

Regular Paper

Community Wellness and Social Support as Motivation for Participation in Outdoor Adventure Recreation

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Abstract

In recent decades, researchers and land managers have seen steadily increasing numbers of outdoor adventure recreation (OAR) participation. Social and community support have long been topics in outdoor recreation literature. The following study aimed to further explain to what extent social and community support and well-being occur because of OAR participation and how important social and community components are to outdoor adventure recreation participants. This study interviewed participants of three OAR activities including, rock climbing, mountain biking, and whitewater paddling. Results from this study revealed two emergent themes related to socially oriented motivations of participation, which include shared experience in nature as well as social and community aspects of participation. The study also includes activity specific social aspects of motivation for participation. Connections of findings to current understanding of OAR are made and supported in the discussion, as well as considerations for future study.

KEYWORDS: *Community wellness, motivation, outdoor adventure recreation, social support*

Introduction

In 2020, as gyms and workout facilities closed their doors due to public health concerns, many people turned to outdoor exercise options such as trail running, cycling, hiking, etc. (“Increase in outdoor activities due to COVID-19,” 2020). The previous study found that as indoor group gatherings and outdoor park spaces limited gathering, activity focused outdoor recreation group gatherings increased, such as bike rides, hikes, and paddle trips. Natural areas that facilitate these experiences saw upticks in user numbers as users flocked to meet their mental, physical, and social health needs (“Increase in outdoor activities due to COVID-19,” 2020). The focus of this study was on those social needs. In person social interactions were at a low point in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Chou et al., 2020); The purpose of this paper is to show

how outdoor adventure recreation (OAR) has and continues to support social connection and sense of community, focusing on the important role that it has in generating positive outcomes for participants' health and wellness in the process.

Literature Review

Kleiber et al. (2011) defined motivation as "what actually moves people toward action" (p. 156) and suggested that leisure motivation may be context dependent. More specifically, Kinicki (2006) defined leisure motivation as "those of psychological processes that cause the arousal, direction, and persistence of voluntary actions that are goal directed" (p. 149). Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory posits that intrinsically motivated leisure behavior is fostered by a psychological need for autonomy, competence, and as is most relevant to the focus of this manuscript, relatedness, which is "a sense of belongingness and connectedness to the persons, group, or culture disseminating the goal" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 64).

Social Group and OAR Motivation

Social groups and motivation in outdoor recreation have long been topics of research in leisure studies, dating at least as far back as the 1960s (Berger, 1962; Burch, 1965). Burch (1964) found that an individual's recreation behavior and motivation is influenced by the group within which one participates. Additionally, Burch (1969) suggested the idea of "personal communities" in leisure, specifically the outdoor recreation pursuit of camping. These studies also proposed that different styles of camping may reflect different social meanings (Burch, 1969) and that social groups are a source of meaning for leisure activities (Burch, 1964) such as outdoor recreation, broadly. Researchers have long suggested that participants' social groups in outdoor recreation activities are likely to "share a common definition of recreation place or activity" (Buchanan et al. 1981, p. 256). The roles that social aspects of outdoor recreation play in an individual's motivation for and enhancement of activity participation, such as being with friends, meeting new people, and escape from social pressures, are extensively established (Buchanan et al., 1981), yet what are not well researched are the impacts that social components of OAR participation have in context and relationship with community aspects of OAR activities.

Outdoor Adventure Recreation

OAR activities have their own unique characteristics and typologies, and generally require specialized equipment, commitment, terrain (both land and water), and share elements of style and language (Wheaton, 2003). Outdoor recreation activity participants may form identities that incorporate the activity into their daily life, which links them to the community of participants of that activity (McCormack, 2017). This community creates a sense of belonging through personal interactions and shared or social media (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2013; Woermann, 2012) thus fostering motivation to continue participation. Authenticity is a central tenet of belonging to a community of OAR sports activity participants (Donnelly, 2006; Dupont, 2014; Wheaton & Beal, 2003). Authenticity requires significant time, resources, and energy (i.e. motivation), thus prioritizing the activity in one's life (Wheaton, 2015; Wheaton & Beal, 2003). In addition, "solidifying group identity relies on drawing boundaries and establishing a shared sense of the group in relation to nonmembers... the sense of belonging in community is nurtured by a sense of difference between the community and the surrounding society" (McCormack 2017, p. 345-346).

