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An existentialist exploration of tourism sustainability: backpackers fleeing and finding themselves

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ABSTRACT

This article applies existentialism to sustainable tourism discussion using an exploratory netnographic case study of 12 backpackers. Highlighted is the importance of both existential avoidance and authenticity to participants looking to escape and transcend underlying existential anxiety. Avoidance can be found in the cultural-adherence and self-esteem pathways facilitated by travel. Authenticity is identified in the deeper interactions with host peoples and landscapes, and the liberation, reflection and learning which emerge from this. Avoidance and authenticity are linked in turn with the sustainability of tourism pursued. The former is associated with more hedonistic escape and superficial, self-centric and insensitive tourism. The latter is suggestive of more transcendent escape and involved, appreciative and alternative tourism.

Introduction

Although an eclectic school of thought, common threads regarding the freedom of the individual and responsibility for one's own actions underpin existentialism (Agarwal & Cruise Malloy, 2000). This can be summarised as a long philosophical tradition concerned with what it means to be human, what it means to be happy and what it means to be oneself (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). Existentialism explores three interlinking elements said to make up the human condition; anxiety, avoidance and authenticity (Tillich, 1952). Existentialism has over the past two decades been brought into the tourism studies literature reflecting strong overlaps between the philosophy and tourism concepts (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). Associations have been drawn between existential angst as precedent and antecedent of tourism (Kirillova & Lehto, 2015), tourism and its enabling of existential avoidance (Comic & Beograd, 1989; Smith & Kelly, 2006), and also its catalyses of existential authenticity (Brown, 2013; Wang, 1999; Xue, Manuel-Navarrete & Buzinde, 2014).

There has not yet, however, been a specific application of existentialism to sustainable tourism. In its simplest form, sustainability refers to the long-term conservation and enhancement of cultural and natural resources (Fennell, 2008). Descriptions of sustainable tourism share common ground based on balancing economic, social and environmental considerations (Shunnaq, Schwab, & Reid, 2008). Cultural and natural environments being the main basis for destination distinctiveness and tourist value (Lansing & De Vries, 2007), the ability of a destination to compete comes from successful sustainable management that preserves place identity as a basis for differentiation (Sedmak & Mihalic, 2008). The approach seeks to maximise and widely distribute desired impacts of development, whilst avoiding or ameliorating negative impacts (Tao & Wall, 2009) and can ideally offer a

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framework for planning and managing industry development in a way that is more sensitive to local natural and cultural systems (Almeyda, Broadbent, Wyman, & Durham, 2010). Stakeholder involvement has repeatedly been emphasised as making the difference between maintainable and sustainable tourism (Hardy & Beeton, 2001). Themes of consumer awareness of sustainability issues, involvement with host landscapes and feelings of responsibility have been outlined as important to driving forward sustainable tourism consumption (Perkins & Brown, 2012).

Whilst the concept of sustainable tourism has so far provided a common platform on which different stakeholders can interact and negotiate the environmental consequences of their operations, it does involve analytical and operational weaknesses (Saarinen, 2015). The growth in academic research in tourism is exciting, but has also fragmented the field contributing to underlying theoretical weaknesses (McKercher, 2016). Limitations within sustainable tourism theory can allow for overly pessimistic or optimistic preconceptions to prevail (McKercher & Prideaux, 2014) potentially restricting commitments to sustainable tourism overall (Tao & Wall, 2009). Hence calls for building philosophical underpinnings of sustainable tourism (see Bramwell, 2015; Buckley, 2012; Cohen & Cohen, 2012). As a fundamentally optimistic philosophy which deals with responsibility and commitment to mankind (Sartre, 1948) and which provides a forum and language in which various advocates can meet to discuss human problems of primary importance and common concern (Mairet, 2007), existentialism may be well placed to address this call.

The contribution of this paper is, therefore, the application of existential philosophy to sustainable tourism discussion. The import of existentialism for the environmental movement lies in the hope it offers for significant change (Ogilvy, 2012). Particularly relevant from a sustainability perspective is the emphasis existentialism places on individual responsibility. Perceptions of responsibility towards sustainability issues are known as important to driving forward market demand for ethical alternatives, demand which has often been lacking leaving sustainability to be pushed forward through a regulatory approach (Buckley, 2012). Existential avoidance and its implied derogation of responsibility may help to explain the intention–action gap in sustainable consumption, whereby stated consumer green intentions differ from subsequent action and which have led to disappointing results for many green initiatives (Aagerup & Nilsson, 2016; Luchs, Phipps, & Hill, 2015). Existential authenticity meanwhile may suggest a willingness to confront and get involved with more sustainable choice-making fundamental in helping solve our planet's ecological crisis (Dermody, Hanmer-Lloyd, Koenig-Lewis, & Zhao, 2015).

An exploratory netnographic study of 12 backpackers is used to illustrate and develop the concepts put forward. This is a tourist niche associated with hedonistic and transcendent escape (Cohen, 2011) and thus suited to exploring existential themes. Research findings demonstrate the importance of backpacking as means of seeking both existential avoidance and authenticity in response to underlying feelings of existential anxiety. This links in turn to less and more sustainable forms of tourism, respectively.

