, and outdoor tourism operators. These costs reduce the net social economic gains achieved from the mental health benefits of outdoor tourism.

Keywords: wellbeing; adventure; nature; escape; hedonism; halal

INTRODUCTION

We analyse the motivations of outdoor tourists in the Islamic Republic of Iran, using interviews with tourists and tourism stakeholders, and interpretivist grounded theory. Using basic thematic coding, we show that different tourists identify the same concerns, but hold opposing views. Using differential narrative analysis, we distinguish three tourist segments: adventure, nature, and escape. Adventure and nature tourism in Iran resemble counterparts worldwide, but the escape segment is very different, and recent in origin. Using axial coding, we show that adventure and nature tourism arose from historical outdoor recreation, but escape is a new component, driven by young urban citizens seeking a psychological safety valve, a brief break from otherwise near-continuous social surveillance. Whilst this is mentally beneficial for those individuals, it drives on-site behaviours at outdoor tourism destinations, that conflict severely with the goals of other tourists, tour operators, local communities, and land management agencies. In escaping from social surveillance, this outdoor tourism segment creates costs for sustainability.

This is a multi-stage iterative analysis, as is commonplace for interpretive grounded theory. Our initial approach and interviews adopted a broad tourism motivation framework, with no specific epistemology of history, health, culture, segmentation, or surveillance. In keeping with the aims and advantages of grounded theory, however, this iterative analysis revealed patterns (basic coding), segments (differential stakeholder analysis) and mechanisms (axial coding), that were not predefined, but were revealed during the course of the analysis. The most novel insight arising from this approach, is that some domestic outdoor tourists in Iran use tourism to sparsely inhabited destinations, as a means to escape social surveillance in more densely populated regions. The principal corollary is that whilst these tourists gain improved mental health, they impose costs on sustainability of the sector as a whole.

There is extensive previous analysis of: segmentation between and within nature and adventure tourists; links between outdoor tourism and sustainability; and links between nature tourism and mental health. We summarise these briefly. Links between social surveillance, health, and outdoor tourism have apparently not been reported previously. We therefore review prior research on surveillance stress, as part of our theoretical frameworks. These theoretical frameworks were not apparent at the outset, but were themselves identified as part of the iterative process of interpretivist grounded theory. To present our findings in logical order, we present these theoretical frameworks before describing methods and results. There are multiple theoretical frameworks, in keeping with grounded theory approaches.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Outdoor Tourist Motivations & Segmentation

Motivations, perceptions, and segmentation of outdoor tourists have been analysed widely (Derek, Woźniak & Kulczyk, 2019; Fossgard & Fredman, 2019; Fredman & Margaryan, 2020), in a “push-pull” framework (Lewis & D'Alessandro, 2019). At the simplest, there are two “pull” categories that apply worldwide. The first is observation of natural attractions, such as scenery, ecosystems, plants, and wildlife (Buckley, 2014; Buckley & Mossaz, 2018; Margaryan, 2018). The second is active adventure, from gentle to extreme (Brymer & Feletti, 2020; Buckley, 2007). These categories overlap; and both can also qualify as ecotourism, if they also include environmental education, minimal-impact management, and contributions to conservation (Buckley, 1994; Fennell, 2020). In some countries, there is also a “push” motivation: a temporary break from urban pollution (Buckley, Zhong & Martin, 2020).

There are cultural and geographical variations in all of these components. Chinese concepts such as *shengtai luyou*, *piaoliu ziyou*, and *jing hua xin ling*, for example, differ from Western concepts of ecotourism, whitewater rafting, and digital detoxification; and there are no English tourism terms directly analogous to “clean-air, clean-water” or “forest oxygen bar” (*sen ling yang ba*) holidays (Buckley *et al.*, 2008, 2014, 2020). Here, we add to these cross-cultural comparisons by analyzing outdoor tourists’ motivations and perceptions for the Islamic Republic of Iran. Modern Iran has arisen from predecessors in the same geographical region over many millennia, and remains culturally distinct (Axworthy, 2016).

Tourism, Nature & Mental Health

Outdoor tourism, and tourist motivations and product purchases, can also be viewed as investments in individual wellbeing and mental health (Buckley & Westaway, 2020, 2021; Cooper and Buckley, 2021; Lengieza, Hunt, & Swim, 2019). Most people take vacations largely with the intention of improving their self-perceived wellbeing and quality of life (Chen & Li, 2018; Lengieza *et al.*, 2019; Pyke *et al.*, 2016; Smith & Diekmann, 2017; Uysal *et al.*, 2016). For nature-based tourism specifically, nature exposure improves a wide range of mental health parameters (Bratman *et al.*, 2019). Nature tourism provides identifiable mental health benefits (Buckley & Westaway, 2020, 2021; Levi *et al.*, 2018), contributing to positive emotions, reduced stress, and improved worldview (Buckley, 2019a, 2020a; Xie & Fan, 2015). These may include both hedonic and eudaimonic benefits (Lengieza *et al.*, 2019; Rahman *et al.*, 2018; Smith & Diekmann, 2017).