Social Motivations for Outdoor Recreation

Studies have shown a strong association between social motivations and outdoor recreation participation. Seminal works found social derivatives of participating in outdoor recreation (Driver, 1976; Driver et al., 1987). The preponderance of more current research on the

topic is on college outdoor adventure programs (COAPs) and has exposed more understanding on social motivations for OAR participation. Several social and community-oriented factors of motivation for participation have been found. Galloway (2012) identified social themes such as peer adjustment and establishment of social networks relating to college student OAR participation. Hines (2020) found that COAP trip leaders' motivations for participation included sense of community, feeling welcome, making friends, and having others with whom they could participate in mutually enjoyed outdoor recreation activities, and with whom to try new activities. College students' OAR participation is associated with social support (Clark & Anderson, 2011; Kanters et al., 2002; Mann & Leahy, 2010; Zwart, 2016) and sense of community may be enhanced among students who engage in college-based wilderness education experiences (Austin et al., 2010; Breunig et al., 2010; Breunig et al., 2008; Lyons, 2003; Smith et al., 2010). Breunig et al. (2010) found that social interactions such as group meals, friendships (meeting new people), group travel, and reflective discussion were of importance for participants.

Previous studies have shown that activity type may influence socially oriented motivations for participation. For example, in their study on rock climbers, canoeists, sea kayakers and whitewater paddlers, Ewert et al. (2013) found that social motivations were the highest predictors for group membership. Gilbertson and Ewert (2015) also found that socially motivated participants tended to choose canoeing over rock climbing, and that rock climbers in their study were more socially motivated than those who identified as whitewater kayakers. Other previous studies provide further support for the socially oriented motivations of participation, such as being friends and spending time outdoors with similar and like-minded people, in a variety of OAR activities including sea kayaking (O'Connell, 2010), canoeing (Lee et al., 2007), whitewater paddling (Lepp & Herpy, 2015) and paddlesports in general (Ewert et al., 2013; Hines, 2020; Lee et al., 2007; Schmidt, 2017; Zwart, 2020), and hiking and backpacking (den Breejen, 2007).

OAR and Community Well-Being

Some specific benefits to a community engaging in nature based outdoor recreation that may be a reason for participation include life satisfaction and well-being (Bertram & Rehman, 2015), emotional stress recovery (Bowler et al., 2010), prevention of negative health outcomes (Warburton et al., 2006), and recovery from mental stress and positive impact to mood (Jiang et al., 2014). Research also suggests that physical activity in nature may reduce negative feelings such as anger, sadness, and anxiety (Bowler et al., 2010). Several studies support the notion that rivers and lakes in urban centers and developed areas have value as natural places where health and wellness can be maintained or improved by participating in pursuit of outdoor recreation (Volker & Kistemann, 2013; White et al., 2010). Studies have shown that physical exercise in nature may mitigate mental fatigue and illness, and simply viewing and spending time in nature has been shown to reduce stress and have psychologically restorative qualities (Jackson et al., 2014). Quality of life of people living in urban environments may be enriched through water-based recreation activities, such as canoeing and kayaking on water trails, which may provide opportunities for wellness through physical activity (Schneider, 2009).

The present study aims to expand on this previous research to further understand outcomes of community well-being and social support due to OAR participation.

Methods

To understand socially focused outcomes of OAR activities this study was driven by the two following questions:

RQ 1: What is the relationship between social and community development and participation in OAR activities?

RQ 2: What role does social support and community have on motivation to participate in OAR activities?

Data Collection and Participant Recruitment

Qualitative data for this study originated from a larger data set. An overview of the general design of the study is as follows. We gathered the qualitative data from participants of three different OAR activities (mountain biking, rock climbing, and whitewater paddling) at several different sites around the United States that are historically OAR participant dense locations (see Table 1). We presented participants with a small recruitment card at highly trafficked areas such as climbing areas (aka. crags), mountain bike trailheads, and whitewater put-ins, as well as areas associated with OAR activities such as campgrounds, restaurants, and gear, bike, or boat shops. The recruitment card contained study information, a Quick Response (QR) code, and Uniform Resource Locator (URL) web address that provided access to an online Qualtrics survey. Participants used their personal devices (smart phone, tablet, or computer) to respond to the survey. Paper copies of the survey were available for participants who did not have a personal device; however, no participants ever requested a paper copy. Following the survey, participants were able to opt-in by providing their phone number for a follow up interview for further investigation. Our goal was to collect three hundred questionnaires (100 for each activity) from the locations described in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Outdoor Adventure Recreation Activity Data Collection Locations

OAR Activity	Data Collection Location
Rock Climbing	Red River Gorge, Kentucky Linville Gorge, North Carolina Marquette, Michigan
Whitewater Boating	Gauley River, West Virginia Nantahala River, North Carolina
Mountain Biking	Brown County, Indiana Asheville, North Carolina Marquette, Michigan

