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AIMS & SCOPE

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EDITORIAL

The first issue of JTSW in 2026 brings together four studies that, from distinct perspectives, explore the contemporary motivations, practices, and management approaches shaping tourist experiences and sectoral sustainability. The first article offers a conceptual rethinking of urban mass ecotourism. Drawing from Eastern philosophical traditions, it challenges Western notions of ecotourism as an exclusively remote or solitary pursuit, arguing for its recognition as a democratic and therapeutic form of proximate leisure. The second study employs a qualitative approach to examine nature-based sightseeing by bus, revealing how the mode of transport itself fosters profound feelings of gratitude and enhances psychological well-being. The third article provides an empirical analysis of push motivations in sustainable farm tourism. Its findings underscore the critical role of emotional involvement and relationship enhancement in driving visitor satisfaction, highlighting the importance of socially engaging experiences. Finally, the fourth article presents a pilot implementation of agile human resources practices in a tourism SME. The results demonstrate the feasibility of this transformative management approach, while also emphasizing the need to account for contextual factors like seasonality. Collectively, these contributions enrich our understanding of how sustainability and well-being are pursued through diverse tourism forms, from mass urban settings to niche farm experiences, and are supported by innovative management practices.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Agile4ALL – An Agile Human Resources Pilot Implementation in an Algarve Tourism SME 55

Diogo Matias Bento
Joaquim Pinto Contreiras
Francisco José Simões Pinto

Lessons from the East: Rethinking Urban Mass Ecotourism from a Contemporary Sustainability Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Recent events, principally the pandemic, have prompted reflection on the future of sustainability in tourism. It necessitated 'proximity tourism' – effectively, staying closer to home and discovering the proximate environment, the only tourism allowed for the mass of people. A form of proximate tourism, mass urban ecotourism, can sound like contradiction in terms twice over - neither 'mass' nor 'urban' are associated with 'eco' in the western imagination and literature shaped by that outlook. This in part resides on a Western view of ecotourism (and human / nature relationships), shaped by a tradition of romanticism that seeks respite from modernity in solitude or in remote settings. Conversely, his paper argues that mass urban ecotourism deserves far higher attention in the West. The pandemic might have necessitated urban mass ecotourism, but in the aftermath, it can be viewed as an inclusive and democratic form of leisure for the masses that also renders therapeutic benefits. Drawing from Asian philosophical and practical traditions, this paper constructs a principally logical rather than empirical case for the development of a mass, urban ecotourism that addresses both sustainability and the leisure needs of the masses. In doing so it makes the case for western tourism planners and academics to take on board important perspectives derived from eastern traditions.

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1. Introduction

In the recent years given increasing social and environmental challenges, sustainability has become central to academic and societal debates on the future of tourism. Such debates received further impetus during the pandemic years with calls for a post pandemic tourism with a greater emphasis on sustainability. Some have advocated an ecologically focused tourism recovery: a transformative re-set of tourism (Brouder, 2020; Hall et al., 2020). Yet discussions of this 'reset' often focus on ecotourism and green niches based in and around rural communities (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Sefyi & Hall, 2020; Sharpley, 2020). Such ideas clearly reflect the sense of urgency in relation to climate change and the environment and are advocated with sincere intentions. However, the degree to which they are realistic or wholly desirable in a profoundly interdependent global world featuring mass tourism, and further masses who wish to be tourists, is contested (Butcher, 2021a; Butcher, 2021b). It is mass tourism that needs to be at the centre of any meaningful reset.

It was encouraging to see the UNWTO declaring 'sustainability as the new normal', and that 'sustainability must no longer be a niche part of tourism but must be the new norm for every part of our sector' in 2020 (UNWTO, 2020). This reflected a clear but not always acknowledged reality: that sustainability has to address the mass of people and their leisure habits. To do otherwise is to neglect the central aim of sustainable development: that of taking responsibility for the future.

Therefore, in a contemporary context, it is timely to think further about bringing mass tourism and sustainability together, in a mutually reinforcing rather than antagonistic relationship. If the recent debates have afforded the opportunity for global tourism to reset and rethink, it is sustainable *mass* tourism that needs to be addressed. Discussions of degrowth, and of various niches aimed at the well healed and well-travelled, neglect this. The possibilities for mass and urban sustainable tourism have, however, been explored in number of studies (Joppe & Dodds, 1998; Higham & Luck, 2002; Som & Baum 2005; Weaver, 2005; Weaver 2007; Ballantyne & Packer, 2013; Sutherland, 2013).

A second notable element of recent discussions in tourism is its prospective therapeutic and recreational role. Various studies have observed that visitations to urban wilderness spaces by the urban masses have facilitated social interactions, improvements in overall health (psychological and physical), social cohesion and spiritual wellness, emotional therapy, reduction in suicide rates (Venter et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2020; Geng et al., 2021; Ugolini et al., 2021; Xiao et al., 2021; Liu & Wang, 2021; Lu et al., 2021; Fagerholm et al., 2022; Luo et al., 2022; Sung et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022; Master & Sung, 2022). The pandemic years amplified existing trends towards more sedentary, less mobile, socially fragmented populations, and a consequent decline of social networks and sociability. Yet urban nature spots have experienced mass visitation due to their proximity to urban centres for therapeutic purposes (Fagerholm et al., 2021; Farkic et al., 2021).

The paper begins by re-looking into some imperative questions regarding mass tourism: the therapeutic advantages of nature and the importance of democratising tourism. Proximity tourism observed as a necessity during times of crisis (like the recent pandemic), that offers possibilities for personal well-being for mass visitors, is posited as a key concept. In turn urban ecotourism is identified as a form of proximity tourism, involving nature, for the masses, thus linking proximity tourism to important goals associated with sustainability.

The paper then proceeds to argue that the way we often think of ecotourism, and nature / environment in general, would benefit from 'lessons for the east' that conceive of these relationships in ways that affirm – philosophically, and in practice - the masses engaging with nature close to urban areas. It is argued that these perspectives provide a critical counter-position to a dominant, Romanticism-shaped view of sustainable tourism development in the western academy that focuses on the *rural* and the *few*. Specifically, the counter position comprises the Eastern philosophical perspectives of Shengtai Luyou, Shinrin Yoku, as well as Confucius and Zen Buddhist philosophies. These perspectives rationalize mass visitations and cultural intervention in *urban* wilderness spaces *for the many, not the few*. Finally, we bring sustainable tourism back into the discussion and conclude.

