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Existentialism, Consumption and Sustainability: Backpackers Fleeing and Finding Themselves

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to understand sustainable tourism consumption through the lens of existentialism. Netnography of backpackers on an extended vacation reveals both existential anxiety and authenticity motivate and shape travel. This in turn has implications for the relative sustainability of otherwise of tourism consumed.

Keywords: Existentialism; Sustainable Consumption; Tourism; Netnography;

INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to position existentialist philosophy in relation to sustainable consumption. An extensive philosophical tradition that can address profound and difficult problems of man and his world (Comic and Beograd, 1989), existentialism may help to enrich academic and practitioner understanding of sustainable consumption and interpret the widely reported gap between consumer intentions and actions regards sustainable consumption (Gleim *et al.*, 2013). Uptake of sustainable tourism which seeks to ameliorate negative and maximise positive impacts of the industry on hosts (Tao and Wall, 2009) has been similarly weak (Buckley, 2012).

Existentialism and sustainable consumption is reviewed in this paper through the lens of tourism. Existentialism has recently been brought into the tourism studies literature

reflecting strong overlaps between existentialism and tourism concepts generally (Steiner and Reisinger, 2006), with research considering the role of tourism as a catalyst for existential authenticity (Wang, 1999; Rickly-Boyd, 2013; Brown, 2013). Tourism thus provides an established context in which to conduct research. There remain gaps in debate however, particularly in representations of the existential avoidance roles tourism consumption may fulfil and existentialism has thus far not been explicitly linked to sustainable consumption.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existentialism

Although an eclectic school of thought, common threads regards the freedom of the individual and responsibility for one's own actions (Agarwal and Cruise Malloy, 2000) underpin existentialism, which may be summarised as a philosophical tradition concerned with what it means to be human, what it means to be happy, and what it means to be oneself (Reisinger and Steiner, 2006). Briefly speaking, existentialism may be categorised into three interlinking elements: anxiety, avoidance and authenticity. Firstly, existentialist thinking relates to the anxiety, discomfort and pain of the human consciousness (Heidegger, 1962; Sartre, 1969). The human being is thrown into a world of meaninglessness, unconditional freedom, inevitable death, and universal alienation (Tillich, 1952). These aspects make up the existential predicament inherent to all humans; the chaotic nature of life and certainty of death, and having to face up to the responsibility implied by total freedom (Sartre, 1948; Agarwal and Cruise Malloy, 2000). An inevitable response to the predicament is anxiety. Rather than confront the painful realities of existence, existentialist thinking suggests that many people much of the time choose to distract themselves from by becoming immersed and lost within the routine, quotidian, group, and inauthentic (Heidegger, 1962; Sartre, 1948; 1969). Typically distractions involve cultural-adherence strategies which focus on immersing

the self within cultural existence by identifying with and favouring social in-groups and acting in accordance with social norms (Fritsche and Hafner, 2012). Alternately self-esteem strategies are seeking escape via immersion within the self as of unique significance amongst peers and in the world (Greenberg *et al.*, 1997). Thirdly existentialist discussion relates to notions of self-actualisation being reached through living authentically. If the intrinsic existence of alienation is linked to anxiety and flight from this to avoidance, then authenticity relates to confronting and overcoming (Heidegger, 1962). Authenticity may be interpreted as an ideal state of fulfilment in which people can be true to themselves (Wang, 1999) as opposed to becoming lost in public roles and spheres (Berger, 1973), day-to-day behaviour or activities or thinking about the self (Reisinger and Steiner, 2006).

Existentialism and Consumption

Consumption of goods and services can play a role in the flight from existential anxiety into avoidance pathways. Self-esteem building for example may come from consumption as practice and belongings which can be used by individuals as a means of claiming and asserting an identity (Elliot, 1997). Tourism, as a highly conspicuous form of consumption, offers many opportunities for self-esteem building (see Chen and Chen, 2011). Tourism is moreover an activity where the emphasis on self is well established throughout (Sin, 2009) and may enable inward-looking esteem-building pathways focussed on indulging and celebrating the self (Greenberg *et al.*, 1997). Consumption can likewise offer a sense of social and cultural immersion. Basically, we employ consumption symbolically not only to create and sustain the self but also to locate us in society (Wattanasuwan, 2005). This is true also of tourism where the routine, familiar and mundane are strongly present and togetherness with significant others is prominent (Obrador, 2012). Tourism additionally offers opportunities to

become part of particular travel communities, such as those of backpackers who frequently share close bonds, codes and cultural practises (Cohen, 2011).