Poor mental health has high economic costs (McDaid, Park, & Wahlbeck, 2019; Patel et al., 2018). National parks and nature hence have a global economic value through visitor mental health, estimated at US\$6 trillion p.a. worldwide (Buckley et al., 2019). This is an order of magnitude greater than the annual value of parks and nature tourism expenditure, including time and travel costs and economic multipliers (Balmford et al., 2015). We can therefore analyse outdoor nature and adventure tourism not solely as a stand-alone sector, but via three-way links between tourism, nature and mental health (Buckley & Westaway, 2020; Buckley, Zhong & Martin, 2020; Cooper & Buckley, 2021).

The mental health outcomes of nature, eco and adventure tourism are little quantified as yet. We do not yet know: how much various nature tourism experiences can contribute to the mental health of different individual tourists; by what mechanisms; and what mental health parameters are affected. Nor do we yet know the economic value of mental health gains to individual tourists, or to commercial tour operators. These uncertainties apply to nature therapies in general: diagnosis, design, dose and duration have been little analysed as yet (Shanahan et al., 2015; Bratman et al., 2019; Buckley, Brough & Westaway, 2018). Different types of nature experiences (Pasanen et al., 2019), for different lengths of time (White et al., 2019), can improve wellbeing for people of different personalities (White et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2017), across a range of environments (Biedenweg, Scott, & Scott, 2017; White et al., 2021; Wyles et al., 2017), but there is as yet no general model. Practical applications have been based on trial and error, and are only at pilot scale (Van den Berg, 2017), or outside the mainstream healthcare system (Buckley, Westaway & Brough, 2016; Davies, 2018; Morris & Scott, 2019; Richardson & McEwan, 2018; Roberts, Jones, & Brooks, 2018).

Ecotourism, Nature Therapies and Post-Pandemic Recovery

Outdoor nature, adventure and ecotourism have new and potentially large roles in mental health. New large-scale nature therapy programs have started in several countries. There are: government-run systems in China and the UK (China National Tourism Administration, 2020; UKNHS, 2020); an employer-funded health insurance program, nominally available to 30% of the population, in the USA (Schmidt, 2018; Blue Cross, 2018); a social enterprise program, reaching 1% of the adult female population, in Australia (Buckley & Westaway, 2020); and an NGO program in Japan (Oh et al., 2017). Australian, Chinese and Japanese programs are set up as tourism operations. Meanwhile, there is a trillion-dollar outdoor parks, nature and adventure tourism sector worldwide, contributing to the mental health of clients in unknown ways, by unknown amounts, and with unknown value (Buckley, 2019).

Research in this field has gained an unanticipated urgency through the global mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Brooks et al., 2020; Fancourt et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2020; Mazza et al., 2020; Mucci, Mucci & Diolaiuti, 2020; Pierce et al., 2020; Vizard et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). These consequences have arisen from lockdowns, livelihood losses, concerns over family, restrictions on travel, reductions in tourism, and deprivation of nature access. Once vaccines become widely available, and travel and tourism businesses can resume full-scale operations, predictions are for rapid resumption in domestic tourism initially, with a focus on parks and nature destinations (McGinlay et al., 2020). Outdoor nature and adventure tourism and recreation is seen as an important mechanism to restore mental health at population scale. This applies across all age groups and genders (Kiewa, 1994; Pomfret & Varley, 2019), though with differences in activities, sites, and frequencies, between different demographic groups and socioeconomic brackets.

Islamic Cultural Context

We focus here on the Islamic Republic of Iran, where public social activities are culturally restricted. Tourism is a significant component of the Iran economy (World Bank, 2017; Seyfi & Hall, 2018; Seyfi, Hall & Kuhzady, 2018). Outdoor nature, eco and adventure tourism is promoted for rural community development (Buckley et al., 2019; Hashemi & Ghaffary, 2017), but it is subject to religious rules on clothing, behaviour, alcohol abstinence, and separation between sexes. Islamic cultural and religious components of tourism have previously been analysed in other Islamic nations, such as Bangladesh (Khanom & Buckley, 2015); Brunei (Chen, Chen, & Okumus, 2013); Egypt (Brown & Osman, 2017); Malaysia (Battour et al., 2017); Maldives (Buckley, Guitart, & Shakeela, 2017; Shakeela & Weaver, 2018); and United Arab Emirates (Eid & El-Gohary, 2015a,b). They have not previously been analysed in relation to nature and mental health.

In Islamic nations, some activities associated with outdoor tourism are *halal*, permitted and encouraged (Arab-Moghaddam, Henderson, & Sheikholeslami, 2007; El-Gohary, 2016; Walseth & Fasting, 2003). Activities that promote individual strength and discipline, including adventure and nature tourism, are generally *halal*, as long as participants observe rules for clothing, speech, respectful behaviour, gender relations, and food and drink (Battour & Ismail, 2016; Battour et al., 2017; Van Nieuwkerk, 2008; Walseth & Amara, 2017; Zamani-Farahani & Musa, 2012). Outdoor tourists in Iran can take advantage of *halal* opportunities, and outdoor tour operators benefit accordingly. There are also many activities that are proscribed as *haram*, forbidden. In addition, there is a class of undefined behaviours that are neither formally *halal* or *haram* (El-Gohary, 2016; Jafari & Scott, 2014; Schwab, 2015; Walseth & Amara, 2017). These are neither explicitly prescribed nor explicitly proscribed, and in practice may be undertaken, but discreetly.