This paper focuses on 'lessons from the east' in thinking about contemporary ecotourism. However, it should be noted that there are also long-standing traditions in western societies (Nash, 2009), perspec-

tives from contemporary western thought (Low et al., 2009) and also from other traditions such as Islamic (Jodidio, 2022) that could also usefully be revisited by anyone seeking to consider an ecotourism more accessible and relevant for sustainable development in modern, mass society. For example, the urban parks movement in the United States and in Europe of the latter nineteenth and early twentieth century, whilst not 'ecotourism', and long pre-dating concern with 'sustainable development', offered a model of nature based urban recreation that was sympathetic to the masses, and far from antithetical to mass society in the way that contemporary ecotourism advocacy and marketing often is. However, the discussion to follow focuses specifically on the potential in eastern perspectives to provide a basis for critical reflection on a contemporary western construction of ecotourism as rural, anti-mass and in tension with modern, urban society.

Nevertheless, the study does not dismiss or downplay the challenges of mass tourism observed by previous studies that have deemed it as the main underlying cause behind the phenomena of too many tourists degrading a destination's aesthetic, ecological and social conditions, often now termed 'overtourism'. However, studies have also challenged this view, stating that depending on the context, mass tourism may not always be the primary reason behind problems placed under the rubric 'overtourism' (and sometimes not even causing it at all) (Perkumiene & Pranskuniene, 2019; Nillson, 2020; Santos-Rojo et al., 2023).

The paper, therefore, offers an analysis based on a synthesis of some existing conceptual perspectives evident in the literature. Conceptual analyses are essential for the scientific understanding of the relationships between fields of study, and for initiating deeper thought and insight (Kirillova & Yang, 2022). Moreover, conceptual studies facilitate re-interpretations of longstanding ideas, or development of new and distinct ideas on a given discourse: 'It can add new insights to traditional problems, reveal new research tracks, or make conceptual bridges to neighbouring disciplines' (Xin et al., 2013, p. 74). Overall, the paper attempts to make a conceptual and logical, rather than empirical, case for urban, mass ecotourism as sustainable development. It does so by looking directly at the philosophical premises of 'Western' Romantic thought, which shapes conceptions of ecotourism, and by contrasting this to certain traditions from (albeit not exclusively) the 'East' more favourable to peoples' active engagement with the natural world.

Based on the above premise, the main goal of this study is to emphasize the imperative of bringing mass tourism into the discourse on sustainability. Put simply, 'urban', 'mass tourism' and 'ecotourism' are terms that should be seen more often in the same sentence. Whereas Western-centric literature all too often regards mass tourism as the antithesis of sustainability, Eastern philosophical traditions provide a progressive, humanist counterpoint.

2. Proximity Tourism

The pandemic years had a profound limiting impact on human mobility. As international travel was severely diminished, domestic and proximity travel during periods of low daily infection rates (leading to easing of lockdown restrictions) became more prominent in many countries. In the UK, for instance, proximity tourism (e.g., staycations) rose greatly in the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021, and is continuing to be a popular trend among mass British holidayers due to the reasons highlighted in Table 1 in t (The Sykes Staycation Index, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024). The UNWTO (2020) reported similar travel trends around the world where leisure-based mobility has been largely limited to domestic regions in the form of 'staycations' to nearby locales, particularly nature-based spots. The rise of proximity tourism has therefore become an expected outcome of the ongoing health crisis (Romagosa, 2020; Lin et al., 2025).

Table 1. Sykes Staycation Index -Staycation Motivations and Activities

Year	Motivations for Staycation within the UK over a Foreign Trip	Activities during Staycations
2018	• Easier to travel within the UK • Less stressful	• Staycations with pets • Experience led staycations Work-based staycations (from birdwatching, fishing to rock-climbing and mountaineering) • Luxury experiences
2019	• The range of things to do nearby • Ease of travel to the destination and therefore, less stressful • Positive recommendations from family and friends • The range of beautiful destinations the UK has to offer • Uncertainties due to Brexit	• Getaways with family & friends • Short breaks with pets • Luxury locations and experiences • Sustainable staycations
2021	• Uncertainty about travelling abroad due to Covid-19 pandemic • Ease of holidaying in the UK due to travel restrictions and health risks from Covid-19 • More affordable holiday in the UK	• Staycations with pets • Getaways with family & friends • Work-based staycations
2022	• Persisting uncertainty around travelling abroad due to Covid-19 in 2021-22 • Budget pressures due to cost-of-living crisis • It's easier and less stressful to travel within the UK	• Staycations with pets • Sustainable/environmentally conscious staycations • Work-based staycations
2023	• Enjoyed holidaying in the UK over the past two years • Pandemic highlighted how much the UK has to offer • It's less stressful • It's easier to go on holiday closer to home • It's cheaper to travel within the UK	• Travelling to shooting locations of TV shows and films. • Visiting local museums, lighthouses, and ethnic/traditional style rural buildings • Camping (or glamping)
2024	• Easier • Less stressful • Cheaper	• Seeking understated/offbeat staycation spots • Experience-based breaks • Travelling to shooting locations of TV shows and films • Camping (or glamping)

Source: The Sykes Staycation Index (2018 -2024)

The discussion of the 'Staycation', which is one form of proximity tourism, is believed to have its origin in late 2000s during the global financial crisis (Jeuring & Haartsen, 2017). Proximity tourism is the phenomenon of visiting (and exploring) unheeded attractions located significantly close to homes/point of origin (Diaz-Soria, 2016; Jeuring & Haartsen, 2017; Lin et al., 2025). According to Bertacchini, Nuccio & Durio (2019, p. 3), proximity tourism can also be defined as a 'broad range of leisure activities and experiences that are consumed within the home region, often but not exclusively occurring through day trips and excursions from metropolitan areas to rural peripheral territories'. Proximity tourism brings along with it the advantages of shorter times of travel to easily accessible nearby destinations, that in turn enables lowering emissions and the evasion of the challenges from seasonal factors and absence of long-haul travel during crisis periods (Canavan, 2013; Jeuring & Haartsen, 2017; Bertacchini et al., 2019). It can be said to be democratic – available to the masses – as it avoids the time and resources that less proximate forms of tourism require.