Nevertheless, Steiner and Reisinger (2006) propose that existential authenticity is a state of being that can be produced or pursued through tourism. Existential authenticity may be linked to the learning, liberating and reflexive potential that tourism holds. These three aspects can play a role in the search for individual and collective identity, meaning, fulfilment and freedom (Wang, 1999; Brown, 2013). The potentially challenging learning characteristics of tourism promote independence and self-sufficiency which in turn becomes conducive to existential authenticity (Rickly-Boyd, 2013). Liberation links with the contrast to everyday roles tourism provides, which enables people to keep a distance from or transcend daily lives (Wang, 1999). As McIntyre (2007) observes, away from the ennui and stresses of the home setting the tourist can be the self they more wanted to be. Tourism may also stimulate reflexivity. Brown (2013) argues that the unique and central function of tourism is in offering a reflective space that is conducive to self-insight and to the examination of priorities. Thus tourism may be viewed as a platform for richer experiential encounters with oneself as well as richer bonding encounters with others (Shepherd, 2015).

Existentialism and Sustainability

These existential motivations may be associated with particular consumption behaviours that could be considered as more or less sustainable. To illustrate, existentialist philosophy highlights that avoidance routines, though valuable as a coping mechanism, are inauthentic, conformist, stifling, and lead to a loss of the real self, self-potential and actualisation (Sartre, 1943; Heidegger, 1962; Berger, 1973). This may in turn associate with consumer behaviours which orientate towards the irresponsible. Social immersion is a means for the individual to cast-off responsibility for own actions (Sartre, 1957). Miller *et al.*, (2010) describe how

tourist's sense of environmental responsibility or guilt is dispelled on holiday by the fact that the location is full of other people who have made the same decisions. Furthermore, selfish consumer behaviours may link with pursuit of existential avoidance that can prioritise the self and certain cultural in-groups (Fritsche and Hafner, 2012). MacCannell (2002) suggests that tourists can be described as egomaniacs and sees tourism in certain forms as supplying the energy for narcissism, economic conservatism, egoism, and absolute group unity or fascism.

By contrast, pursuit of existential authenticity appears to be more compatible with sustainable tourism principles. Although not all tourists or all of the time are looking for existential authenticity (Steiner and Reisinger, 2006), search for meaning, connection and self-actualisation is important to many (Wang, 1999). Certain tourists appear to crave the enhancement rather than avoidance of self, and many go away to confront the very problems that other tourists are only too happy to leave behind (Smith and Kelly, 2006). Backpacker tourists for example look for authentic experiences and want to meet local people to share their experiences and cultures, and to encounter unspoilt natural landscapes and sites (Cohen, 2011). The implied willingness to seek out closer interactions with natural and cultural landscapes links with descriptions of sustainable consumption as something which requires involvement, commitment and added investment (i.e. Tao and Wall, 2009).

METHODOLOGY

Exploratory research involved a netnographic analysis of twelve tourists pursuing a prolonged holiday together between Jan-June 2016. This research sample was opportunistic, snowballing from chance observation of acquaintances' online behaviour. Participants are all prolific users of various social media and all used to describe in detail a long-term vacation undertaken together, hence offering a research opportunity. Although backyard sampling is a risk of such an approach, pragmatic considerations were felt to outweigh in what is an

exploratory study building understanding rather than seeking generalization. Netnography adapts the open-ended practice of ethnography to the contingencies of the online environment (Kozinets, 2006) and is a pragmatic and efficient tactic to obtaining and working with online data (Wu and Pearce 2014). Netnography analysed a combination of social media platforms used by participants to document travel experiences. Used in this study was the lurker format, whereby researchers do not reveal their research activity to online participants, nor participate in online exchanges; something which ensures that participants remain unaware of the researcher's activities and interact in the relatively uninhibited manner characteristic of online communities (Mkono and Markwell, 2014). As with Doster (2013) the sample was small, but rich and dynamically evolving, with the amount of photographic (1500 photos), textual (1200 comments) and video data (24 minutes) reviewed, comparable to other studies. Data collected was broadly classed using visual methods (see Stepchenkova and Zhan, 2013). This visual method was performed through interlinked stages of collecting data, content analysis, and semiotic interpretive analysis. An inductive process using a social constructivist approach to interpret data and build conclusions was used (see Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Themes were allowed to emerge from research organically and these were then related back to the extant literature (Thornberg, 2012).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research illustrated the long-form (3-6 months) travel experience undertaken by participants. This involved several stages spread across South Asian countries with various periods of collective and individual travel. Research coalesced around themes of existential avoidance and authenticity illustrating how both of these informed travel by participants.

References are made to tourism providing and being used for existential avoidance.