Social Surveillance Stress

Spying is a longstanding human social practice; but new surveillance technologies, both overt and covert, have been developed and deployed rapidly and recently, and these create stress. Most inhabitants in many countries are now monitored near-continuously, via: on-site video cameras and audio recording; webcams, facial recognition and emotion diagnostic software; geotracking of vehicles and mobile communications devices; fixed-site check-ins; financial transactions; speech parsing and textual analysis; and similar technologies (Birenboim et al., 2019; Marwick, 2012; Moore, 2018). These technologies are deployed, often in combination, by: government agencies such as police, traffic, customs, immigration, and taxation; retail premises and landowners; employers; political and marketing enterprises; and search engines and social-media software (Buckley & Cooper, 2021; Dhir et al., 2021; Fallik et al., 2020).

Many governments, both historically and currently, also monitor their citizens through social surveillance: political and police persuasion for individuals to spy on each other. In many countries, police or secret police use surveillance techniques to intimidate, harass, arrest and detain individuals in order to maintain power. At the same time, individuals are persuaded, through various individual benefits, to adopt technologies that simultaneously contribute to their own surveillance (Cosgrove et al., 2021; Till, 2019). As surveillance becomes more and more widespread, it creates a panopticon effect (Bentham, 1791; Foucault, 1975), which forces individuals to self-censor their communications and behaviour (Yu, 2021).

For most individuals, continual surveillance, and the risk of punishment whether merited or not, creates considerable stress and anxiety (Stein et al., 2017; von Dawans et al., 2018). This applies in workplaces as well as public spaces (Aiello & Kolb, 1995; Ball, 2010; Till, 2019), and it applies whether or not the types of surveillance are legal or illegal in the country concerned (Eley & Rampton, 2020; Frampton & Fox, 2021). The risks of non-compliance with cultural codes of conduct, whether religious or secular, are highest where surveillance is strongest and codes are most powerfully enforced. This includes Islamic nations, which comprise one quarter of the world's population and more than a quarter of its countries. It may also apply to Islamic and other minority populations in non-Islamic nations, including the USA (O'Connor & Jahan, 2014). Therefore, if escaping the stress of social and other surveillance is a driver for some types of tourism, that becomes relevant to our understanding of global tourism, whether or not it may be significant in Western nations.

METHODS

Methodological Frameworks

We adopted a qualitative methodology, under a grounded-theory paradigm. There are three or four principal schools of grounded theory (Aldiabat & Navenec, 2011; Allen, 2010; Apramian et al., 2017; Conlon et al., 2020; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020; Morgan, 2020; Sebastian, 2019; Tarozzi, 2020; Tie, Birks, & Francis, 2019). Our approach matches most closely to the interpretivist school, using basic coding, differential stakeholder analysis, and axial coding. We recognise the role of epistemology. That is, our prior knowledge, training, and interests may influence: the topics we address, the persons we select for interview, the questions we ask them, the codes we develop for their responses, the concepts we extract, and the constructs and coding tree we create. The same interview transcripts can yield very different understandings through a mental health investment frame, for example, than through a traditional tourism destination image frame (Cooper & Buckley, 2021).

We also recognise that interpretation is an iterative process, and that axial coding is the search for a latent structure, an underlying mechanism that can provide insights and understanding of primary patterns revealed by basic coding. Axial coding is an interpretation by the analysts, and the same basic coding tree can yield multiple alternative axial models. Therefore, readers are entitled to know the authors' backgrounds and positions. The principal author is female, young, an Iranian citizen, bilingual in Farsi and English, and a former outdoor tour guide and tourism marketer, with academic interests in sociology. The co-author is male, old, foreign, monolingual in English, a former outdoor guide, with academic interests in tourism and sustainability. He has visited Iran 3 times, to take part in outdoor nature and adventure tours.

Interviews

We interviewed 38 outdoor tour clients and 9 tour company staff, 40% female. Tour client contacts were identified via tour companies. Anonymity was maintained. Ages ranged from early 20's to mid 70's, with 71% aged <40. Interviews were semi-structured, ~60 minutes, with ethical approval, informed consent, and no inducements. The authors expressed no opinions. We also carried out unstructured interviews with a total of 50 local residents, and staff of parks agencies and marketing organisations. Including multiple interviews with some tour company owners, we carried out >100 interviews in all. Interviews were carried out in

Farsi or English, and translated into English for joint analysis by both authors, as for cross-lingual analyses between English and Chinese (Buckley et al., 2020), Dhivehi (Buckley et al., 2017), or Farsi (Buckley et al., 2019). Data were collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

We used a three-stage analytical approach: basic coding; differential narrative analysis; and axial interpretive coding and theory building, focussing on mental health aspects. In the first stage, interview transcripts were analysed using standard qualitative constant-comparison methods, under an interpretive grounded-theory paradigm (Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Stern & Porr, 2017). That is, concepts were extracted, coded, and classified iteratively (Bryman, 2016), to build a structured information framework. Coding was checked by two independent coders, with very close agreement. Iterations were repeated until theoretical saturation and efficient coding were achieved (Saunders et al., 2018).