We collected data for this study from August 2019 through November of 2019. At the time of the survey, we asked the participants if they were willing to participate in a ten to fifteen-minute phone interview at a later date. Response rate from phone call and text message solicitation was highest for mountain bikers for these interviews with 62% of individuals agreeing to be interviewed, with rock climbers at 51%, and whitewater boaters with just under 40% of potential participants agreeing to an interview. We conducted interviews over the phone with the random sample of agreeing participants ($N=33$, 13 mountain bikers, 10 rock climbers, and 10 whitewater paddlers) and consisted of 8 females and 25 males. Consent for phone interviews was provided when the participant voluntarily listed their phone number at the end of the online survey. We used a call recording smart phone application to record the call for later review and data analysis. These interviews ranged in length from 10 minutes to 32 minutes. During the interviews we took, in-situ notes by writing down key words and noting themes. Finally, we transcribed the interviews verbatim for further analysis. Data were then analyzed and shared with an external reviewer to ensure reliability of the analysis. The semi-structured interview protocol contained

a variety of questions some of which do not pertain to these research questions; the focus of this manuscript are participant responses to the following interview questions:

1. What do you feel your primary reason for participating in your OAR activity is?
2. What about the location(s) where your OAR takes place influence your motivation to participate?
3. Of the following, which do you feel is the strongest reason for participating in your activity in the location that you do and explain why? 1) physical activity, 2) the social group and sense of community, or 3) the natural environment, or 4) something else, if something else please explain_____?

Data Analysis

In the primary coding cycle, we reread the transcriptions noting and coding themes within the interviews conferring with notes taken during the initial interview. Coding was organized using Dedoose qualitative coding software. We implemented a constant comparison coding method confirming and further bolstering support for already coded themes as well as adding new codes when new themes develop was used (Tracy, 2013). Returning to these data in subsequent coding cycles, we condensed and combined or split and expanded codes outlined in the primary code cycle to provide a more robust and expansive presentation of the thematic elements found in the interviews. This is described as an iterative process in qualitative research where the researcher organizes the data in themes, oft called “parent codes,” and subthemes or “child code.” Themes or patterns emerged in the data that were in line with our research questions and topic. For the analyses of these data, we conducted two main coding cycles. First, we used a primary coding cycle to identify main themes and subthemes through quote excerpts pertaining to the research questions. We saved these experts for subsequent rounds of coding. Using Dedoose research software we filtered excerpts by activity, participant, theme, and other descriptive topics. This allowed us to identify “codes” or themes that were referenced the most while considering activity, location, etc. In the second round of coding, we reassessed excerpts identified in the primary code cycle and intuitively engaged in reorganization of coding hierarchy by merging or moving “child codes” to other “parent codes,” merging themes and subthemes with others that were similar or splitting themes into multiple themes if they were on different topics. As mentioned earlier, we also identified themes in-situ taking notes during the phone interviews. We used these as the initial themes that were input into the software during the first code cycle.

Saturation

In qualitative research the concept of saturation is where no new ideas or themes emerge in the data (Tracy, 2013). For this study when saturation was reached, data collection discontinued. Table 2 provides a visual representation of total numbers of codes.

As suggested by Tracy (2013) in the second-round of coding we read through the data again to further define or combine coded themes. Finding that no new themes had emerged and that several items were combined we determined that saturation needs had effectively been met.

Table 2
Code Count for Saturation

# of Transcriptions Analyzed	Number of “Parent Codes”	Number of “Child Codes”
Primary Code Cycle		
5	8	43
7	8	45
12	8	55
17	8	59
21	8	71
28	8	86
All	8	84*
Secondary Code Cycle		
All	8	76

Note *Denotes the point in data analysis at which the researcher perceived saturation expectations to be met.

Validity, Reliability, and Bias

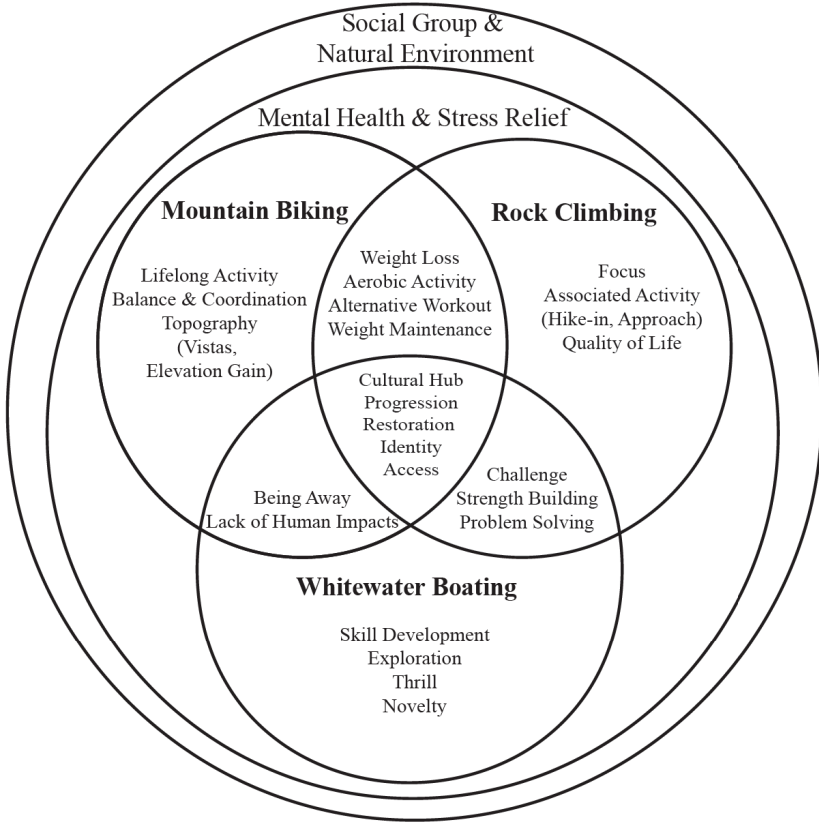
To safeguard valid findings from this study we incorporated several specific methods. First, the interview and the subsequent verbatim transcription process itself was protection for validity of the study. Transcriptions were originally performed using transcription software. Following transcription, recordings were listened to again to ensure accuracy of the transcriptions. A concern of ours was to be cognizant of our own inherent bias associated with research on this topic and incorporated an external reviewer to mitigate bias through an external coding validity check cycle.