2.1 Urban Ecotourism?

One form of proximate tourism is urban ecotourism. The term 'urban ecotourism' was coined in 1996 by the Blackstone corporation (Wu et al., 2010). In the same year, the Green Tourism Association (GTA) of Toronto started advocating the concept of 'urban green tourism'. The GTA's goal to promote urban green tourism was to enhance appreciation for urban natural areas and cultures among residents and visitors, augmenting the ecological quality of such natural areas, and revitalising the socio-cultural and socio-economic conditions of such urban natural locales (Gibson et al., 2003). Weaver (2005) put forward some potent arguments commending the concept of urban ecotourism as a form of mass sustainable tourism. Urban ecotourism regards modified spaces that support specific ecosystems adapted to urban or peri-urban environments as locations for tourism. They create the opportunity for environmental education,

specifically an understanding of the ecological conditions in urban modified spaces and the ways migrant elements of nature strive to survive in an urban context (Weaver, 2005).

Furthermore, Weaver pointed out the economies of scale and enhanced revenue generation for conservation from mass urban ecotourism, as these 'soft' ecotourists come in far larger numbers than their 'hard' ecotourist counterparts, and therefore contribute substantially in socio-economic terms (ibid.). Socio-economic benefits are significant. They involve investments in ecologically focused infrastructural projects on one hand, and on the other, opportunities for education and leisure proximate to the mass of people. Therefore, large scale ecotourists (or soft ecotourists) visiting urban ecotourism sites (particularly to 'extensive natural habitats', 'remnant natural habitats', and 'derelict and reclaimed sites'), carry the potential to bring positive changes in ways and on a scale that hard/traditional ecotourists in widely advocated niche, small scale forms occurring in far more fragile ecosystems in remote natural areas cannot (Weaver, 2005, p. 22).

Higham and Luck (2002) discuss a number of additional facets of urban ecotourism that may make it advantageous from the perspectives of environmental sustainability and inclusivity, especially when compared to rural ecotourism (rurality is normally assumed for ecotourism in the vast majority of western studies). They argue that the urban version of ecotourism is benign as a lot of challenges that emerge from traditional ecotourism with regards to disturbance to fragile, remote ecosystems, and social impacts on remote, distinctive local communities can be averted. Moreover, along with Weaver (2005), they suggest that urban ecotourism sites, due to their easy accessibility, can bring economies of scale, as they are far less seasonal and the high number of urban and outside visitors can generate the necessary revenue for sustainable infrastructure development, and conservation programmes (Higham & Luck, 2002). Weaver (2002 and 2007) emphasized the prospects of mass scale high concentration ecotourism in urban settings (evident particularly in Asian contexts), to qualify as a particularly sustainable form of tourism, particularly in socio-economic terms.

Notably, despite initial enthusiasm in the late 90s and early 2000s, the concept of urban ecotourism did not get due scholarly attention, with journals continuing to focus on rural rather than urban locations. One of the very few works focusing on urban ecotourism was by Wu et al. (2010), based on the Yangmingshan National Park, near the urban centre of Taipei. Notably, they suggested that urban ecotourism has a greater environmental than economic impact, as it strives to mitigate the negative effects of urban life, rather than altering remote locales as traditional rurally based ecotourism tends to do. This relative neglect in scholarly journals is reflected in popular accounts too. Ecotourism is invariably a rural phenomenon in the popular press, and most often located in destinations distant from key tourism generating regions. Ecotourism of this sort is exclusive due to expense and costly in terms of emissions.

Urban ecotourism has the potential to attract high participation from the masses, and often occurs at sites with locational proximity and easier accessibility (via affordable and efficient public transport). These attributes can be argued to endow it with a considerable degree of egalitarianism. It provides opportunities for well-being, socialisation, and education on the value of ecology, as a human right for the masses (urban residents, particularly those who are economically marginalised and mass visitors).

2.2 Proximity Tourism and Urban Ecotourism

Urban ecotourism is a form of mass-oriented urban nature-based experiential activity aimed at attracting both residents and visitors towards natural habitats within or in the peripheries of metropolises, for recreation, ecological education, and well-being (Weaver, 2001; Weaver, 2005). Therefore, the nature of mobility in urban ecotourism fundamentally involves travel to natural areas in proximity to major urban areas. Given the similarities in the underlying principles of proximity tourism and urban ecotourism, in terms of closeness to the destinations from the points of origin of travellers, and the environmental and accessibility advantages, they can be regarded as congruent. Hence proximity tourism - that temporarily fulfilled the recreational needs of visitors due to pandemic-related mobility restrictions - can feed into a renewed interest for urban ecotourism at a much larger scale in the present (post-pandemic period). Being close to nature is a key motivation for proximity tourists/'staycationers' to travel (UNWTO, 2020) and so urban ecotourism can benefit from proximity travel. Also, it is notable that the UNWTO (2022) predicts

travelling close to home and experiencing open-air activities primarily in the form of nature-based travels will be one of the key global tourism trends for the coming period.

Pertinent to this study, a number of studies on urban outdoor recreation, particularly during the pandemic, indicate that urban residents and visitors in East Asian cities preferred wilderness spaces located close to urban centers where they reside/originate (Lu et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). Easy accessibility due to favourable proximity of nature parks brought more benefits to them in terms of reducing stress levels and enhancing overall well-being. Moreover, in terms of outdoor recreation, the urban masses of Asian cities preferred nature-based areas (containing the natural settings of 'mountains, forests, and lakes') close to cities to urban parks located within the city (Lu et al., 2021, p. 9). As will be argued presently, western tourism could look east for ideas and inspiration concerning urban ecotourism.