In this first stage, we found that different groups of tourists addressed the same topics, but expressed consistently distinct views and positions. In the second stage, therefore, we used differential narrative analyses (Buckley et al., 2019b; Reed et al., 2009) to contrast their views, allowing us to distinguish three identifiable segments in the Iranian domestic outdoor tourism sector. In the third, axial stage, we compared the mental health benefits and obstacles between the three sectors; examined how they fit within social and cultural restrictions in Iran, relative to other nations; and assessed their relative ecological, social and economic sustainability.

RESULTS

Basic Coding, Concepts & Constructs

Basic coding identified 140 concepts nominated by interviewees. We classified them into 53 lower-tier, 14 mid-tier, and 3 top-tier constructs. The top-tier division is between person, place, and product. The basic coding tree is shown in compressed format in Table 1. This includes all the concepts extracted from interview transcripts, prior to more detailed and directed analysis. It adopts an epistemological framework from tourism, not mental health.

Table 1. Basic Coding, Concepts & Constructs: Four-Tier Coding Tree

TOP and Mid-Tier constructs	<i>low-tier constructs: basic concepts</i>
PRODUCT	
Location	<i>novelty</i> : new, remote, natural, unknown
	<i>access</i> : physical, permits, police blocks
	<i>accommodation</i> : hotels, motels, camping
History	<i>associations</i> : climbers, clubs, own gear
Quality	<i>accommodation</i> : some unacceptable
	<i>facilities</i> : often lacking, poor hygiene
	<i>operators</i> : illegal, inauthentic, certification
	<i>service</i> : standardise, guarantee needed
	<i>guide skills</i> : training, certification critical
	<i>government</i> : no experts, no department
	<i>coordination</i> : establish an operator union

Risk, Safety	<i>tour guides</i> : expertise, safety, dangers
	<i>emergencies</i> : equipment, preparation
Outdoor Skills	<i>activity</i> : climb, trek, canyon, off-road 4WD
	<i>camping</i> : cooking, tents, high wind
	<i>safety</i> : poor weather, cliffs, rivers, dunes
	<i>navigation</i> : remote areas, difficult terrain
	<i>photography</i> : scenery, birds
Education	<i>less</i> : entertainment, young cf middle-aged
	<i>more</i> : connect to nature, not just holidays
PERSON	
Motivations	<i>challenge</i> : challenge, adrenaline, feel alive
	<i>achievement</i> : achieve, happiness, you made it
	<i>nature</i> : beauty, pristine, parks, flora and fauna
	<i>peace</i> : calm, peacefulness, self-understanding
	<i>escape</i> : no restrictions, problems, coercion; be myself
Exercise	<i>enthusiasm</i> : cf sedentary urban life
	<i>opposition</i> : tired, optional, short, rest
Information	<i>friends</i> : photos, shared experiences
	<i>family</i> : mother, sister encouraged me
Escape Cities	<i>pollution</i> : want clean air, water
	<i>stress</i> : out of urbanism, away from city
	<i>work</i> : boosts performance, mood to work
PLACE	
Communities	<i>opportunities</i> : help, money, work with tours
	<i>safety</i> : tourists welcome, tourist safety
	<i>opposition</i> : don't want tourists, negative
	<i>subcontract</i> : local transport, catering, guides
	<i>local</i> : accommodation, campsites
	<i>cultures</i> : diversity, how people live
	<i>tourists hassled</i> : locals abuse tourists
	<i>locals hassled</i> : tourists don't consider locals
	<i>value for money</i> : charge for nothing, poor service
	<i>local tours</i> : travel cheaply, just your friends
Environmental impacts	<i>no regulation</i> : no rules in parks, too many people
	<i>ORV</i> : drive everywhere, no rules, damage ecology
	<i>litter</i> : everywhere, no longer pristine
	<i>fires</i> : no rules about lighting fires
Other group members	<i>make new friends</i> : meet new people, stay as friends
	<i>share</i> : show photos, talk about trip, catch up, memories
	<i>existing friends</i> : fun, happy, friends not random people
	<i>conflicts</i> : can't, bother, annoy, show-off, drink, dating
Laws and cultural restrictions	<i>accept</i> : not an issue for most clients
	<i>feel restricted</i> : some clients want to avoid rules
	<i>break rules</i> : ignore, stay in camp, drink not trek

Fine-grained Differential Analysis

As shown in Table 1, there are a number of themes where different respondents identified the same topics, but expressed contrasting or opposing views. For example, some want exercise and challenge, others rest and relaxation. Some want education, others entertainment. Some travel to make new friends, others prefer to travel only with old friends. For axial coding, therefore, we first differentiated the respondent tourists into three groups or segments. Since our data are qualitative, this is not a standard quantitative market segmentation study (Derek et al., 2019; Fossgard & Fredman, 2019; Fredman & Margaryan, 2020). Since all the tourists are in the same stakeholder group, it is not a standard differential stakeholder narrative analysis (Buckley et al., 2017; Reed et al., 2009). We therefore refer to it as a fine-grained differential narrative analysis, a qualitative analysis of tourist segments. We distinguish three segments: adventure, nature, and escape (Table 2). Below, we describe each group broadly, and summarise motivations using respondent quotations.