Findings

The data gathered in this study provide intriguing results regarding motivation related to OAR participation. Foremost, for each of the three specific OAR activities of focus, socially oriented factors of motivation were associated with participation. The following explanation of findings is grounded in and guided by the two main themes related to socially oriented motivations of participation. These two themes are 1) spending time and sharing experiences in nature, and 2) participating in OAR as health promotion in the context of social connectedness as well as being part of a community through the lens of a holistic conceptualization of health. There were also similarities and differences among the activity types and socially oriented motivations for participation.

Activity-Specific Responses

This section describes the differences based on activity recognizing that the nature of participation in each of the activities included in the study is unique, and that the social aspects of participation are inherently influenced by the ways and settings in which the activities are undertaken. These present the most novel findings from these data. NOTE: Themes emergent from interview responses that were not socially driven will still be discussed in relation to motivations for activity to provide breadth and depth to the reader’s understanding of the findings.

Figure 1*Activity-Specific Motivations for OAR Participation*

Social group/community, the natural environment, and the reduction of stress and subsequent improvement of mental health were established motivations for all activities. The Venn diagram (see Figure 1) shows that there are marked differences and similarities in motivation when comparing between OAR activity ranging in focus from social and community, health and wellness, psychological and physical arousal, etc. The following further outlines some of these comparisons.

Mountain Bikers

Of the three groups of participant types, mountain bikers were the least likely to report the social group as being a primary reason for participating, this could be due to mountain biking being more of an individual sport, where as whitewater paddlers and rock climbers paddle and climb with others for safety, risk management, and support reasons. For example, Schmidt (2017) identified that social support, encouragement, and relatedness for whitewater boaters was paramount to participation. Still, mountain bikers generally enjoyed regularly participating in group rides and enjoying being part of the mountain biking community afterwards at a local restaurant or brewery. When asked to choose between the social group, natural environment, physical activity, or something else as the primary reason for participation mountain bikers were

a bit torn. For many participants it was hard to differentiate between these reasons, as is evident in this excerpt:

Can I say all the above? It's a little bit of everything because...okay. I can go there, and I can ride there's my physical activity. I can see somebody in the parking lot and talk to them for an hour. Yeah. You know, so it's all of the above.

Among mountain bikers, being in the natural environment was also an overarching theme. Belonging to a social group was also mentioned frequently by mountain bikers in the interview responses. Other motivations for mountain biking to emerge in interviews include the concept of mountain biking as a lifelong activity, positive outcomes of participation such as balance and coordination, and experiencing varied topography and unique landscapes.

Whitewater Paddlers

Of the three activities of focus, whitewater boaters were the most dissimilar in regard to interview responses when compared to mountain bikers and rock climbers. The natural environment and social community were mentioned as being the primary reasons for participating. It's important to note that the natural environment was common across activity type and does not represent an identifiable difference between activities. Social group and community also represent strong reported motivations for whitewater paddlers. Paddlers rarely reported that they paddle alone due to desiring social connections, shuttling requirements to and from river put ins and take outs, as well as risk management. All but one paddler, and this participant only said they did this rarely, report that they never paddle alone. In addition, only four of the 10 whitewater boaters who agreed to an interview mentioned that their physical activity was the primary reason for participating, instead most who provided non-social, and health related emergent themes focused on motivations for participating that include exploration, thrill, skill development, and novelty. Whitewater boaters generally did not note or mention physical activity and any form of health as being one of their primary reasons for participation. Several mentioned that mental health was a resultant outcome of their participation however, identified "other reasons" as primary.

Rock Climbers

The primary reason for participation for rock climbers is the social group and sense of community with the natural environment being a close second. Helen identified the relationships that are fostered through participating in rock climbing and stated "I really like the community that it brings it in. I've made some really good friends through it and it's just something that I look forward to doing."