3. Lessons from the East: Making Urban, Proximate Ecotourism a Part of the Discussion

While from the Western perspective, urban ecotourism appears to be largely ignored in favour of its rural counterpart (Higham & Luck, 2002), possibly due to the 'anti-mass' sentiment of its advocates (Butcher, 2007), in East Asian contexts this is far less true. Urban ecotourism is far more attuned to recreation-oriented mobility in several East Asian urban contexts and fits with East Asian cultural and philosophical perspectives regarding people and nature. This reality has profoundly influenced planning and designing of nature-based recreational settings (Wang & Buckley, 2010), and driven scholarly output on urban ecotourism in East Asian vernacular languages.

3.1 'Shengtai Luyou'

'Shengtai Luyou', a term that originated in China in the 1990s, can be referred to as the Chinese version of ecotourism (Buckley et al., 2008). However, the cultural standpoint of Shengtai Luyou is based on such underlying principles and practices markedly distinguish it from ecotourism practiced in other parts of the world, particularly in the Western hemisphere. The key differences lie in the areas of dimension, outcome, and settings of ecotourism (Buckley et al., 2008; Shi et al., 2019; Akhoundogli & Buckley, 2021).

In terms of dimension, under 'Shengtai Luyou' ecotourism takes place on a large-scale basis in which sizable numbers of visitors visit nature-based sites for recreation, adventure, and well-being purposes. The involvement of the masses in ecotourism visitation, therefore, becomes a pertinent consideration under 'Shengtai Luyou' (Buckley, 2007; Buckley et al., 2008). Traditional Chinese cultural philosophy of nature visitation approves 'crowding' or participation of large number of people as it is considered integral to the artistic and literary expressions of the region (Cater, 2006, p. 33; Li et al., 2019). Viewing ecotourism as a small scale, low intensity travel activity by Western scholars is in the Eastern perspective strongly perceived as a denial of the masses' liberty to engage in nature travel, and consequent encouragement of elitism (Yang, 2018).

The Marxist view, a version of which has been formally embraced in the political philosophy of the People's Republic of China (PRC), postulates that transformative and emancipating social development can only occur through the involvement of the masses (Zeng, 2015). Development of scientific, aesthetic, and spiritual thought processes that bring positive changes to society, environment and culture are affirmed as outcomes of the actions of the masses (Zeng, 2015). Therefore, the progress of ecotourism without the participation of the masses as a socio-ecological and cultural force is contrary to this thinking. The concept of 'Shengtai Luyou' appears to have embraced this praxis and hence, advocates the participation of masses. Here it seems to be in sharp disagreement with the western conception of ecotourism, generally deemed to be a small-scale activity in order to be ecologically compatible and socio-culturally responsible.

The desirable outcomes of ecotourism under 'Shengtai Luyou' are seen as based upon the individual, but also collective, well-being of visitors. Visitation to nature-based areas for ecotourism in East Asian contexts are often associated with physical and mental wellbeing associated with socialisation (among friends and family), engaging in nature-based recreational activities (bathing in the waterfalls, picnicking, camping, moderate difficulty forest hiking, and angling), as well as spiritual (temple visits and meditation,

and experiencing nature) (Buckley et al., 2008; Shi et al., 2019; Khanra et al., 2021). In contrast, the Western practice of ecotourism tends to focus on the welfare of the visited than the visitor, as well as environmental stewardship and enhancement of local socio-cultural and socio-economic vitality.

Notably, Shengtai Luyou is an environmental philosophy that seems to contrast in important ways with the Romanticism that shapes western conceptions of the human / nature relationship, and their manifestation in the advocacy and promotion of ecotourism (Li et al., 2019; Akhoundogli & Buckley, 2021). Western Romanticism, foundational in the sentiments that shape the demand for natural experiences such as ecotourism, has always drawn upon solitude and solitary contemplation (Pepper, 1996). This is in come contrast to the apparently more 'social' conception of Shengtai Luyou. The foundations of Romanticism, associated with the Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire, stress the individual – their uniqueness, their emotions - and oppose the impact of modern rationality on the human soul (Ferber, 2010). In the 19th century, Wordsworth's poetic Romanticism was accompanied by a desire to keep the Lake District free from the masses, to protect its sublime beauty that not all, he felt, could appreciate (Zuelow, 2015). He opposed the development of the railway to Windemere on that basis (ibid.). Henry David Thoreau's *Walden, or, Life in the Woods* expressed a similar North American transcendental Romanticism that saw a need for solitude, a being at one with nature, as radical respite from the rationality of modernity (Thoreau, 2017 (original 1854). These sentiments are reflected subsequently in western culture, through to the present day: from the establishment of the US National parks such as Yosemite and Yellowstone (Demars, 2009); to Jack Kerouac's desire to live atop a mountain on his own in *Lonesome Traveller* (2000); to the modern ecotourist, seeking succour in the face of urban modernity, in nature and with peoples deemed to live closer to it (Kitheka et al., 2019).

In terms of settings of ecotourism sites, in 'Shengtai Luyou' the aesthetic conditions of nature-based locations can be augmented by human interventions like incorporation of cultural, artistic, and spiritual edifices (Buckley et al., 2008; Li et al., 2019). As a result, East Asian nature-based sites, particularly those close to urban areas, tend to have a certain degree of altered landscapes consisting of cultural structures amid nature (Wen & Ximing, 2008; Lee et al., 2012). Such cultural and spiritual enclosures within nature are believed to enhance the quality of human-nature interface from a metaphysical point of view (Wen & Ximing, 2008). This is yet another context in which the Western view of ecotourism – specifically its Romanticism - is somewhat opposed to 'Shengtai Luyou'. In the contemporary Western view of ecotourism, human interferences in nature by means of inclusion of aesthetic elements are detrimental to the fragile ecological and social conditions of the area and can stand in the way of conservation and protection of sensitive environmental and socio-cultural elements (Buckley et al., 2008; Shi et al., 2019). The Eastern view, by contrast, 'tend[s] to favour human manipulation of nature in order to enhance its appeal compared to its preservation in a pristine state' (Cater, 2006, p. 33). Eastern Asian philosophical perspectives emanating from Confucianism and Zen Buddhism are founded on the principle of harmony and unity between nature and humans (Lee et al., 2012; Pang et al., 2025). Sustainability understood in this way involves non-exclusion of both man-made (cultural, artistic, and spiritual) elements and physical environmental elements in natural settings as a part of the harmonious interrelationship between the two (Lee et al., 2012; Li et al., 2016; Christensen, 2017). As such it is more sympathetic to a conception such as 'urban ecotourism', a term that sounds contradictory from a Romantic perspective.