Table 2. Distinguishing Adventure, Nature, and Escape Tourists

Parameter	Adventure	Nature	Escape
Origins	1980's	2000's	recent
Outdoor skills	experienced	inexperienced	uninterested
Preferences	activities	contemplation	partying
Drawn by	thrills	tranquillity	freedom
Exercise	welcomed	accepted	avoided
Enviro impacts	leave-no-trace	express concern	create impacts
Key concerns	guide skills	safety, comfort	price, secrecy
Group members	same skills, interests	make new friends	only existing friends
Social interactions	for safety only	unimportant	principal goal
Laws, restrictions	accept, adopt, adapt	accept, adopt, adapt	object, avoid

Adventure

For tourists in the adventure segment, their main motivation is to take part in specific adventure activities. They choose destinations principally to provide opportunities for their preferred activities, and they are prepared to put up with some discomfort in order to take part. Activities mentioned included “*climbing, mountaineering, trekking .. canyoning, off-road 4WD.*” Clients said that they wanted experiences that were “*challenging*”, made them “*feel alive*”, gave them “*adrenaline.. achievement and happiness*”, so that finally they could tell themselves “*you made it!*” They mentioned “*lack of physical activities in urban life.*” For this group, safety was a key concern. They noted that: “*I could not go there by myself*”; that even the “*roads and driving are dangerous*”, and that “*with expert leaders, I felt safer*”. Besides access and activities, they mentioned factors associated with wilderness camping, such as “*cooking and erecting tents in high wind*”. They argued that: “*destinations are not set up for emergencies*”, so they relied on the tour operators for “*equipment in emergency situations*”. For these clients, therefore, factors such as “*technical training*” and “*guide certification*” were key considerations.

According to interviews with present-day outdoor tour operators, the adventure group arose historically from non-profit outdoor recreational clubs, such as mountaineering clubs. In the initial club trips, each participant paid their own costs directly. This evolved to systems where trip costs were aggregated, and shared equally. Group planning then gave way to individual leadership, equipment rental, and expert guiding. This evolved to commercial outdoor tour providers, with the expertise and equipment to offer the entire experience. Initially, these tour operators aimed to train their clients in outdoor skills, and to share tasks equally. This gave way gradually to a greater distinction between guides and clients, with skilled and experienced guides doing the work, leaving clients free to enjoy scenery, activities, and social interactions. Currently, tour company staff and guides design itineraries, provide equipment and food, and are responsible for navigation, logistics, cooking, and guiding. They train clients in activity-specific skills such as climbing or skiing, but not in general outdoor survival skills such as navigation or cooking. The historical evolution of adventure tourism products in Iran thus parallels that in many parts of the world (Buckley, 2007).

Nature

The nature segment arose as commercial outdoor tourism became more widely available in Iran. Tour company staff described this evolution: *“a lot of people were interested in discovering Iran’s beauty, and we wanted to introduce the natural landscape to people who did not know about activities such as mountaineering and hiking.”* These clients see outdoor tours less as an opportunity to carry out a specific activity, and more as an opportunity to visit *“new places”* and remote areas that *“nobody knew about”*. Again, this parallels the history of nature tourism in many parts of the world.

Tourists in the nature segment are seeking *“beautiful natural landscapes”* and *“pristine natural areas”*, especially *“national parks ... flora and fauna.”* They want to achieve *“peacefulness ... self-understanding ... connection to nature”*. They contrast natural beauty, peace, and tranquility, against *“air pollution”*, *“urbanism”*, and *“city issues”* such as work stress, and they argue that after a holiday in nature, they can achieve *“increased performance”* and have a better *“mood to work.”* They are less keen on physical exercise, asking for *“shorter”* and *“optional”* treks, *“without high physical activities”*. They also expect higher comfort levels than the adventure group. They complain about *“unacceptable accommodation quality”*, *“poor hygiene in toilets on roadsides”*, and the lack of *“showers and facilities in campsites.”* They wanted *“guaranteed”* and *“standardized”* service quality.

The nature group were also concerned over safety, including possible opposition to tourism from local residents, because they are often *“taking family”*, so they *“have to be very careful”*. They dislike tours that are *“just holidays”*, that have *“no connection to peace and nature”*, and *“too much attention to entertainment”*. They are concerned to minimize environmental impacts. Some also have specialised goals, such as birdwatching or landscape photography, and expressed concern that there are *“no tours for photography”* and *“no special service for photographers.”*

Escape

The escape segment is the most recent in origin, and is very different from the adventure and nature groups. These clients are driven principally by social factors. They want a temporary escape from the social and political restrictions that apply in Iranian towns and cities. They express their motivations as *“getting away from restrictions”*, so that they can *“be myself”*

and feel free of all problems,” “free of all social concerns”, with “no more ‘must’ and ‘must not’”. They want to travel somewhere remote where they are unobserved, so that they can listen or dance to music, consume alcohol, and relax in the company of friends of both genders. According to tour company staff, they prefer “drinking rather than being in nature”, and they want “a place for showing off and dating.” The tourists themselves say that they “come here to have fun”, that “fun is my main motivation”, and that they want to be “surrounded by happy people”.