Existentialism

Existentialism considers the human being as 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 human beings as individuals are forced to confront the truth about the chaotic nature of life, certainty of death, and the responsibility and alienation implied by total freedom (Agarwal & Cruise Malloy, 2000; Kirillova, Lehto, & Cai, 2017). The first effect of existentialism is that it puts every individual in possession of themselves as they are and places the entire responsibility for their existence squarely upon their own shoulders (Sartre, 1948). Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself, he is the totality of his actions and nothing more (Sartre, 1948). An inevitable response to the existential predicament is existential anxiety. Kierkegaard (1859/1956) described anxiety as the dizziness of freedom. Heidegger (1962) posited that people live in a state of "uncanniness", feeling ill-at-ease, in a state of dread and anxiety as a natural response to the chaos of

life and the inevitability of death which makes internal life fundamentally unsettled. For Sartre (1969), anguish results from the discovery of the nothingness and contingency of existence, whilst anxiety is provoked by the multitude of choices facing us and the different life direction carried by each one as well as by the understanding that we alone are the author of our choices.

Existential avoidance may be simplified as the strategies employed by humans to evade, postpone or flee from existential discomfort. Rather than confront the painful realities of existence existentialist thinking suggests that many people much of the time choose to distract themselves from these by becoming immersed and lost within the routine, quotidian, group and inauthentic (Fromm, 1942). Terror management theory posits that the existential motive to defend against fear of death underlies a wide range of human behaviours (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). Anxiety buffering processes can be broken into cultural-adherence and self-esteem pathways, striving for either of which can be a way to symbolically defend against death anxiety (Tam, 2013). The former involves immersing the self within cultural existence by identifying with and favouring social in-groups and acting in accordance with social norms because cultural existence may transcend individual's decay (Fritsche & Hafner, 2012). The latter meanwhile relates to immersion focused upon comforting the self as of unique significance amongst peers and in the world (Fritsche & Hafner, 2012).

Whilst important as coping mechanisms, existentialist philosophy posits that existential avoidance routines are inauthentic, conformist, stifling, and that too great a focus on these can lead to a loss of the real self, self-potential and actualisation (Berger, 1973; Heidegger, 1962; Sartre, 1943). Man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility; those who do are merely disguising their anguish or are in flight from it (Sartre, 1948). Thus the third aspect of 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 (Xue et al. 2014. Authenticity may be interpreted as an ideal state of fulfilment in which people can be true to themselves (Wang, 1999) and acts this way as opposed to becoming lost in public roles and public spheres (Berger, 1973). To be oneself means shedding culturally accepted and preserving intrinsically meaningful values (Kirillova, Lehto, & Cai, 2017) and transcending day-to-day behaviour or activities or thinking about the self (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). Authenticity, involving the dissipating of deceptive consolations of today's concerns and inner realisation of one's own independent destiny, is a kind of honesty or courage as the authentic individual faces something which the inauthentic individual is afraid to face (Grene, 1952).

Existentialism and tourism

Comic and Beograd (1989) state that the principle purpose of tourism is to give humans an additional hope and material with which to build illusion and self-deception making life easier. To this end, tourism can enable avoidance pathways. Self-esteem pathways focused on indulging and celebrating the self and selected in-groups (Solomon et al., 1991) may be observed within tourism, an activity where the emphasis upon and indulgence of self is well established (MacCannell, 2002; Sin, 2009). Tourist behaviour and motivations are frequently preoccupied with hedonism and relaxation, often in solitude (Cohen, 1982). Meanwhile, as a highly conspicuous and expressive form of consumption, tourism may provide significant opportunities for self-esteem building and display. Travel may serve as a source of intrapersonal and interpersonal esteem, and symbol of social status and improved social standings among family and peers (Chen & Chen, 2011).

Cultural-adherence pathways involving immersion in the social and routine (Fritsch & Hafner, 2012) may also be facilitated by tourism which provides social structure and community (Decrop & Snelders, 2004; Trauer & Ryan, 2005). Backpackers, for instance, frequently share close bonds, codes and cultural practices (Cohen, 2003, 2011). Tourism is an experience that creates and strengthens social relationships among family members, friends and acquaintances (Mura & Tavakoli, 2014).

Holidays provide opportunities for relationship reaffirmation, cultivation of togetherness and social bond building (Obrador, 2012). Social routine is brought into and replicated on holiday (Edensor, 2001).

However, tourism offers not just an escape route but something more than that relating to self-discovery, actualisation and transcendence (Comic & Beograd, 1989). It is not in some hiding place that we will discover ourselves; it is on the road, in the town, in the midst of the crowd, a thing among things, a man among men (Sartre, 1972, p. 5). Both escape from meaninglessness and a search for meaning are related to tourism (Smith & Kelly, 2006). Although not all tourists or all of the time are looking for existential authenticity (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006), search for meaning, connection and self-actualisation are 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 & Kelly, 2006).