Differences between Eastern and Western views of ecotourism go beyond 'Shengtai Luyou'. Various studies in the past have demonstrated the contrasts between the way ecotourism has been perceived, practised, and philosophised in the East and West. For instance, the western pro-environmental view posits that local communities in ecotourism settings are often resistant to development emanating from tourism growth or are often unaware of the economic benefits of tourism (Cater, 2006). On the contrary, in many instances locals often seek economic opportunities through tourism to lift their living standards and for having access to improved facilities in the vicinity of their residences. Local communities (or indigenous communities) living in ecotourism settings are also often perceived to be leading (and contented with) very traditional and humble lifestyles. This creates the impression of a considerable degree of cultural 'exoticness', whereas on the contrary indigenous communities have been observed to be keen to embrace more convenient non-traditional lifestyles and possessing aspirations of better living standards emanating from capitalist-materialistic lifestyles (Cater, 2006). Moreover, what are sometimes deemed to be 'sustainable'

and ecologically sensitive practices in poor, rural areas – sometimes admired as 'the environmentalism of the poor', and desirable from the perspective of the western ecotourism advocate – may in fact be simply cultural norms and ways of living suited to survival in the context of poverty (Milton, 1996).

3.2 The South Korean case

In South Korea, the cultural narrative in human-nature relationship emerges from the Confucian and Zen Buddhist philosophies. Such a narrative emphasizes the unity of human and the natural environment. Essentially known as the 'unity of man and Heaven', the underlying principle of East Asian philosophies is to deem all constituents of earth as one body (Lee et al., 2012; Pang et al., 2025). The Confucian belief prevalent across North and East Asian cultures, considers the trinity of heaven, Earth, and humans as a collective entity in the cosmos, where humans are referred to as a progeny of heaven and earth. Based on this principle, all elements of heaven and earth or nature can be deemed as siblings of humans, and are hence, unified (Pang et al., 2025). This forms the conceptual basis of sustainable ecotourism in Korean context, that is strongly underpinned in the Confucian philosophy of 'creative transformation' (Lee et al., 2012, p. 523). 'Creative transformation', is characterized by the harmonization brought about by the alterations in human and nature-based elements; permissible by the principle that both are unified critical elements of the universe (Wen & Ximing, 2008; Lee et al., 2012).

The process of harmony between humans and nature is central to the South Korean concept of sustainability, as both are perceived to complement each other through a process of conservation and restoration. Based on this view, human actions in nature are permissible as long as the physical and aesthetic resources of the latter are not exhausted, creating disharmony.

The incorporation of cultural (and spiritual) structures within wilderness areas in South Korea, are common, as evident in Ppuri Park, a recreational forest in the outskirts of Daejeon, where structures relating to 'Filial Piety' have been embedded. More instances of such occurrences can be found in Gyeryongsan National Park and the Jangtaesan Recreational Forest, both located in proximity to Daejeon where spiritual/religious and recreational structures comprise a significant portion of the aesthetic features. While the Gyeryongsan National Park features the Donghaksa Buddhist temple originally built in the 8th century AD, the Jangtaesan recreational forest contains the spiralling recreational skywalk overlooking the thick canopy of the only metasequoia forest (ginkgo trees and bald cypress) in South Korea. Such instances 'are viewed as the harmonious integration of the human spirit with the surrounding physical environment' (Lee et al., 2012, p. 529). Moreover, such integrations of human structures within nature also reflect creative transformation that brings harmony and a spirit of regeneration. Visitations to such urban wilderness spots that reflect harmony via creative transformation tend to involve mass visitors who seek recreational, wellbeing and spiritual experiences in such environs, and their group sizes also tend to be large (Wen & Ximing, 2008). Visitation based on such motives and scale is regarded compatible with nature, based on the principle of harmony and unification of human and physical environment in the cultural philosophies of Confucianism and Zen Buddhism (Wen & Ximing, 2008; Lee et al., 2012).

As with Shengtai Luyou, the philosophical basis on which ecotourism (and sustainability) is understood and practised in South Korea also partially contradicts Western conceptualisations. This is in terms of: firstly, creative transformation as opposed to a conservationist approach in the West; secondly, intervention of human (spiritual and cultural) structures in nature based on the tenet of human-nature unity, as opposed to the western view that deems such interventions damaging to nature (Cater, 2006; Wen & Ximing, 2008; Lee et al., 2012); and thirdly – and most importantly in the context of this paper - the presence of masses as opposed to a greater degree of solitude.

3.3 Japan's 'Shinrin Yoku'

The Japanese concept of 'nature/forest bathing' or 'Shinrin Yoku', advocates mindfulness travels (or short trips) to forest areas or nearby nature-based areas and engaging in less challenging nature-based activities such as walking or sitting-back amidst nature (Paletto et al., 2024). Studies refer to the Japanese Shinto faith as the origin of the belief in the therapeutic powers of wilderness areas – such powers emanate from spiritual elements residing within trees that engage with humans and unify them with nature result-

ing in a healing effect (Farkic et al., 2021). In 1982, the forest agency of the Japanese government introduced 'Shinrin Yoku' as a practice (and a concept) that involved visiting forest areas for recreational, and nature-based therapeutic tourism (Tsunetsugu Park & Miyazaki, 2010; Farkic et al., 2021; Pérez-Calderón et al., 2024). Over the years, it became incorporated as part of a widely practised health and well-being activity aimed at mitigating stress, anxiety and restore normal organ, nervous system, blood, and sensory functions (Park et al., 2009; Tsunetsugu et al., 2010). Furthermore, the practice of 'Shinrin Yoku' was also aimed at conservation and protection of forest areas and developing consciousness on the value of nature to human society (and individual human well-being in particular) (Farkic et al., 2021).