They do not want nature education, adventure activities, or physical exercise. They complain that *“tours are not entertaining,”* and have *“too much focus on education.”* Members of the escape group do not want to travel with children, with older generations, or with people they do not know. They think that many outdoor tours are *“designed for middle aged people”* and don’t *“address the needs of young customers”*. They think that it is *“more fun to travel with friends”, “with my group of friends”, “with friends not random people”*. In their view, they *“pay to enjoy time with friends.”* In tours that also include clients interested in nature or adventure, they complain that their activities are restricted *“because of other tour members”,* since they would *“bother other customers.”*

They do not care about social or environmental impacts, with other stakeholders noting that they *“light fires”, “damage the environment”,* and *“leave litter everywhere, even in pristine places”* so that parks and wilderness destinations that were *“pristine before,”* are *“not any more”*. They also want to *“travel cheaply,”* and complain that *“homestays charge you for nothing”* or *“charge you a lot for poor service”,* and even that *“local people are getting annoying”*. Tour operators complain about this group, that they *“think that in remote areas they can do whatever they want and can ignore rules”* and that *“they prefer to stay in camping areas, hanging out ... and drinking rather than going trekking.”*

Axial Coding

Mental-Health Interpretive Lens

In the third and final phase of our analyses, we interpret the different motivations of each of the three outdoor tourist segments, using a mental health lens. This is not the only possible lens, but it fulfils the function of axial coding in that it provides an underlying mechanism that can account for the differences between segments (Table 2), which in themselves reflect patterns identified from basic thematic coding of raw interview transcripts (Table 1). In Table 3, we identify differences between the three segments in: emotions sought and experienced; motivations, including interests in remote destinations; perceived sources of wellbeing gains and therapeutic benefits (Bratman et al., 2019; Buckley & Westaway, 2020, 2021; Lengieza et al., 2019); and consequent preferences for commercial outdoor tour products.

The key insight from Table 3 is that the adventure and nature segments are in search of eudaimonic wellbeing (long-term balance) and are closely comparable to similar segments worldwide; but the escape segment is in search of hedonic wellbeing (short-term pleasure), and is rather distinct from outdoor tourism in other countries. Indeed, it is more similar to 4S sun-sand-sea-sex tourism in Western nations, such as “Schoolies Week” in Australia (Lawton & Weaver, 2005), or “Spring Break” in the USA (Sönmez et al., 2006), where school-leavers and college students respectively, gather *en masse* to party at beach tourism destinations.

Table 3. Mental Health Comparison Between Adventure, Nature, and Escape Tourists

Parameter	Adventure	Nature	Escape
Key emotions	thrill, adrenalin	calm, tranquillity	fun, enjoyment
Main motivation	challenge, achieve	beauty, peace	socialise, relax
Reason for remote	adventure options	pristine, nature	unobserved
Wellbeing from	skilled mastery	contemplation	avoid rules
Therapy from	energy recharge	stress reduction	escape restrictions
Want guides for	training, logistics	safety, education	entertainment
View of locals	logistic assistance	cultural attraction	annoying obstacle
Tourism concerns	access, safety	hygiene, service	price, restrictions
Perceived risks	physical dangers	lack of amenities	illegal behaviours
Cf. other countries	same aims, results	same aims, results	more restrictions

Cultural Context

From the themes raised in interviews with escape-group tourists, it is clear that they see urban social mores in Iran as more restrictive than they would prefer, at least whilst they are on holiday. Tourists in the nature and adventure segments accept or adapt easily to Islamic restrictions, such as those on clothing, alcohol, and gender proximity, since these are part of their regular daily lifestyles. For these groups, outdoor tourism can be used as mental health therapy without infringing cultural restrictions.

Those in the escape segment, however, are deliberately attempting to avoid these restrictions. That is why they are on holiday. They are unhappy if the presence of other tourists, or local communities, or tour company staff, prevent them achieving this goal. They aim to improve their mental health and happiness through temporary freedom, unrestricted fun. To achieve this, they want to travel only with friends who have similar opinions, to remote destinations where they can behave as they wish, unobserved and uncensored. “Not all Iranians agree to the strict adherence to Islamic codes of conduct ... younger generations are more open-minded [in their] attitudes towards music, dancing, social and physical contact between members of the opposite sex.” (Zamani-Farahani & Musa, 2012, p. 810).

The escape group are generally not breaching laws or religious obligations, at least overtly. They skirt the boundaries between behaviours that are formally *halal* or *haram*, as outlined earlier. The government of Iran requires all citizens to abide by Islamic cultural restrictions, but permits a range of personal religious adherences. Strictness of religious observance varies between individuals. For ethical and privacy reasons, we did not ask interviewees about this aspect of their lives. From their perspective, they are not breaching religious obligations; they are achieving a temporary escape, for their own mental wellbeing, from what they see as unduly onerous social rules applying in cities. The restrictions they are escaping are not legal or religious, but cultural.