The learning, liberating and reflexive potential that tourism holds can play a role in the search for knowledge and awareness of self, individual and collective identity, meaning, fulfilment and freedom that existential authenticity implies (Brown, 2013; Cook, 2010). Wang (1999) outlines how tourists are preoccupied with an existential state of being activated by certain tourist activities and that tourism provides a temporary reprieve from the routine. Away from the ennui and stresses of the home setting, the tourist can be the self they more wanted to be (McIntyre, 2007). There is potential for the re-imagination of possibilities (Ponting & McDonald, 2013). Greater sexual liberation, for example, might suggest emancipation from social norms elsewhere suppressing of natural human desires and self-authenticity (Kim & Jamal, 2007). If everyday life does not allow the authentic self to be reached, then tourism may offer an opportunity to pursue (Brown, 2013). Tourism can henceforth provide conditions that facilitate personal reflection and subsequent self-development (Wang, 1999). A recurrent theme in the literature is that tourism can trigger significant change in those pursuing it (Knudsen, Rickly, & Vidon, 2016). Tourists expose themselves to new and challenging situations, cultures and people in a quest for personal reappraisal, growth and understanding, independence and self-sufficiency conducive to existential authenticity (Kirillova & Lehto, 2015; Wang, 1999). A central function of tourism is in offering a reflective space that is conducive to self-insight and to the examination of life priorities (Brown, 2013). Away, tourists come face to face with existential questions of "who am I?" and "what is my place in the world?" (Brown, 2009). 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

Existential avoidance can suggest a denial of responsibility, painful reality and inconvenient truths with potentially negative implications for sustainability (Fritsche & Hafner, 2012). Social immersion is a means for the individual to cast-off responsibility for own actions (Sartre, 1957). Kierkegaard (1859) described the immorality of crowds into which the individual subsumes themselves, weakening their sense of responsibility by reducing it to a fraction therein. Within tourism, Fennell (2008) interprets Kierkegaard's (1859) descriptions of crowds as a superiority complex which manifests itself through assuming responsibility becomes somebody else's domain when in a crowd. Miller, Rathouse, Scarles, Holmes, and Tribe (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. Authors note tourists blaming others, having faith in technological solutions, displacing or downplaying responsibility, as excuses for unsustainable or unethical actions (i.e. Hanna, Scarles, Cohen, & Adams, 2016; Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014). Garrick (2005), for example, describes sex tourists' rationalisations of their actions by using racism, denial and distortions to justify. Fritsche and Hafner (2012) highlight how existential avoidance pathways imply the derogation of deviant social groups and of nature as a way to symbolically defend against the realm of mortality.

Self-esteem and cultural-adherence pathways within tourism may additionally facilitate a selfish orientation that can undermine sustainability. Criticisms have been of tourists as inherently self-centred

(Wheeller, 1993) and tourism as a form of development which prioritises the one over the many (Fennell, 2008). MacCannell (2002) suggests that tourists can be described as egomaniacs and sees tourism in certain forms as associated with more passive and superficial consumption intended to build and protect the ego. Highlighted is the frequent prioritisation by tourists of relaxation and pleasure over environmental considerations (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014). Although not incompatible with ethical forms of tourism themselves pleasure-seeking activities (Malone, McCabe, & Smith, 2014), hedonistic pleasure may outweigh moral norms with negative consequences (Diken & Laustsen, 2004). Life spent in the pursuit of enjoyment alone is devoid of any deep meaning or commitment to anything beyond self (Rohde, 1968). The self-absorbed narcissist is less likely to be concerned for the well-being of others or environments (Naderi & Strutton, 2014). Gaining an interest in and commitment to sustainable principles may therefore be less likely (Holifield, 2010). Tourists with stronger egoistic values have been found to be significantly less interested in environmentally friendly experiences, less willing to curb personal freedoms, and more interested in hedonistic pursuits (Perkins & Brown, 2012).

In contrast, existential authenticity places emphasis upon acceptance of one's total and unambiguous responsibility for own actions (Sartre, 1948). This would appear to be compatible with notions of sustainable consumption and non-consumption practises which suppose that the consumer is concerned about the effects that a purchasing choice has not only on themselves but the external world too (Cherrier, Black, & Lee, 2011). Encouraging the individual to take responsibility for and control of their actions may make more conscious of consumption choices and sensitive to consequences (Dodds, Graci, & Holmes, 2010). What is more, the pursuit of self-actualisation emphasises deeper and more challenging learning experiences, interpersonal and intrapersonal exchanges, environmental proximity and reflexivity (Brown, 2009, 2013; Wang, 1999). These might be conducive to sustainability in that closer host–guest–landscape interactions are commonly seen as antecedents and precedents of sustainability. Collaboration, for example, something which facilitates the exchange of expertise, resources and enthusiasm that can stimulate the reappraisals, entrepreneurship and creativity needed to develop and implement sustainable solutions (Hardy & Beeton, 2001), is stimulated by proximity of hosts and guests (Canavan, 2016). Similarly, the awareness of natural and cultural landscapes commonly described as a prerequisite to their protection (Almeyda et al., 2010; Eagles, 2002; Reimer & Walter, 2013) is fostered by involvement and participation with these (Cheng & Wu, 2015; Perkins & Brown, 2012).

Existentialism and backpackers

Themes of existentialism and sustainability are pertinent to discussion of backpacking. Researchers have illustrated this niche as one motivated by both the hedonic and eudemonic (Cohen, 2011; Sørensen, 2003). Although this can be true of all tourists (Smith & Keely, 2006), backpackers appear to particularly emphasise search for self-actualisation, growth, connections with local nature, culture and people, learning and challenge (Chen, Bao, & Huang, 2014; Ooi & Laing, 2010; Paris & Teye, 2010). Backpackers are depicted as looking for authentic experiences and wanting to meet local people to share their experiences and cultures (Cohen, 2003, 2011) and to encounter unspoilt natural landscapes and sites (Paris & Teye, 2010). They may see their trip as a form of self-development, learning and change (Noy, 2004).