'Shinrin Yoku', more specifically refers to forest-air breathing as 'bathing' as it involves the inhalation of both volatile and non-volatile components present in the fresh air of forests that improves human health (Craig et al., 2016). Some of the outcomes of participating in Shinrin Yoku or 'nature/forest bathing', is experience healing qualities of it from stress and anxieties of urban (prosaic) life and obtaining spiritual wellbeing by connecting (and harmonising) with nature through the 5 senses (Guardini et al., 2023; Pérez-Calderón et al., 2024). The 5 senses can be referred to as 'vision (scenery), olfaction (smell of wood), audition (sound of running streams or the rustle of leaves), tactile sensation (feel of the surfaces of trees and leaves), and taste' (Tsunetsugu et al., 2010, p. 29). The connection with nature through the 5 senses aids in developing strong bondages with it and brings both psychological and physiological benefits to individual. From a physiological point of view, practice of 'Shinrin Yoku' in the form of short forestwalks has been observed to reduce stress, hyperactive behavioural responses, hypertension, and improve cardiac health (Pratiwi et al., 2020). Individuals suffering from high blood glucose levels or with a severe type of diabetes have experienced improvements in their body functions through participation in 'Shinrin Yoku' (Park et al., 2009; Pratiwi et al., 2020).

Positive behavioural responses and spiritual well-being were some of the outcomes observed in previous studies focusing on tourists' psychology. A spiritual experience in the context of 'Shinrin Yoku' can be described as healing process of the mind and body of an individual enabled by exposure to nature (Hansen & Jones, 2020; Guardini et al., 2023; Pérez-Calderón et al., 2024). Such nature-spiritual element emerges from the experiential mental impact of the wilderness environments and their scenic beauty on humans as evidenced through the expressions of romanticism and transcendence in visual art forms, literature, science, philosophies relating to naturalism, and mysticism (Hansen & Jones, 2020). The spiritual experience has also been observed to be elevated by socialisation - the collective appreciation of nature between individuals with fellow participants of 'Shinrin Yoku'. This interpersonal, as opposed to solitary, dimension strengthened both shared and individual senses of spiritual wisdom (Frederickson & Anderson, 1999).

From a behavioural perspective, the benefits of 'Shinrin Yoku' can be evidenced through improvements in emotional responses (mitigation of anger, depression, anxiety, mental fatigue, hostility, confusion, and sense of isolation) (Pratiwi et al., 2020; Hajj, 2023). Individuals who have participated in guided forest walks have shown signs of positive transformations in terms of their psychological (emotional and cognitive) health (Song et al., 2018; Pratiwi et al., 2020).

'Shinrin-yoku' is considered to be one of the most accessible ways to get in touch with the natural world and to lower excessive stress to level (Tsunetsugu et al., 2010, p. 28). This makes forest bathing in wilderness areas close to urban areas as well as green spaces within them accessible to the mass populace residing in metropolitan areas, and to visitors (and urban tourists). Therefore, mass proximity travel emerges as the praxis for 'Shinrin-yoku' in urban contexts (and urban resident well-being and recreation, as well as a therapeutic tourism offering in urban tourism).

Table 2. Comparative Features Between Eastern View of Ecotourism based on Asian Philosophical and Practical Traditions and Western View of Ecotourism

	Eastern View of Ecotourism based on Asian Philosophical and Practical Traditions			Western View of Ecotourism
	Shengtai Lüyou (Chinese)	**Shinrin Yoku (Japanese)**	**South Korean View of Ecotourism (based on Zen Buddhism and Confucianism)**	**Western View of Ecotourism**
Overarching Philosophy	Ecotourism emphasizes human health, embodies a preference for enhancing nature through art and artifacts, and embraces limitless scale—ultimately nurturing both individual and collective well-being among visitors	"Forest bathing," or Forest-air breathing involves inhaling natural compounds that soothe stress and anxiety, and also fostering spiritual well-being by reconnecting with nature through the five senses—sight, smell, sound, touch, and even taste.	"Unity of man and Heaven" or the unity of human and the natural environment. Heaven, Earth, and humanity form a cosmic trinity, with humans as the offspring of heaven and earth—making all natural elements their siblings and part of a unified whole (universe)	• Western Classical Conservationist approach (shaped by 18th & 19th century Western Romanticism) emphasizes eco-centrism, solitude and solitary contemplation. • Advocates for the welfare of the visited rather than the visitor.
Scale	Large scale/ involvement of the masses / mass participation	When set in nearby forests, forest bathing can involve large groups of individuals seeking spiritual and physical well-being through short walks in nature	The concept of 'creative transformation' permits the involvement of mass visitors (large groups) seeking recreational, wellbeing and spiritual experiences in such environs	Small scale (often expensive), low intensity travel activity to be ecologically compatible and socio-culturally responsible.
Nature-human Interaction	Aesthetic augmentation of nature-based locations by human (cultural, artistic and spiritual) interventions	Collective appreciation of nature via socialisation with fellow participants in short forest walk experiences	'Creative transformation' is characterized by the harmonization brought about by the alterations in human and nature-based elements	Disapproval of human interferences in nature, and rejection of humans being integral to or in harmony with nature
Experiential Aspects	Enhancement of physical and mental wellbeing via • socialisation (among friends and family) • engaging in nature-based recreational activities • spiritual (temple visits, meditation, and experiencing nature)	mindfulness travels (or short walking trips) to forest or nearby nature-based areas and engaging in simple, calm and low effort nature-based activities	Visitation to wilderness areas seeking recreational, wellbeing and spiritual experiences in such environs (consistent with the idea of 'creative transformation')	Low impact experiences that can often involve difficult and physically challenging activities, embraced by hard ecotourists (with deep or eco-purist tendencies).

Source: Buckley et al., 2008; Wen & Ximing, 2008; Cater, 2006; Tsunetsugu et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2012; Shi et al., 2019; Akhoundogli & Buckley, 2021; Farkic et al., 2021; Paletto et al., 2024.

4. Urban Residents, Urban Tourists, and Proximity Ecotravel to Urban and Peri-urban Wilderness Spaces

Studies have shown that urban residents often desire visitations to biodiverse (or biologically rich) wilderness spaces over simple green spaces. Such desire arises from individual aesthetic needs (Fischer et al., 2018). Urban wastelands and modified spaces converted into biodiverse green spaces, either via a natural process or urban green planning, have in some cases become preferred wilderness spots for urban residents and visitors, to connect with nature (Fischer et al., 2018).

