



Rush as a key motivation in skilled adventure tourism: Resolving the risk recreation paradox

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ABSTRACT

At least 14 different motivations for adventure tourism and recreation, some internal and some external, have been identified in ~50 previous studies. Skilled adventure practitioners refer to ineffable experiences, comprehensible only to other participants and containing a strong emotional component. These are also reflected in the popular literature of adventure tourism. This contribution draws on >2000 person days of ethnographic and autoethnographic experience to formalise this particular category of experience as rush. To the practitioner, rush is a single tangible experience. To the analyst, it may be seen as the simultaneous experience of flow and thrill. Experiences which provide rush are often risky, but it is rush rather than risk which provides the attraction. Rush is addictive and never guaranteed, but the chance of rush is sufficient motivation to buy adventure tours.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Significance

The motivations of adventure tourists are significant for tourism both as a category of human behaviour and as a trillion dollar global industry. From a social science perspective, adventure tour clients make conscious choices to allocate discretionary time and funds to adventure activities, with no material gain. Their reasons and rewards for doing so thus provide insights into human psychology (Arnould & Price, 1993; Arnould, Price, & Otnes, 1999; Crompton, 1979; Holyfield, 1999; Holyfield & Fine, 1997; Jonas, 1999).

From the commercial perspective, knowledge of clients' motivations helps tour operators construct products (Buckley, 2007), design marketing strategies (Buckley, 2003; Gilbert & Hudson, 2000; Williams & Soutar, 2009), choreograph client experiences (Arnould et al., 1999; Holyfield, 1999; Holyfield & Fine, 1997; Jonas, 1999; Pomfret, 2006; Sharpe, 2005), and defend accident lawsuits (Yerger, 2004–2005).

1.2. Risk recreation paradox

Adventure tourists pay for risk recreation activities (Breivik, 1996; Lipscombe, 2007; Page, Bentley, & Walker, 2005), but adventure tour operators aim to minimise risks (Buckley, 2006;

Cater, 2006; Morgan, 2010). The orthodox response to this paradox (Buckley, 2010a; Cater, 2006) is that adventure tour operators sell their clients the semblance of risk so as to confer social capital (Bartkus & Davis, 2009; McGillivray & Frew, 2007), whilst protecting them from real risk so as to avoid illness and injury, medical and legal costs, and poor publicity.

This contribution proposes that the orthodox resolution applies only to adventure tour products designed for unskilled clients. At the skilled end of the adventure tourism spectrum, I argue that clients are in fact motivated not by risk but by a particular type of experience referred to here as rush. This appears to be the first formal recognition, description and analysis of rush. Sensations which seem to correspond to rush, as defined here, have been mentioned by participants in some previous studies, but as “ineffable” or “indescribable” (Allman, Mittelstaedt, Martin, & Goldenberg, 2009; Bratton, Kinnear, & Korolux, 1979). Thus Lyng and Snow (1986) refer to the “admonition that ‘if you want to know what it’s like, then do it’”. Brymer and Oades (2009) quote a BASE jumper: “you can’t even begin to try to make someone who hasn’t done it understand”. And Bratton et al. (1979, p. 24) use a classic quotation from “the immortal Mallory”: “if you have to ask why men (*sic*) climb, you wouldn’t understand the answer.”

For active participants in adventure tourism, rush is a clear, distinct and self contained concept. It is widespread in the marketing materials of adventure tourism and the popular literature of adventure recreation. Examples include: a wingsuit skydiver quoted by Midol and Broyer (1995); snowboard racer Jeremy Jones, quoted by Heino (2000); or skateboard freestylist Mat Hoffman,

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quoted by Higgins (2010). It is a common component in conversation between clients on commercial adventure tours. In this contribution I argue that rush can be understood as a formal academic concept, despite claims by many adventure exponents that it can only be appreciated if experienced in person.

1.3. Approach

This contribution aims to communicate and formalise a concept which previous authors, both popular and academic, have referred to as comprehensible only to those who have experienced it, and indescribable to those who have not. The approach taken here is thus principally autoethnographic, i.e. drawn from the author's own experiences. If, in the views of previous authors, personal experience is critical to comprehension, then an autoethnographic basis is the only approach available.

It is also ethnographic, drawn from extended lived experience as part of a set of subcultural groups, the exponents of various forms of skilled outdoor recreation. There are many types of ethnography and autoethnography, and all of them balance the details of record against the depth of involvement. Approaches which involve interviews, recording devices and note taking visible to participants may bias their behaviour and restrict their conversation, and interfere with the researcher's ability to identify with their experiences. The most fundamental autoethnographic approach involves living as one of those under study, and reflecting and recording only when such interaction and immersion is not under way. This is the method adopted here.