Backpacking also involves more casual and hedonistic aspects (Maoz, 2007; Cohen, 2011) that might be associated with existential avoidance pathways. The communitarian nature of backpacking, whereby individual and group backpackers are often deeply embedded within close-knit communities with own codes, hierarchies and support systems (Hampton, 1998; Sørensen, 2003) can both enhance and undermine existential authenticity. Social bonds may catalyse existential authenticity (Heidegger, 1962; Sartre, 1948); however, social immersion is also a strategy for existential avoidance (Grene, 1952). Backpackers from collectivist societies are described as preferring to stay in ethnic enclaves where large numbers congregate to experience home comforts and the company of tourists of similar interest (Maoz, 2007).

Backpacking has been frequently discussed within the sustainable tourism literature. This form of tourism is praised as small-scale, locally involved and environmentally conscious (Hampton, 1998). Local economic gains from backpacking are often higher than from mass tourism as backpackers stay longer, spread money over a wider geographic area, bring benefits to remote regions, and tend to purchase more locally produced goods and services (Hampton, 1998). Thus communities providing services to backpackers are more likely to retain control over their enterprises and thus leakage rates are minimal (Wilson, 1997). Backpacking has nonetheless also been criticised as hedonistic, isolated, egotistical and environmentally damaging (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000; Cohen, 1982). Maoz (2006) outlines disruptive, self-contained and hedonistic backpackers as not necessarily less harmful to host environments. Cohen reports lifestyle travellers often found socialising with other tourists rather than the "other". Criticism has been of backpacking as just another variant of global tourism which reinforces inequitable links between the developed and less-developed worlds with the latter merely a playground for the former (Bruner, 1989).

Methodology

This paper took a netnographic approach to exploratory research in order to develop the themes outlined. Netnography is a novel adaptation of traditional ethnography for the Internet as a virtual fieldwork site (Kozinets, 2006). This takes advantage of the changing virtual landscape of tourism and rapidly growing participation in online communities (Mkono & Markwell, 2014). The evolution of online communication enhances the dynamism of online interactions and creates new and exciting possibilities for Internet-based research including netnography (Mkono, Ruhanen, & Markwell, 2015). Noted is the candour and richness of online communities where there is potentially a dynamic repository of individuals' unprompted experiences and reflections individuals consider important (Mkono & Markwell, 2014). The netnographic approach provides a pragmatic and efficient tactic to obtaining and working with online data and works well as an exploratory approach, assessing newly emerging novel phenomenon (Wu & Pearce, 2014).

Participants were drawn from the authors' existing social media networks in a serendipitous and opportunistic manner in that this project was inspired by observations of online contacts' travel behaviour. Limitations of this approach in terms of sample representativeness are readily acknowledged. Sampling is, however, often opportunistic (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) and social networks are typically consocial; based upon commonplace and often incidental forms of association (Kozinets, 2015), therefore the backyard issue may be less significant. Utilising existing social media contexts provided entrée to observing online discussions, presentations, reviews and narratives. The deeper relationships built up over time add study context and knowledge about individual participants, helping combat uncertainties of online representation. Sequential purposive sampling was adopted (Teddlie & Yu, 2007) whereby selection of units or cases is based on their relevance to the research questions not their representativeness (Bryman, 2007). This approach was felt applicable to netnography which uses the information that is publicly available in online forums to identify and understand relevant online consumer groups (Kozinets, 2006).

A final sample of 12 tourists was identified (see Table 1). These were all backpackers travelling in 2016 for periods of 2–6 months throughout India, Nepal and South-East Asia, documenting and sharing their travels publically via social media. Analysed were all publically available social media posts relating to the expedition, including pre-, during and post-trip. This involved photographic (1500 photos), textual (1200 comments) and video data (24 minutes) shared via Facebook and Instagram.

A passive approach was taken in this study. Hereby researchers do not reveal their research activity to online participants, nor participate in online exchanges (Mkono & Markwell, 2014). Non-disclosure can be an ethical issue (Kozinets, 2006), however, Mkono and Markwell (2014) do suggest that gaining individual consent is not required when the data collected are from publicly accessible sites, whilst the lurker format ensures that participants remain unaware of the researcher's activities and interact in the relatively uninhibited manner that is characteristic of online communities.

Table 1. Table of respondents.