Lake Văcărești in Bucharest, Romania, an unfinished and abandoned water infrastructure in the late 1980s, has become a naturally transformed urban wilderness space supporting a wide range of flora and fauna, particularly relating to avian life, mammals, and reptiles (Tribillon, 2016). Urban residents belonging to different demographic, and socio-cultural groups derive therapeutic and personal well-being benefits from such biologically rich urban wilderness spots as shared urban green spaces lying in close proximity to their residences (Fischer et al., 2018; Fagerholm et al., 2021). Moreover, varying levels of biodiversity richness between natural green spots within urban areas and peri-urban natural areas can also enable visitors derive comparable degrees of well-being and recreational benefits from both (Carrus et al., 2015).

The Bukit Nanas Nature Reserve in the middle of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, a small tract of virgin urban rainforest with moderate level of species diversity and 5 nature trails, has drawn admiration from both urban residents and international visitors for recreation, well-being, experiential education on environment and sustainability (Faezah et al., 2013; Aziz et al., 2017; Rahman et al., 2017). Bukit Nanas Forest reserve serves as an ideal sample for experiencing tropical Malaysian rainforest biodiversity, to international travellers desiring to visit the country's major rainforest-based ecotourism sites as well as those with a primary purpose of experiencing urban and cultural tourism (Aziz et al., 2017). In the same vein, Bukit Gasing Forest nestled between the cities of Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya, Malaysia offers a congenial setting for tourist visitation in the form of engaging forest hiking trails in close proximity to urban tourism hubs (Foo, 2016).

Urban wilderness areas, particularly human modified natural areas, when driven by 'self-organized ecosystem processing' can result in zero carbon forestry and high adaptability to urban conditions due to the presence of a mix of indigenous and non-indigenous plant species (Kowarik, 2021, p. 95). Moreover, the combination of human relics (and cultural structures) and nature in various urban contexts make urban wilderness a *cultural* concept (Kowarik, 2013; Kowarik, 2021). Both these factors contribute towards making urban areas environmentally resilient and socially compatible to mass visitors (Shi et al., 2019).

In proximity ecotravel contexts, the visitor-visited dichotomy as established by existing literature on traditional ecotourism can be negated given that in a geographically (and spatially) proximate destination local residents *are visitors as well as tourists* (Chen & Chen, 2017; Jeuring 2018; Salmela et al., 2021). The degree of proximity urban ecotourism settings offers to urban residents generate a sense of duality in them in terms of being both visited (resident) and the visitor as they encounter the unexpected 'otherness' of a 'familiar' natural area close to home (Salmela et al., 2021, p. 54).

5. The Sustainability of Urban Ecotourism

Urban ecotourism fits what is often regarded as a criterion of sustainability – inclusivity. In contrast to expensive and exclusive eco destinations, it widens access, or 'democratises', enjoyment of nature. Urban forests contain psychological restorative properties, in terms of instilling positive sensations and socialising opportunities. This is important in urban environments which, despite their apparent conviviality and population density, can be lonely places (note that loneliness implies a longing for the companionship of others and to be a *part of* something, whereas solitude, associated with western ecotourism, expresses desire to be *apart from* others).

Sensory gardens in forest locations close to urban areas offer nature-based recreational opportunities for those with a range of mobility limitations (physical challenges) as well as psychological challenges (Jang & Son, 2020; Wajchman-Switalska et al., 2021; Lin et al., 2025). Furthermore, it has also been observed that visitors with physical mobility challenges also face economic challenges arising out of unaffordable costs of tours that are compatible with their disability needs (Jang & Son, 2020; Wajchman-Switalska et al., 2021). This can be overcome by accessible attributes of proximal urban green space, such as guidelines and infrastructure to overcome communicative, social, and structural barriers (Wajchman-Switalska et al., 2021). The degree of ease in accessibility and 'universal design' of urban forest -based recreational areas promote a sense of 'social inclusivity' for a large section of urban masses who are faced with challenges, which may be physical, psychological as well as economic (Wajchman-Switalska et al., 2021, pp. 11-12). Hence, the perception of mass visitors about biodiversity is shaped by their understandings of urban

natural spaces that foster social inclusivity and universalism; such understandings bring public support for conservation of urban wilderness areas (Carrus et al., 2015).

According to Kowarik 'urban wilderness areas are usually used by a range of urban people, often including marginalized groups that benefit from the 'otherness' of these informal greenspaces in terms of missing regulations and opportunities for interacting with natural elements' (2018, p. 343). Moreover, visitation to urban nature-based spots with higher levels of biodiversity also encourages socialisation (social interaction) opportunities among visitors that aids in the building of strong kinship, and sense of community, and resulting in their collective well-being (Foo, 2016; Fagerholm et al., 2021).

Therefore, it is apparent that urban nature has a significant mutually beneficial inter-relationship with mass visitors. This contrasts with the anti-mass tourism sentiments of ecotourism as often conceived of (Butcher, 2007). Sustainable urban mass tourism in the form of proximity ecotourism in urban areas, fosters such interrelationship. Often aided by mass public transit systems or other forms of low emission transport, and involvement of larger sections of the populace, particularly the economically and physically marginalised, mass urban ecotourism addresses critical environmental and social sustainability goals. On one hand, opportunities for socialisation, recreation, well-being, and therapeutic benefit, and on the other hand, appreciation of urban nature and advocacy for its conservation, as well as education and experiential learning on its ecological value, are some of the transformative and utilitarian benefits urban mass visitors can derive from socially inclusive urban wilderness spaces (Shwartz et al., 2014; Carrus et al., 2015; Foo, 2016; Kowarik, 2018; Kowarik, 2021; Fagerholm et al., 2021; Wajchman-Switalska et al., 2021). These outcomes of proximate urban wilderness spaces potentially contribute to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) of ensuring healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, making cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable, sustainably managing forests, and ensuring of sustainable consumption and production patterns.