The approach is also analytic, in the sense that it attempts to identify key aspects of those experiences, distil them to irreducible components, and show their relationships to pre-existing concepts. Finally, it contains an unusual element, an attempt to communicate this supposedly indescribable experience to readers who may not themselves have lived through it. The communication mechanism is a set of short descriptive vignettes. This is more closely analogous to creative writing or drama than to academic analysis. It is a routine component of novels or movies, for example, which aim to generate emotional empathy in their audience, for circumstances which the audience have not themselves experienced in person. In the technical academic literature of tourism research, however, materials are commonly used only as a basis for content or discourse analysis.

Autoethnographic approaches have been rather little used in tourism research. Ryan (2005), Ryan and Stewart (2009) and Buckley (2006, 2010a, 2010b) do effectively use such approaches, but not explicitly. These approaches have a longer history in sport and leisure research (Allen Collinson & Hockey, 2011; Ewert, 1985; Holyfield, 1999; Irwin, 1973). Standard reference books on qualitative research methods, such as that by Silverman (2011) include ethnography but not autoethnography. In the literature of ethnography (Chang, 2008), there is a division between analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006), which uses the researcher's experience as a source of data; and evocative autoethnography (Ellis, 2004), which uses creative writing to convey the emotional components of experience. This contribution uses both analytic and evocative approaches.

As in all qualitative social science research, the author owes the reader a responsibility to reveal his or her own role in the group under study. Details are described in Section 4, but in brief, this article arose from the author's experience as a participant in commercial adventure tours over the past 15 years. This included roles as client, guide, and ancillary staff. These roles were made possible through skills gained previously in individual outdoor recreation. They included extensive conversation with other participants, and familiarity with popular literature in the form of specialist outdoor

recreation magazines, DVDs and marketing materials. This lived experience was not undertaken solely or specifically to study motivations, but it provides the raw material drawn upon here: the analytic autoethnographic approach advocated by Anderson (2006). The ethical concerns associated with autoethnographic approaches (Tolich, 2010) are avoided, as no person other than the author is quoted, described or identifiable in this text.

As in many such studies, the components could be presented in a variety of different ways. The structure used here is as follows. First, previous literature on adventure motivations is reviewed, including a summary table identifying 14 distinct categories. Second, rush is defined as a formal concept, and distinguished from prior related concepts. Third, the circumstances providing autoethnographic experiences and ethnographic information on rush are outlined. Fourth, this information is summarised for five outdoor adventure activities, each including a vignette to communicate how rush is experienced by the participant. Fifth, findings are synthesised to present rush as an individual psychological experience, as a motivation in adventure tourism, and as a counterpart to risk.

Under this structure, the analytical formalisation of rush is introduced before the autoethnographic components are presented. The reason for this order, rather than the reverse, is to situate rush relative to other relevant and related concepts such as flow and peak experience, and to provide context for the vignettes which illustrate rush from the participant perspective.

2. Adventure motivations

There are ~50 previous studies of participant motivations in adventure tourism and recreation, and these have identified at least 14 different categories of motivation, using a variety of terminologies. These are summarised here in Table 1. Age, gender, activity, difficulty, prior skill, definitions and analytic methods differ between studies, with no overall patterns apparent. Climbing and mountaineering have been studied most frequently, with at least 15 analyses in the past three decades (Berger & Greenspan, 2008; Bratton et al., 1979; Breivik, 1996; Carnicelli Filho, Schwartz, & Tahra, 2010; Delle Fave, Bassi, & Massimini, 2003; Ewert, 1985, 1993, 1994; Feher, Meyers, & Skelly, 1998; Kiewa, 2001; McIntyre, 1992; Mitchell, 1983; Pomfret, 2011; Rossi & Cereatti, 1993). There are ≥11 analyses of whitewater rafting and kayaking (Arnould & Price, 1993; Arnould et al., 1999; Carnicelli Filho et al., 2010;

Table 1
Motivations for adventure activities.

| | |
|---|--|
| Internal, performance of activity | |
| Thrill | Adrenalin, excitement |
| Fear | Overcoming fear |
| Control | Maintain physical and mental control of one's body |
| Skills | Using expertise to perform very difficult tasks |
| Achieve | Overcoming challenges to reach difficult goals |
| Fitness | Activity simply as a way to keep physically fit |
| [Risk] | [Danger as a direct motivation] |
| Internal/external, place in nature | |
| Nature | Appreciation of beauty |
| Art | Perception of activity as artistic |
| Spirit | Activity as spiritual experience |
| External, social position | |
| Friends | Enjoyment in sharing an activity with others |
| Image | Enhancing how one is perceived by others |
| Escape | A change from routine of home or work |
| [Compete] | [Competition against others] |

Note: for those items shown in square brackets [], some studies did identify these factors as motivations, but others specifically excluded them – that is, participants explicitly denied that they were motivated by risk or competition respectively. Categories are derived from the 50 studies cited in this section.

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