Codename	Age	Place of residence
W	28	UK/Aus
K	25	UK
A	25	UK
S	25	UK
J	29	UK/Aus
R	27	Aus
B	25	UK
C	25	Aus
G	25	UK
U	25	UK
T	24	UK
Z	27	Aus

Research and analysis was an inductive process using a pragmatic social constructivist approach to interpret data and build conclusions (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Doster (2013) presents a similar interpretevist approach to content analysis regarding the mix of visual and narrative content created by teenagers on social media. Themes were allowed to emerge from research organically, interpreted in an ongoing basis, and related back to the extant literature in a loose interpretation of grounded theory (Thornberg, 2012), something which Kozinets (2015) describes as appropriate to analysing netnographic data. Colour-coding/copy–paste techniques, content analysis and semiotics (Pink, 2013) were used to organise and interpret data. Such a content-semiotic analysis method may offer insights into both metonymic and metaphoric (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013) dimensions, and denotative (literal), and connotative (implied), meanings, at once (Hunter, 2015). As with Hunter (2015), this visual method was performed through interlinked stages of collecting data, content analysis and semiotic interpretive analysis. All written posts relating to travel were transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word by the author where they could then be thematically coded at the analysis stage (as per Mkono & Tribe, 2017). Visual data were reviewed online with themes amongst and reflections upon these made in author field notes. Written quotes (anonymised) are presented in findings and discussion as they are presented online, but photographs and videos are not due to privacy and copyright issues.

Findings

Netnographic research gives an insight into the tourism undertaken by the 12 participants. All of the participants begin by collectively taking part in the "Rickshaw Run", a semi-structured event whereby contestants independently race rickshaws through India to a set finishing point within a two-week period. The group raises funds for charity from sponsorship of their participation. Afterwards the group travel throughout India, Nepal and South-East Asia. There are various periods of collective travel, fragmenting into separate constituent groups, and being joined by others.

Research coalesced around themes of existential avoidance and authenticity with backpacking facilitating these. Some evidence of underlying existential angst is revealed in pre-trip social media posts which highlight uncertain work and home lives. Six participants had recently lost or quit their jobs, for example. Run up to travel departure brings descriptions of escape from underlying frustrations and desire to find a sense of fulfilment. Post-holiday meanwhile, participants describe the transition back to home environments in largely negative terms. "Are rickshaw withdrawals a thing? I miss it all. Also a devastating lack of chai in my life" (R). Underscored perhaps is the temporary state of existential authenticity which fades out following the end of the holiday (Wang, 1999), or even the way that tourism can trigger increased existential angst following return to the freshly apparent mundane (Kirillova et al., 2017). The same interpretations could apply to loss of comforting avoidance too.

Existential avoidance

A consistent theme throughout participants' online posts is travel being used as a break with or flight from dissatisfaction with home and working routines and environments. It is interesting that travel is often described as enabling the evasion of adulthood, something typified as dreary, constrained and difficult, instead replaced with fun, adventure and freedom from cares and responsibilities:

> 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. (W)

Overlap is with existentialist interpretations of mortality and responsibility as sources of anxiety.

This avoidant escape appears to be into recognisable pathways. Cultural adherence was identified in the high levels of tourist routine followed by participants whilst abroad. Similar attractions, activities, accommodation and transportation are used throughout. J's daily documentation of the Rickshaw Run for instance reveals a consistent pattern of frustrations, drama and perseverance on India's chaotic roads:

> Toeing a rickshaw through traffic is second nature now…time to level up with a 55 km stint through the dark.

> 14 hours on the road and a 3 am arrival heralds the end of the Rickshaw Run. Chased by wild dogs in the deserted nuclear testing town of Pokhran, only to get a flat tyre 200 m up the road was some serious Blair witch s#*t!

> Making it in darkness again thanks to a molten spark plug, impatient truck drivers and some rabid monkeys.

Social immersion is suggested through the established tourist communities engaged with throughout. At times these are reminiscent of what Maoz (2007) describes as backpackers preferring to stay in ethnic enclaves to experience home comforts and similar company. B for instance depicts his stay for 2 weeks in an isolated backpacker commune:

> Gutted to be leaving Laos again, another awesome Pi Mai Laos on Don Det with old and new friends. After 13 hours of bus fun I've made it to Vietnam which I'm loving already, however I'm still a little jealous of K who's decided to stay in her hammock on Don Det and will probably never leave.

As well as these external social bonds, internal social links are celebrated and reinforced through frequent mutual praise:

> I love this guy so much. He is always there with his crazy-eyed stare ready for the next adventure. (G)

> Rain all day so we stayed inside and painted. We can just talk for hours and never get tired. This is best-friendship. (R)

Self-esteem pathways might be evidenced in the documenting sharing of experiences themselves, something which could be seen as an exhibitionistic display of cultural capital gained through travel. Social media narratives appear to be carefully crafted in order to present certain travel attributes. As noted elsewhere, there has been significant uptake of social media by tourists to curate and share vacations, present and manage certain desirable self-narratives and images (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016). Narratives constructed in this case play to familiar tropes of being a traveller rather than a less culturally valuable tourist. Posts by S and A following a visit to the Taj Mahal, for example, use an air of detachment and irony to maintain the image of being unconventional travellers despite visiting a mass-tourism attraction:

> This was from the back of the Taj Mahal but actually I found the guards there more interesting. (S)

> Obligatory selfies at the Taj Mahal today. Best part? holding a chipmunk for the first time. (A)

> One of the wonders of the world and she takes a picture of me taking a picture of the wonder of the world… classic A. (S)

Together these layers of cultural-adherence, social-immersion and self-esteem building suggest a quite psychologically safe holiday, in the sense that participants are mutually supported and

interconnected throughout, and tend towards ego-building activities. These recall Cohen's (1982) self-referential detachment, Maoz's (2007) introspective backpacker tourist groups and MacCannell's (2002) egoistic tourist bubble.