In relation to mountain biking and whitewater boating, there is not much of a travel component to rock climbing as an activity itself. While for many participants said they must travel by vehicle to get to the climbing site, once one arrives at the climbing area that is generally where the participant(s) will remain for the next few hours. Whereas for whitewater boating and mountain biking the movement through the environment is innate to the activity. There can be quite a bit of downtime while rock climbing, as there really can only be one participant on any given route at a time. This allows for individuals or other group members still on the ground to interact, converse, and socialize. Similarly, the concept of the indoor aspect of climbing comes into play here. While boaters or mountain bikers may not ride with the same group day after day, rock climbers who spend time at an indoor rock-climbing facility may climb with or at least interact with their rock-climbing social circles multiple times per week if not every day. For example, one rock climbing participant said:

I mean, I think socially it's been like one of the... like some of my best friends I've met through climbing, so I'd probably have to go with that. Just kind of the community that

I've build through it. All the trips that I've been able to take have been with some of my closest friends at school outside. So that's kind of probably my favorite part about it.

Another participant expands into further detail on the how social connections form organically and effectively while rock climbing.

Whether you mean to or not it becomes a very social experience, if you're climbing with ropes you have to have a partner. And so, you can just go up to someone and be like, "Hey, would you like to climb?" And friendships can form. And if you're not climbing in that style, let's say you are bouldering, for example people may be looking to get advice and talk and you're all sitting around in a group and it's a very natural way to network and build social connections.

The participant mentions the need for "others" in order to participate in roped climbing. That is a key distinction between the other two activities measured in this study. Both mountain biking and whitewater paddling (at least when kayaking), are generally performed individually without the need for partners. That makes rock climbing automatically more likely to support social and interpersonal connections. Other motivational themes among participants identified as climbers include experiencing intense concentration or a "flow state" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1974; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999), activity associated with getting to the crag (e.g., hiking), and maintenance or improvement of quality of life.

Emergent Sub-themes

Two additional themes also emerged from these data surrounding social groups and community support derived or grounded in OAR participation. The following themes represent interesting and unsolicited aspects of OAR participation that are congruent with, build upon, and deepen understanding of the topic of interest in this manuscript.

Cultural Hub

One interesting phrase used by one of the whitewater paddlers was in reference to the idea of the OAR activity contributing to the development of a cultural hub. A whitewater paddler said, "It's also where people, people are really centered around those locations. Which with that comes culture, surround those locations. It's a cultural hub and experience for like-minded individuals." Whitewater paddlers often congregate at the "put-in" or "take-out" where they park vehicles and start or end their paddle, connecting both for preparation as well as socialization after the paddle. Several mountain bikers also alluded to this idea of the OAR activity as providing the development and foundation of a cultural hub. For example, several cyclists discuss how they participate in group rides in their town which tend to terminate or at least migrate over to a local brewery after the ride where the social constructions and further development of the social group occur. Participants noted the importance of trails proximally located to urban or suburban areas where the participants lived, worked, and socialized. Noting that the activity thus became the core of their society. The OAR activity itself and social activities associated with being part of the community of participants contextualizes the OAR activity as a cultural hub.

The cultural hub concept may be most clearly observable when considering rock climbing, particularly when considering the rise in popularity of indoor climbing facilities. Several climbing participants cited the indoor climbing gym often as their "third place" or a location apart from their home or work. Increase in development of these facilities results in increased access and proximity for rock climbers. Most participants identified that they climb more indoors than outdoors because as one participant said, "It's five minutes from my house, and I'm able to stop on my way home from work." Participants noted their well-being, health, and quality of life stem from the fact that climbing is ingrained in their everyday existence due to the indoor facility. The two rock climbing participants who reported they did not climb indoors regularly reported

that they climb outdoors between three and four times a month and generally on the weekend. However, those that supplemented indoor climbing to their outdoor experiences would climb three to four times a week. While most rock-climbing participants noted that while they did prefer climbing outdoors in a natural setting the benefits (physical health, stress relief and mental health, overall well-being, social connections, etc.) of supplementing indoor climbing more regularly into their weekly schedule outweighed missing the natural context.