Sustainability & Ecotourism Disguise

The three tourism segments also have very different outcomes for the sustainability of outdoor tourism. Most of the destinations are in remote areas, many of them national parks or World Heritage Areas, with nearby local communities living rather traditional rural lifestyles. Outdoor tourism operators have invested considerable time and resources, over

many years, to obtain legal certifications, access permits, local community support and approval, and local contacts and suppliers for food, transport, accommodation, and safety (Buckley et al., 2019b). They are careful to create positive impacts for local communities, eg through employment; and to minimise social and environmental impacts, through appropriate guiding, behaviour, and equipment. Tourists in the adventure and nature segments generally comply with all of these expectations, and behave as ecotourists.

Tourists in the escape group, however, see themselves as escaping restrictions, and in that process they create negative impacts. They visit the same places as reputable tourism operators, but they do so using unauthorised logistics providers. They leave litter, light fires, cause damage to soil and vegetation, and may offend local communities and small-scale family accommodation providers, as well as other tourists. As one local told us, *“they lit a fire, and stole pillows and a dog.”* They may do this heedlessly rather than deliberately, but the effect is the same. They do not act sustainably, and they are not ecotourists, only disguised as such. This has negative effects on the entire outdoor tourism industry, creating social and ecological impacts at destinations. That also affects access and approval for authorised tour operators, with negative economic effects.

Reputable outdoor tour operators comment that the behaviours of the escape segment *“create negative ideas about tourism,”* but that in many outdoor destinations, there is currently *“no rule to stop them,” “no rules about lighting fires,” “no rules for tourists in national parks,” “no regulation controlling numbers,” “no legislation against illegal operators,” “no control over illegal tour operators,” “no technical training for tour operators,”* and *“no control on authenticity.”* In consequence, reputable tour operators sometimes find their field operations blocked. They may be unable to gain permits to operate in a national park; or when they arrive with clients, they may be turned away: *“we have permits, but they refuse it;” “the police stop us, even with our license.”* Reputable operators would therefore prefer greater regulation and enforcement.

DISCUSSION

The social and economic values of mental health benefits derived from outdoor nature, eco and adventure tourism and recreation are now recognised throughout developed Western nations (Bratman et al., 2019; Buckley et al., 2019a; Buckley & Westaway, 2020, 2021; Cooper & Buckley, 2021); and with some cultural differences, also in wealthy Asian nations, notably China and Japan (Buckley et al., 2020; Oh et al., 2017). Tourism in Islamic nations (Battour et al., 2017; Shakeela & Weaver, 2018), including ecotourism in Iran (Buckley et al., 2019b; Hashemi & Ghaffary, 2017), has also been analysed extensively, but not previously with a focus on mental health.

Here, we started with a generalised qualitative analysis of outdoor tourists’ motivations and perceptions, identifying 140 basic concepts that we coded and classified into 53 lower-tier, 14 mid-tier, and 3 top-tier constructs (Table 1). This basic coding process was carried out within a tourism epistemological frame, independent of mental health or cultural considerations. It revealed considerable heterogeneity amongst domestic outdoor tourists in Iran, which we formalised using a fine-grained differential analysis, to identify three segments: adventure, nature and escape.

These segments have different and distinguishable characteristics and motivations (Table 2). The adventure segment wants thrill, exhilaration, excitement, and transformation, as in other countries (Brymer & Feletti, 2020; Hetland et al., 2019; Buckley, 2018; Niedermeier et al., 2017; Svensson et al., 2019). They use commercial tour operators for local knowledge, permits, technical training, logistics, wilderness camping, and safety. They accept and adapt easily to Islamic restrictions. The nature segment wants less physical activity, and greater comfort. Their focus is on natural beauty, peace, tranquility, psychological restoration, and recovery from stress (Table 3). Again, this matches the psychotherapeutic outcomes of nature tourism in other countries (Buckley, 2020a; Buckley & Westaway, 2020, 2021; Oh et al., 2017). Both these segments qualify as ecotourists.

The escape segment is very different. They use the outdoors to be unobserved, to dance, date, drink, and listen to music, with friends of both genders. They want short-term fun: their wellbeing aims are hedonic rather than eudaimonic. They ignore rules, and create social and ecological impacts. Whilst escaping restrictions on interpersonal behaviour, these tourists breach expectations on responsible social behaviour. Their interests, behaviours, and mental health implications are poorly aligned with the expectations of commercial tour operators, with practical management implications for the commercial outdoor ecotourism industry. Indeed, this segment corresponds more closely to beach party tourism in other nations (Lawton & Weaver, 2005; Sönmez et al., 2006). Since that is not permissible in Iran, the escape segment travels to remote destinations as a substitute. They masquerade as ecotourists, but this is a disguise. They exploit the undefined zone between activities that are clearly *halal*, encouraged, and those that are clearly *haram*, forbidden. They use outdoor tourism to escape social surveillance in cities, but create conflicts for tour operators and parks agencies. Pressures on mental health are powerful, and gains from outdoor tourism are great, but cultural complexities lead to conflicts.