Existential authenticity

As well as being suggestive of hedonistic escape avoiding responsibilities, travel is also described in terms of transcendent escape bringing an appreciated sense of liberation:

> 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. It often comes as a shock to discover the day of the week and the date. Losing track of time, to just be in the moment, to feel alive, to just breathe, feel, see and hear all the splendour in this glorious world has filled my heart with so much gratitude. I am truly thankful. (W)

Wang (1999) outlines how, as a contrast to everyday roles, tourism is regarded as a simpler, freer, more spontaneous, more authentic, or less serious, less utilitarian and romantic lifestyle which enables people to keep a distance from but also transcend daily lives. A describes for example the positive impact of stepping outside one cultural norm from home: "I've not worn make-up for weeks now and I can honestly say my skin has never felt so goooooood #liberation #allnatural."

Reflexivity is clearly stimulated by tourism with travel often referenced as thought-provoking:

> Even when you think you have your life all mapped out, things happen that shape your destiny in ways you might never have imagined. Trust your journey" these words #preach they get me right here #hola #fate #alwaysareason #theuniverseisyours #trustyourjourney #ibelieve #thedoorisopen #newchapter #newbeginning #gratefulheart. (W)

Findings thus relate to travel providing space for reflexivity and encapsulate the role of tourism in fostering self-examination and growth (Brown, 2009, 2013). Likewise that tourism provides space and materials to stimulate self-analysis, reflection, realisation, growth and actualisation (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; Wang, 1999; Xue et al., 2014).

Netnography reveals how such discussions of authenticity appear alongside themes of landscape interactions, deep, challenging and communal experiences. Thus proximity to unfamiliar and beautiful natural and cultural landscapes is an important aspect of this sense of transcendence. "Swimming with phosphorescent plankton made me feel magical. This world is so beautiful" (K). Landscapes are frequently celebrated as providing space to be oneself and live a healthy lifestyle, linking to discussions of existential authenticity being rooted in connections with nature (de Beauvoir, 1948; Shepherd, 2015). They also inspire feelings of spirituality, tranquillity and finding oneself. K, for example, captions a surreptitious photograph of B meditating by a waterfall: "Pretty sure he has found himself #whywearehere."

In addition difficult and challenging situations such as uncomfortable transport arrangements are frequently depicted:

> Yesterdays' 12 hour trip was an experience, here's the view from inside our mini bus...yes those are cracks on the windscreen. Inside the minibus was a different sight with 4 scooters 7 people and a whole load of luggage and boxes. #whenwillitend. (C)

These echo the testing situations which Rickly-Boyd (2012) identifies amongst rock climbers' life on the road and through which self-actualisation may be realised. Deeper experiences of existential authenticity are said to come from physical challenges combined with sensory stimulation (Lew, 2011), such as when serendipitously making connections with local inhabitants: "We were stopped by the side of the road and this family took us in and taught us how to make chai and paint henna" (S). Similarly, existential authenticity is derived from tourists' participation in the event rather than from merely being spectators of it (Wang, 1999). For instance, overcoming mechanical and logistical problems: "Roof rack collapsed into the rickshaw, driving wrong way down the highway, haven't eaten for 2 days but absolutely loving every minute of this crazy adventure" (A).

Learning is additionally described in terms of collective development, with shared experiences building deeper bonds between group members and contributing to a sense of individual and collective confidence.

> 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. (S)

> The most difficult journey that I could not have done without these guys. You got me to raise myself to this challenge. (U)

Findings thus relate to interpersonal and intrapersonal authenticity. The former refers to the search for self-identity facilitated by the freedom of the tourism liminal space (Rickly-Boyd, 2012; Wang, 1999). The latter involves emotional bonds, intimacy and communality assisting a search for existential authenticity (Kim & Jamal, 2007; Shepherd, 2015; Wang, 1999).

These themes are effectively summarised by W celebrating the completion of the Rickshaw Run, highlighting the importance of liberation, landscapes, challenge, reflection and community:

> We actually did it! We finished!! We drove ourselves 4000 kms across India in just a rickshaw!! We saw beaches, mountain ranges, tropics, desert, jungles, a nuclear testing site, tiger reserves, Indian raves and met the most beautiful people along the way. We had countless breakdowns, many moments of wondering if we'll survive, one flipped rickshaw, one hospital visit, multiple runs from police, charged by wild boars, rabid dogs and monkeys. We have been reunited with our closest friends and family twice – so freakin cool! I have been lucky enough to meet some of the most generous, kindest, beautiful people along the way. There have been many tears but there have been many more belly-laughs. All of my clothes have holes in. I've not worn makeup for months. I am now awkwardly blonde and my roots are 3 inches too long. But I wouldn't change any of it for the world!