Identity

Identity was commonly encountered in the data of the current study as well. While rock climbers and whitewater paddlers noted that they had found identity in their OAR activity, several mountain bikers also mentioned this sentiment as the activity becomes a part of who they are, which is in line with what previous leisure research suggests. In the interviews we asked participants when their OAR activity would come up in conversation with someone they just met. For many, they responded that it usually was family first, then their job or OAR activity. Participants often noted that when asked “What do you do?” they would go one of two ways when considering the environment, they were in at the time, whether more work or recreation-ally focused. First, they may explain their occupation or second, they may say “I’m a mountain biker”, or “I’m a rock climber”, “I’m a paddler.” Clearly, many of these individuals have begun to find identity within their connection to OAR and we posit that social groups contribute heavily to that. Humans tend to identify themselves in relation to other people or groups of people with which they are associated (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Table 3
Primary Reasons for Participating by Activity

Mountain Biking	Whitewater Paddling	Rock Climbing
Natural Environment	Natural Environment	Social Group
Social Group	Social Group	Natural Environment
Physical Activity	Progression*	
	Novelty*	

Items are ordered in terms of prevalence of theme
Note *Reasons identified as *something else* by participants

Shared Experience in Nature

Findings also reinvigorated and supported previous understanding of the outcomes and importance of OAR activities. Participants mentioned spending time and participating in their preferred activity (climbing, mountain biking, whitewater paddling) in the natural environment a major factor of motivation related to participation. The natural environment theme was most prominent among mountain bikers and paddlers. Among rock climbers the natural environment was found to be the second most important factor of motivation to participate (see Table 3). The aspect of spending time and having shared experience in the natural environment with a social group is important to consider in relation to participation in a chosen activity. Several participants noted that if they were with their friends, participating in an OAR activity was likely to be enjoyable. For example, one participant said:

I think the times I’ve been outdoor climbing; it’s been with a good group of friends. We’ve gone out, we’ve had a great time and we had a lot of fun. So, I think that was the big draw for me is doing that and being, being outside, hanging out with my, with my friends.

In addition, a whitewater paddler, talked about his perspective on the social group and said:

Generally, the areas that you find yourself in, the only people back in those areas are other people that are similar in skill and ability and experience. You kind of, you're with a community of people that have a shared experience and you all kind of trust each other.

As mentioned, the natural environment was noted as being the primary reason for OAR pursuits, because many of these activities either take advantage of the topography, location, or specific resources that the natural environment affords such as cliffs, rivers, etc. often taking place in remote and distant areas. Part of managing risk in OAR pursuits often means that individuals participate with others for increased safety. For OAR participants, especially rock climbers and paddlers, taking part in these activities alone, without others, is not advised and therefore requires cooperation and connection with a group of other participants. As such, social connection is an innate component to these activities.

Participant responses noted that having shared experiences and working in cooperation, in the often remote and distant areas that OAR activities occur in was key in their motivations for participation. Participants noted that part of their social connection was "remember when..." moments that they have had with their climbing, paddling, or riding friends. Often these moments were due to hardship, challenge, or novelty originating from the variables of the natural environment.

Social Factors of Well-being Promotion

Dickson et al. (2008), identify the health and well-being promotion gained from participating in adventure activities, which generally occur in nature. They cite several benefits surrounding the social connections attained through participation: specifically, "bringing families together, meeting like-minded people, introducing new people into the community, and generating a sense of pride and heightened community identity" (p. 19). Shared experience may be the basis for the development of the social group, with positive holistic health outcomes such as social wellness and social support as motivational factors in addition to the well-known physical health benefits of physical activity in the outdoors (and in general).

The social and community aspects of participating in activities in the natural environment were found to be motivating factors in this study, as well as perceived health benefits as the outcomes of participation in the OAR activities included in this study. For example, a rock climbing participant stated:

I think factors of why I climb are... community and mental health and pursuing something that I love and, and getting, just getting my mind off things and getting in a flow state are all reasons that contributes to my overall health.

From this participant's perspective and that of other study participants, the reasons for which people climb seem broader in scope than merely for physical health benefits. Study participants mentioned specific components such as community and social connection, the pursuit of a passion, and getting into a flow state (Csikszentmihalyi, 1974) as factors of attraction and continued motivation for participation. The social aspects of participation in OAR activities are a major contributing and explanatory factor in describing why individuals choose their specific OAR as well as why they chose to the specific locations at which they prefer to participate.

Social Group

Social group was the second most prominent response when participants were asked what their primary reason was for participating in an activity (as told by mountain bikers and paddlers), though it was the primary reason as told by those identifying as rock climbers. One rock climber shared:

I have a lot of friendships that surround paddling and there's a lot of camaraderie that I really appreciate about the sport that it brings people together over. And I really appreciate the community and the sort of sense that I think that, that there's health factors as far as social support and social wellness that go into that for me.

This participant identifies the social health outcomes related to his paddling in this previous excerpt. For many OAR participants their participation provides them with a sense of belonging and relatedness to a like-minded group of individuals that contributes to the generation of strong community and social ties. Friendships are founded on individuals being like-minded and identifying this sense of connection. The following excerpt outlines the aspect of belonging to a social group attained from participation in mountain biking:

It's certainly a social thing. You know, a great deal of my friends are also mountain bikers. My wife is and then we have friends that come up to visit to ride and lots of local friends that ride, I ride with them and sometimes, you know, ride by myself or there's lots of group rides or things like that as well. So, I think that there's a camaraderie to it, you know? There's this cool social aspect of it besides just having fun I guess, if that makes sense.