Netnography reveals that tourism is described by group members as enabling the evasion of

adulthood; something typified as dreary, constrained and difficult. Travel is referred to as a way to stay young, keep having fun, avoid responsibilities and not become boring. *“This one exploded glitter all over her face, threw on her huge sequin silver skirt to sit and drink rum on our balcony. K you understand how boring adult-life is, may we never grow up and live in Wonderland together forever #idontknowhowtoadult.”* Posts position this as a carefree, fun adventure and draw contrasts with mundane home environments, responsibilities and routines. *“No commitments whatsoever. Just complete liberation. I’ll never be this free as I am right now. Completely in my element and loving this life with my mind, body and soul.”*

In terms of existential avoidance strategies employed on holiday, high levels of tourist routine could be identified. Posts reveal a largely standardised pattern of tourism, with similar sites, accommodation, transportation and hospitality used throughout the trip. This suggests group members becoming immersed in the familiar and mundane (Greene, 1952). Likewise social immersion within the group of friends and in wider traveller communities is demonstrated by the many posts that depict and describe group relationships, such as a review of a period spent in Vietnam: *“The BEST two days. Scored a private boat and cruised around the Vietnamese islands with some of my best friends. So many belly-laughs, so many failed somersaults, the world’s biggest jellyfish, the most majestic game of beer pong ever played, a near Wilson castaway, rum and no water. Vietnam, I love you.”*

Posts also emphasise pursuit of existential authenticity through travel. References are made to travel contributing to self-actualisation, personal growth, bond building and sense of one’s place in the world; indications of tourism catalysing existential authenticity (Wang, 1999). Emphasis is placed on learning, liberation and reflection stimulated by travel. Difficult and challenging situations, such as uncomfortable transport arrangements are repeatedly highlighted and described in terms of overcoming obstacles and experiences obtained on the road (as per Rickly-Boyd, 2013). Self-assessments are of growing as individuals and bonding

as a group (Shepherd, 2015). *“I can’t believe we shared this experience together. We overcame all those obstacles and became better people as a result. We know each other better than I thought possible and if we can do this can do anything together.”* Liberation is described in posts in terms of getting away from norms, responsibilities and expectations, generating a sense of freedom from restrictive obligations (Steiner and Reisinger, 2006). *“It’s funny how the days of the week used to dominate my life and be my routine. Having this unforeseen opportunity to see the world has meant I have completely lost touch with time.”* Reflexivity is also in evidence encapsulating the role of tourism in fostering self-examination and growth (Brown, 2013). Being introduced to new cultural and natural landscapes is referenced as a spiritual, expansive process that provokes gratitude for and appreciation of the world and one’s position and relationships therein. *“Seeing the world has shown me the importance of living for the moment. So good to be reminded!”*

Lastly research began to establish some links between existential tourism states and sustainability of tourism consumed. Posts describing pursuit of existential authenticity relate to tourism activities which demonstrate participation in deeper experiences, implying opportunities for deeper exchanges, changes and creativity (see Canavan, 2016). Posts highlight mutual social, craft and cultural exchanges between group members and local people that may exemplify. Such deeper exchanges may be linked to various criteria for measuring sustainable tourism such as positive host-guest relationships, local control of industry, and commitment to sustainable principles (Almeyda *et al.*, 2008; Tao and Wall, 2009). Emphasis on nature and culture during these periods did include specifically sustainable tourism activities such as visits to conservation projects. *“Paddling along the Mekong River in a wooden boat and spotting Mekong dolphins. It was just so incredibly peaceful, the only sound was them breaching the water to take a breath. It is estimated there to be only 80-90 left in the wild: we were so lucky to have seen at least several.”* Hence initial

suggestion is that existentially authentic tourism behaviours more closely overlap with notions of sustainable tourism.

Conversely findings inferred that irresponsible and selfish tourism consumption was more likely when existential avoidance was prioritised. Posts illustrate hedonistic periods involving drinking and self-indulgent behaviour. A corresponding emphasis was on closed backpacker communities cut off from the wider host world (as per Moaz, 2007). Such prioritisation of the self and distance of travellers from hosts are criticised within the literature as linking to unsustainable tourist impacts including environmental neglect, prioritisation of the one over the many, and insensitivity towards hosts (MacCannell, 2002). Inferences from netnography are that selfish individual and group prioritisation characterises some posts and periods of travel.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to position existentialist philosophy within sustainable consumption debate. It introduces an exploratory netnographic study of backpacker tourists to begin to elaborate on the proposed themes of consumers motivated by existential avoidance and authenticity, with resulting consumption behaviours that may be less or more sustainable respectively. Research illustrates the importance of both existential avoidance and authenticity to tourism consumers. Thus tourism can be framed existentially as a means of escape through self-esteem and cultural-adherence pathways it enables. Also something more than that relating to the learning, liberation and reflection opportunities catalysed, and which may lead to self and collective discovery, actualisation and transcendence (see Comic and Beograd, 1989; Wang, 1999; Steiner and Reisinger, 2006). Secondly discussion and research begins to make links between existentialism and sustainability. It appears that tourism which relates to existential authenticity may be more likely to produce consumption behaviours

which prioritise deeper experiences and exchanges compatible with the emphasis placed in sustainable tourism definitions upon deeper tourist involvement contributing to awareness of and commitment to sustainability (i.e. Tao and Wall, 2009). As a small scale exploratory study only, future research could investigate and build upon the proposals made.

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