Sustainability

Cultural-adherence and self-esteem pathways observed appear to link with more detached, inward-looking and self-centred tourism reminiscent of criticisms of backpackers as not necessarily less harmful to host environments than other tourist niches (Maoz, 2006). Posts describe drinking, partying and playing:

> I'd just like to let all you hard working people back home know that it's 3.40pm here and while you're starting your day I've just cracked my first beer. #smug. (B)

> Can't wait to see you guyzzzzzz (ps, we haven't had alcohol for 2 weeks- damn these dry states- you guys know what we are doing on day 1 amiright?!). (W)

> Haha you'll be glad to know then that gin is quite easy to get around here! As are cocktails…and beer…and everything actually. (A)

Posts are moreover frequently self-referential, with individuals and the group the focus of these and surrounding landscapes a somewhat secondary backdrop (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016):

> 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. (W)

This superficiality and self-interest raises questions to what extent local peoples and cultures are engaged with. Descriptions of experiences gained on the road appear somewhat superficial and call into question the depth of learning obtained. "I can now say hello in 7 different languages and have eaten food with my hands, chopsticks, bamboo and banana leaves" (W). Interactions between participants and hosts can seem patronising. Maoz (2006) does suggest that the quest for authenticity amongst backpackers does not necessarily lead to a search for deep and close understanding of locals and their culture, but instead a settling for instant, neatly packaged authenticity. Posts relating a robbery illustrate the tourist-centric perspective of participants.

> To the person who reached inside our rickshaw and snatched our bag straight from my lap, I really do hope you enjoy what you find in there. I'm sure our first aid kit will come in handy as well as our near empty bottle of hand

sanitiser. Don't forget to apply our mosquito repellent but follow it up with the anti-itch cream. The sun cream is pretty cheap and useless but I hope it provides you with some protection. Oh, and my sunglasses are pretty rad too! I hope you enjoy wearing silver lenses strutting along the beach paired with our 10 year old hoodie. And please spend that £7 wisely! We had a pouch of stickers too that we handed out to kids, please make sure they get used up. The kids loved them! Above everything, I really hope you truly have a wonderful day and that these items enrich your life in more ways than they did ours. Now, where's the beer? Let's drink!! Wait, where's my ID? Crap. (W)

Tourist narcissism (Canavan, 2017) could be inferred in the indignation at transgression of play and lack of empathy for local living conditions.

Nevertheless, also evidenced are deeper and more meaningful connections with hosts. These can be associated with the pursuit of existential authenticity, involving as this does deeper interactions with peoples and landscapes. This includes various cultural exchanges between hosts and guests. "These two Laotian women were fascinated by my sewing kit, red wool and handmade tassels. We spent some time trading crafting skills and traditional Laotian techniques via hand-gestures" (W). Social connection is also evidenced in the spontaneous and positive exchanges made with local people on the road. "Last part of the bike-loop and these guys flagged us down. We couldn't speak each other's language but we danced, had water fights, ate noodles and drank beer. Laos knows how to party!" (C). Deeper connections appear to be made, such as a new friendship with hosts leading to a wedding invitation. "The lads looking amazing in traditional Indian clobber for (x and y's) wedding. It didn't stay looking this good." (B). Such exchanges may be conducive to sustainability, rooted as this is in a flow of ideas, goodwill and mutual respect (Canavan, 2016; Mura & Tavakoli, 2014).

Deep connections with natural landscapes likewise emerge. Participants come across as knowledgeable about and concerned for their environments:

> 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. (C)

If tourist awareness of environmental issues can potentially contribute to increased conservation ethos (i.e. Eagles, 2002), then netnography highlights some level of concern for environmental surroundings. Several visits are to specifically sustainable attractions. Tiger, elephant and turtle conservation programmes are volunteered at.

> Spent today giving bananas, medicine, mud baths and showers to elephants who have been rescued from over work and riding. Such beautiful gentle giants - they stole our heart with their big ole trunks. (A)

> What a way to finish our holiday; releasing wild turtle hatchlings on a beach in Sri Lanka. (C)

These perhaps illustrate how the deeper involvement and willingness to accept challenges may hold positive sustainability implications, albeit seemingly selfless contributions to local communities and environments may in fact be self-serving attempts to boost own image or acquire social status (Ooi & Laing, 2010), and as such these could be interpreted as further means of avoiding rather than confronting responsibility as a tourist. Such tourists do typically offer something back to their host project, however (Pan, 2012), meaning that ego enhancement and altruism are not mutually exclusive (Ooi & Laing, 2010).

Discussion

Existentialism may help to enrich understanding of why tourists behave in ways that are more or less sustainable, and thus elaborate upon the contradictions frequently found in the literature, such as to the respective sustainability merits or otherwise of backpackers. If backpackers are motivated by both avoidance and authenticity, as was the case here, then they may be expected to display a range of tourist behaviours with differing sustainability implications.

Research highlights the importance of existential avoidance to participants. Travel is a means to flee frustrations with home, feelings of responsibility and mortality. Featuring prominently in social

media posts are tourism enabled avoidance pathways. Social immersion and cultural adherence are evident both within the close-knit group of travellers who continuously reaffirm their commitment to each other, and without in the established backpacker routines, lifestyles and communities that surround throughout travel (as per Cohen, 2003; Hampton, 1998). Ego-building may be observed in the self-conscious attempts to position as desirable travellers who are ambitious, adventurous and original. Existential avoidance associates with more self-centric, superficial and hedonistic pleasures tourism provides; drinking, playing, fleeting visits to idyllic landscapes and brief relationships with others met on the road. Findings thus echo Shepherd's (2015) analysis of the rootless nature of tourism which disassociates the individual from time and place, something conducive to existential avoidance rather than authenticity (de Beauvoir, 1948; Heideggeger, 1962).