Sense of Community

The sense of community gained from participation in OAR activities was another main health promoting attribute for participation. Social group and sense of community were especially prevalent among whitewater kayakers and rock climbers but were regularly mentioned by participants of each activity type. For many OAR participants their participation provides them with a sense of belonging and relatedness to a likeminded group of individuals that contributes to the generation of strong community and social ties. Many individuals identified their activity as a cultural hub or one in which they build their social culture around, which contribute and support community health in a variety of forms (social, mental, physical, etc.)

Discussion

This study aimed to advance the understanding of community well-being and social support because of OAR participation. From outdoor education programs (Sibthorp & Jostad, 2014) to college orientation programs (Austin et al., 2010) to specific OAR activities (Schmidt, 2017; Whiting et al., 2011), the research on the social components derived from OAR is prevalent. The findings of this study identified two primary themes associated with social and community support and development. First, OAR participants identified that spending time and having experiences in nature were motivational factors of participation. Second, participants viewed OAR activity participation as health promoting in the context of social connectedness and being part of a community. This second theme broaches the topic of how OAR participation can be viewed through the lens of a holistic conceptualization of health for participants. This discussion will briefly review these two themes, introduce some theoretical considerations pertinent to this topic, identify several limiting factors, and posit ideas for future study.

Well-Being Promotion Through Social Support

When considering benefits and outcomes of OAR participation, the positive influence on community health and wellness are clear. For example, personal health benefits associated with OAR participation are easily understood as many OAR activities require varying amount of physical exertion. However, we also know that there are other health outcomes as well such as mental, emotional, and social health benefits. These benefits are believed to originate from the social connections and community support found within OAR participation. Deci and Ryan (2000) in their work on self-determination theory posit that humans have three primary needs

from a psychological perspective: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. As we further consider OAR participation, motivation, and outcomes, understanding and connecting these three needs to OAR participation is understood. Needs of autonomy may be met as many OAR activities require a certain amount of self-initiation. Competence needs may be met as OAR activities are often delineated by clear difficulty levels (e.g., climbing route grades, whitewater rapid classes, and mountain bike trail difficulty ratings). These difficulty levels make improvement and competence easily recognizable for the participant. Finally, (Deci & Ryan, 2000) define relatedness as “the desire to feel connected to others” (p. 231). This study provides strong evidence for the role that OAR activities play in interpersonal relatedness, social connection, and community development. The findings of this study found participants ascertaining how their OAR activity fosters social circles and community experience.

Felce and Perry (1995) identify that quality of life is derived from several dimensions including physical well-being, social well-being, emotional well-being, and activity participation. Participants in this study often acknowledged the function their OAR pursuit played in enhancing their quality of life. When considering quality of life based on the dimensions proposed by Felce and Perry (1995) we notice distinct congruence with our findings.

Cultural Hub and Identity Formation

Findings from this study suggest that participants use their OAR participation to connect with an activity focused cultural core. Rivers, climbing crags, trailheads, and outdoor recreation industry establishments such as gear shops, collectives, or campgrounds become many participants' third place. As mentioned in the findings, the third place in community development research is not the first place (one's home) or the second place (one's workplace), rather it is an additional meeting area that becomes the cornerstone of community formation and support (Oldenburg, 1999). Within the area of OAR, indoor climbing facilities are clear examples of third places. Climbing gyms have cracked the code in becoming an essential cultural hub for patrons and have capitalized and supported the innate human desire for connection and social interaction. Bow and Buys (2003) identify that the natural environment has an important function in community and place attachment. However, there is little research on how OAR supports cultural connection and identity, specifically. The present study introduces the connection between OAR participation and the cultural core or hub that is resultant of this participation.

Spending Time and Having Shared Experiences in Nature

This study suggests that for most OAR participants (in this study) a combination of the natural environment and the social experience was one of their primary reasons for participating in their specific OAR activity of choice. In previous research on OAR motivation, Ewert et al. (2013) suggest that there are three categories of motivational factors which include sensation seeking, self-image, and social components. Within the social category, components of belonging (community), being part of a team or group (community), and friendship (social support) are congruent with the current findings. What is less evident in previous literature is the role that the natural environment plays in relation to participants' motivations. Perhaps the role that nature has in OAR participation has been considered obvious, but from this study the nuances between participant responses when considering specific OAR activities are intriguing; further research is recommended.

Further expanding on distinguishable differences between activities, previous literature helps guide consideration in some regard. Ewert et al. (2013) found that social motivations were the highest predictors of all group membership among climbers, canoeists, sea kayakers, and whitewater paddlers. Gilbertson and Ewert (2015) also found that socially motivated participants tended to choose canoeing over rock climbing, and that rock climbers in their study

were more socially motivated than those who identified as whitewater kayakers. In congruence with previous research findings (Hines, 2020; Lee et al., 2007; O'Connell, 2010; Schmidt, 2017; Whiting et al., 2011), this study found that whitewater kayakers, and paddlesports participants by extension, are a socially motivated group among those interviewed, though as was noted in the findings, all groups indicated that social factors and the natural environment were among their primary reasons for participation.