Cultural escape of this type has been studied extensively as hedonistic travel (Shakeela & Weaver, 2018). Examples include British tourists in Mediterranean countries, US tourists in the Caribbean, or Australian tourists in South-East Asia. There are also domestic examples in many countries, such as large-scale music events, festivals, and rave parties, where social rules are suspended temporarily, at least to some degree. Some are non-commercial, not publicly advertised, and remain hidden. For those that are commercial, visible, and promoted by the tourism industry, there are commonly controversies over appropriate policing of the line between legal and illegal behaviours. The social and legal acceptability of different types of tourism and recreation, and the consequences for both health and sustainability, can thus differ greatly between and within different countries and cultures.

CONCLUSIONS

Differential narrative analysis is used here to contrast three outdoor tourism sectors using some of the same local providers at the same destinations, a finer scale than previous applications. Tour clients whose aims are active adventure and excitement, or passive nature contemplation and enjoyment, gain therapeutic benefits from outdoor ecotourism in the same way as for nations with fewer cultural restrictions. For the adventure segment, the mental health benefits derive from challenge, thrill, achievement, and recharge. For the nature segment, they derive from peace, calm, tranquillity, de-stressing, and psychological restoration. These benefits reflect eudaimonic wellbeing. These segments correspond closely to other nations, with minimal modification from cultural restrictions.

The third segment comprises tourists whose main aim is fun and freedom from the cultural restrictions in cities. This group can also gain mental health benefits, by escaping social rules. These benefits reflect hedonic rather than eudaimonic wellbeing. There are some parallels in less culturally restricted nations, but behaviours that generate social disapproval are still much more restrained in Iran than in Western nations. Behaviours considered reprehensible in Iran would be acceptable in the USA or Australia, and behaviours considered merely frivolous in those nations would be illegal in Iran. For practical tourism management, there are conflicts on-site between registered and well-qualified tour operators and their nature and adventure clients, and the escape group and their largely unregistered tourism providers.

There are thus three key findings. First, outdoor nature and adventure tourism can still provide therapeutic benefits, even in countries with more restrictive cultures. Second, some citizens in Iran use outdoor tourism to improve their mental health by providing temporary escape from social surveillance in cities. Third, whilst the adventure and nature segments behave sustainably, the escape group does not. It masquerades under an ecotourism disguise, but it creates negative environmental, social and economic impacts, and cannot be considered sustainable. Unsustainable outdoor tourism operations under the guise of ecotourism are widespread worldwide (Wardle et al., 2018). This is one rationale for certification programs, aiming to differentiate legitimate ecotourism from greenwash (Buckley, 2020b). Our findings here show how difficult this can be. Different groups of clients for the same destination, enterprise, product, and even guide, may behave in very different ways, depending on their personal motivations and the specific affordances they aim to expand (Buckley & Akhoundoglu, 2020). The sustainability of tourism depends on the tourist (Buckley, 2019b) as well as the tourism product, enterprise, and destination.

What are the implications for future management and research? From a management perspective, it is clear that the escape segment is currently in conflict with: the nature and adventure segments, commercial outdoor tourism operators, protected area management agencies, and local communities. All those stakeholders would prefer greater regulation and surveillance, including ecotourism certification programs and access permits, and on-ground monitoring and enforcement. Tourism personnel complained that Iran's national tourism agencies currently have little knowledge or interest in nature, adventure and ecotourism. Individuals in the escape segment, of course, have different perceptions. They see their outdoor activities as a legitimate mechanism to improve their own wellbeing by a temporary escape from social surveillance, undertaking activities which they see as appropriate for younger-generation urban residents. Outdoor tourism provides a social safety valve. The problem with that perception is that the escape segment behaves irresponsibly, imposing costs on others. By creating these impacts, they lose their disguise and invisibility.

From a research perspective, the existence of the escape segment in the domestic outdoor tourism industry in Iran raises the question whether similar sectors exist, as yet undescribed, in other countries and cultures. Protected area management agencies in many Western countries have reported that some users ignore regulations and create major impacts; and that this includes factors such as litter, fires, illegal off-road driving, and large parties and festivals in remote areas. It is not clear, however, that these are driven by a desire to escape from social surveillance, as we found here for Iran. We might anticipate that escape motivations would be more prevalent in countries with more restrictive cultures. There are numerous news reports, for example, of wealthy individuals from more restrictive cultures, taking holidays to more relaxed countries, and behaving in ways that would be inappropriate or illegal in their countries of origin.

A second general research issue raised by these findings, is the economic cost imposed by badly behaved urban visitors to parks and other outdoor areas. Protected areas worldwide have a very substantial economic value through contributions to visitor mental health, ~500 x larger than the aggregate budgets of management agencies (Buckley et al., 2019a). Visitors impose costs, however, and *per capita* costs can differ between individual visitors by several orders of magnitude, from leave-no-trace backcountry hikers, to deliberately damaging illegal uses. At a society scale, we need to measure those costs in economic terms, and offset them against the economic value of mental health benefits. The escape segment in Iran, and its counterparts in other countries, achieve personal gains in mental health, but impose costs on the tourism industry, local communities, and nature. Can we measure those gains and costs?

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