Travel relating to existential avoidance appears to be linked with less sustainable tourism. More hedonic and generic tourism seems to be less well integrated with local landscapes. Tight backpacker communities appear to somewhat restrict interactions with hosts (Ogilvy, 2012). Materialistic rather than sustainable consumption might be prioritised (Arndt, Solomon, Kasser, & Sheldon, 2004) for the image-management and self-esteem building priorities evidenced in social media presentations (Doster, 2013). Touristic detachment, self-centredness and ego are more likely to produce less sensitive behaviours that may antagonise hosts, minimise positive inputs and undermine sustainability (Cohen, 1982; Fennell, 2008; MacCannell, 2002; Wheeller, 1993).

Also demonstrated by this paper is pursuit of self-actualisation through travel with an emphasis on not just escaping from but transcending the day-to-day and mundane, generating sensations of liberation and reflexivity (Wang, 1999). In this case, a tourist journey constitutes a change, a breakaway from the everyday rut, which can enhance spiritual self-knowledge, self-cognition and self-development, as well as more profound understanding of the world (Comic & Beograd, 1989, p. 7). Findings demonstrate the seeking out of challenging, often communal, experiences that can help to stimulate individual and collective learning and development (Brown, 2009, 2013; Shepherd, 2015). Objects and experiences are referred to by Sartre (1957) as important sources of meaning, and related by Heidegger (1962) to connectedness. Here travel provides opportunities to interact with unusual natural and cultural landscapes and to participate in adventurous experiences (Lew, 2011; Rickly-Boyd, 2013). If reality itself is meaningless, then people must make meaning by how they live their lives in order to experience authentic existence (Sartre, 1943. 1948). Meaning is created through experiencing love, through acting creatively, and through suffering (Frankl, 1984). It would seem as if this backpacking holiday is helping participants to create meaning and catalyse existential authenticity.

Existential authenticity likewise has significance for sustainability. Deeper interaction with local people appears to contribute to the positive exchanges that sustainable tourism is rooted within (Canavan, 2016). Similarly, deeper interaction with natural landscapes may nurture increased environmental consciousness amongst hosts and guests (Reimer & Walter, 2013). Moreover, being willing (or even desiring) to put up with significant inconvenience such as basic infrastructure, in order to access deeper experiences of nature and culture, may reduce the need for intrusive development, help to distribute impacts beyond tourism centres, spreading development and alleviating pressures, and increase inputs into local areas (Hampton, 1998; Paris & Teye, 2010; Scheyvens, 2002).

Sustainable consumption often implies some form of additional investment that individuals are not always willing to make as there is often a trade-off between morally superior choices and satisfying self-orientated consumption goals (Luchs et al., 2015). Findings in this case indicate that the pursuit of existential authenticity helps to overcome these obstacles and results in more involved forms of tourism. The value placed by these travellers on the self-actualisation facilitated by deeper and more challenging experiences, means that the additional investment these require is often worthwhile. Nevertheless, avoidance and authenticity are both considered by existentialist thinkers to be inevitable, overlapping and necessary for coping with the human condition (Berger, 1973; Tillich, 1952). Too great an immersion in avoidance may lead to the dissipation of self, but constantly thinking about mortality and responsibility is likely to lead to despair (Sartre, 1957). Although consumption including tourism can facilitate, authenticity is serendipitous and momentary (Kirillova & Lehto, 2015;

Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; Wang, 1999). Sustainable tourism practitioners have to find ways to respond to both the avoidant and authentic aspects of tourism, managing and minimising the possible insensitivities associated with the former, facilitating and harnessing the positive potential of the latter. Responsibility in tourism is complex and an onus remains on influencing and guiding tourists (Blackstock et al., 2008; Puhakka, 2011), whilst continuing to meet the demands of the tourist to travel.

Conclusion

Netnography reveals a group of backpackers both fleeing and finding themselves. Research also shows that such flight and discovery have implications for sustainability. The tourists reviewed here are sometimes self-indulgent, prioritising existential avoidance through cultural adhesion and ego-building pathways. Less sustainable tourism is a potential consequence of fleeing responsibility and defending against mortality. However, this group of tourists is also shown to be willing to get involved with local peoples and landscapes as they seek deeper and more challenging experiences that will help catalyse existential authenticity. More sustainable travel rooted in proximity of hosts and guests and alternative style tourism appears to be compatible with this urge.

Highlighted is the potential for existentialism to enrich sustainable tourism theory. Nevertheless, as a small-scale exploratory study, the findings from this paper are restricted. Limitations of the netnographic approach include difficulty of verifying online participants and lack of physical context traditional ethnography provides (Mkono & Tribe, 2017), whilst a small sample of a particular tourist niche precludes generalisation. Future research could build upon the topics outlined by applying alternative qualitative or quantitative methodologies that allow for greater depth in terms of probing existentialism in tourism, and breadth enabling generalisation. This could continue focus upon backpackers, but other niche tourist categories might provide useful insights. Volunteer and eco-tourists, for example, might be revealing in terms of existential authenticity.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Dr Brendan Canavan is a senior lecturer in marketing at Huddersfield Business School. His research explores sustainable consumption, marketing and management, with a focus on tourism.

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