Interestingly, contrary to Hines (2020), the present study found rock climbers to be more motivated by social factors than those who identified as whitewater paddlers or mountain bikers; Hines (2020) found rock climbing to be the least socially motivated activity among those providing leadership and instruction of climbing, paddlesports, and backpacking programs. Inconsistencies in the literature regarding OAR activities, as we see in rock climbing, may suggest the motivational changes may be so minor it is hard to identify and distinguish between consistent motivational reasoning. On the contrary, it may also mean that motivation differs based on more variables than those most prevalent in the literature (i.e., gender, race, ethnicity, age, location). We believe that the findings of this study are rationale for a continued and more comprehensive inquiry into multiple variables in relation to motivational factors and existing themes of participation.

Health Well-Being Promotion Through Community

When considering benefits and outcomes of OAR participation, the positive influence on community health and wellness are clear. Personal health benefits associated with OAR participation are easily understood as many OAR activities require varying amount of physical exertion. However, we also know that there are other health outcomes as well such as mental, emotional, and social health benefits. These benefits are believed to originate from the social connections and community support found within OAR participation.

Theoretical Connection

There are several theoretical considerations that provide further explanation and support of the perceived benefits of OAR participation. However, the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) is the most relevant explanatory framework for understanding socially oriented motivations of OAR participants in relation to the current findings. The theory of planned behavior articulates that “people act in accordance with their intentions and perceptions of control over the behavior, while intentions in turn are influenced by attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceptions of behavioral control” (Ajzen, 2001, p. 43). Study participants' early experiences participating in their preferred OAR activity likely gave them knowledge that a community of like-minded individuals exists where they may engage with positive social interactions and a prosocial environment; maintain an activity associated community (or cultural hub); partake in learning skills in unique environments; and engage with the natural environment in novel experiences.

Those experiences may have contributed to a positive attitude towards the social environment, perceived social support, and associated elements of the activity-based community, in concert with motivation to participate in the activity for other reasons such as thrill, skill development, physical health benefits, and other positive outcomes or benefits. These positive experiences may have then influenced OAR participants to believe that they have behavioral control over their ability to adopt the behaviors associated with their activity of choice and the associated community, culture, and social environment. In addition, accrued experiences as OAR participants and members of their activity community/social world may have impacted their perceptions of the subjective norms of the activity where they were able to experience “typical” behaviors performed by other participants of the same activity.

Limitations

The following outline several of the limitations of this study. First, the initial survey and subsequent interview were not presented to the participants at a controlled time. The interview was even further disconnected than the survey solicitation and we had no control over the last time these individuals had participated in their activity. For some their last participation may have been earlier that day, however for others it may have been several days or even weeks since their last participation. Second, According to Driver (1976) recreation research must be extremely careful when making claims on user expectations, experiences, and benefits, saying:

the subject [outdoor recreation] might be so complex that these variables are, in fact, not measurable, and that we are deluding ourselves to propose otherwise. We must be careful not to “use the users,” misrepresent them, or adopt research and management strategies that does not account for all relevant preferences.” (p. 184)

In order to accomplish this, the participant must acknowledge and be kept aware that preference is being considered as well as clearly understand how and why the research is being performed (Driver, 1976). From this understanding there are clearly some concerns regarding response bias with outdoor recreation research.

Recommendations for Future Research

From our research, this is one of the few current studies that focuses on comparing multiple OAR activities from a general population perspective. The preponderance of the research on social support comes from college and therapeutic programs (Andre et al., 2017; Breunig et al., 2010; Sibthorp & Jostad, 2014). Future studies may benefit the body of knowledge by broadening the scope of this study by considering additional OAR activities while maintaining a general population sample to provide better understanding for motivations and tendencies of the largest OAR participation group.

The most novel findings from this research may focus on the idea of OAR generating a cultural hub in communities. As more trails, climbing areas, and whitewater parks are developed, and outdoor industry business continues to grow this cultural hub concept may be more interesting to investigate. For example, what are OAR participants looking for that draw them to these locations? Is it merely the classic “if you build, it they will come” mentality, or is there more to it than that?

Conclusion

The feeling of community connection and social support has never been more needed than it is right now. After social distancing measures were required for public health people turned to the outdoors in droves. This study aimed to first further investigate the role that OAR has on social and community support and well-being. From there, we considered specifically, what it is about OAR that fosters social support and community connection. Our findings provide further evidence that OAR have and continue to be a viable and effect tool in generating social cohesion, support, and community health, both from a psychological and physiological perspective.

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