Finally, recent studies on mass ecotourism have observed ecotourists motivated by the desire to learn about ecological elements (flora and fauna species) through nature-oriented storytelling techniques while experiencing wilderness (Shi et al., 2019). Moreover, urban communities residing in close proximity to major biodiversity spots like the Amazon, reap benefits from mass ecotourism in terms of building of 'social and cultural capital, as well as entrepreneurial skills, self-esteem, respect for nature and cultural values, motivation to pursue formal education, and collective action' (Neleman & Castro, 2016, pp. 276-77).

6. Conclusion

Proximity tourism has become more salient in recent years, particularly since the pandemic. Yet the therapeutic, recreational, and environmental learning opportunities brought to mass visitors (or soft ecotourists) in urban green spaces is an important and neglected area of research and practice. Scholarly enquiry has tended to disregard the importance of the behavioural, aspirational, and existential aspects of mass visitors. Some even argue that the masses on their holidays have been 'written out' of tourism analysis, or dehumanised through assumptions that they are somehow lesser than those who choose worthy sounding niches in exotic locations (Butcher, 2020). So a bringing together the reality of mass society and mass tourism on the one hand, with sustainability through ecotourism on the other, is conceptually important.

Moreover, the Asian philosophical foundations set out in this study provide, in both philosophy and in practice, a counterpoint to the western view of ecotourism based on a romantic sensibility that advocates minimal interventions in nature, smallness of scale, solitude, and the primacy of the visited community. Asian philosophical traditions emphasize that the human element in nature is constitutive and not necessarily dominative, and therefore does not put a limit on the scale of human intervention. Furthermore, the importance of the spiritual, aesthetic, and restorative elements in nature-based travel involving mass visitors is strongly reflected in the Asian traditions cited. Drawing on these traditions, the restorative, recreational, experiential and educational benefits of accessible and inclusive urban ecotourism for mass visitors, including those who are physically and economically marginalised, is clarified.

Therefore, new thinking, drawing on the Asian sensibilities outlined here or ethos from other non-Western geo-cultural regions of the world, could prompt ways of integrating the benefits of nature into mass society, rather than seeing the two as in tension. In amongst the many much vaunted 'lessons of the pan-

demic', an emphasis on urban, mass ecotourism as integral to sustainability and sociability, could be an important one.

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Wheels of Escape: Seeking Nature, Well-Being and Gratitude on the Road

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ABSTRACT

This study examines individuals' motivations for escaping and seeking in the context of nature-oriented sightseeing travel, with a specific focus on bus travel as the primary mode of transportation. While literature often examines these motivations through individual psychological processes or destination-related evaluations, limited attention has been given to the role of transportation, particularly bus travel, in shaping travel motivations and well-being outcomes. Using a qualitative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals who had participated in bus-based sightseeing tours. The findings reveal that participants' connection to the natural environment is not solely based on personal preferences but emerges from a complex interplay of social, economic, and environmental influences. A key outcome of nature-oriented sightseeing travel was the expression of gratitude, which played a central role in participants' well-being. Moreover, the structure of bus tours, which enable scenic observation and collective experiences, was found to support emotional and psychological engagement. These insights underscore that transportation is not merely a logistical element but an experiential component that significantly contributes to overall well-being. This study offers a novel perspective by emphasizing how the mode of travel itself can shape the depth and quality of the nature-oriented sightseeing travel experience, thereby enriching individuals' psychological outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Travel has been widely recognized as a way for individuals to gain insights into diverse cultural, social, and environmental contexts (Curtin & Brown, 2018). Travelers can develop their minds, emotions, and cultures through life-changing experiences (Slak Valek & Fotiadis, 2018). These experiences can also bring motivations such as open-mindedness, tolerance, and positive environmental attitudes (Kuenzi & Mc-Neely, 2008). Iso-Ahola (1983) suggests that tourism is linked to satisfaction, awareness, escape, and the pursuit of new experiences. These factors influence travel plans and behavior, contributing to 'psychological intrinsic motivation' (Iso-Ahola, 1983). Similarly, Ross and Iso-Ahola (1991) emphasize the importance of experiencing a sense of competence, coping with difficulties, learning, exploring, relaxing, and finding oneself (Ross & Iso-Ahola, 1991). Research supports the notion that nature-oriented sightseeing travel enables individuals to escape their daily lives and reconnect with the natural environment (Bimonte & Faralla, 2014; Iversen et al., 2016). Research suggests that the natural environment provides a valuable escape from modern life. It can help people feel more optimistic, energetic, and positive (Guardini et al., 2023). It has also been suggested that spending time in nature can reduce stress and improve feelings of empowerment, hope, and harmony (Ryynanen, 2023). One of the most critical psychological benefits of nature-oriented sightseeing travel is the deepening of a sense of gratitude. Guardini et al. (2023) state that experiences with nature make individuals more sensitive to their environment, causing them to appreciate what they have more and recognize small moments. The literature suggests that nature-oriented sightseeing travel by tourists is associated with enhanced well-being (Balmford et al., 2009; Fredman et al., 2012; Buckley et al., 2012). Yu and colleagues (2020) emphasize that vacation and leisure travel contribute to the subjective well-being of tourists by increasing their sense of belonging and happiness (Yu et al., 2020).

Rossmann and Ulehla (1977) discuss travel in five dimensions: emotional and spiritual experiences, adventure, aesthetic contributions of the natural environment, escape from urban stress, and escape from the social environment. Travel is thought to affect well-being and quality of life beyond happiness (Friman et al., 2017). For many tourists, the natural environment and resources form the basis of travel motivation (Luo & Deng, 2008), while traveling in an unfamiliar place offers opportunities for personal development (Pearce & Lee, 2005). The findings of Ruiz-Moreno et al. (2024) indicate that individuals who travel frequently tend to have higher levels of well-being.

Tourists seek experiences such as interacting with local communities, gaining knowledge, and fulfilling the search for meaning (Balmford et al., 2009). Nature-oriented sightseeing travel is associated with motivations to escape routine and discover peaceful environments. These trips are a physical escape and fulfill psychological and emotional needs. The bus is popular for nature-oriented sightseeing travel, offering passengers relaxation, self-beneficial activities, and social interaction (Clayton et al., 2017). Therefore, in this study, the bus was preferred as the mode of nature-oriented sightseeing travel. In tourism literature, bus travel is primarily considered part of mass and standard package tours; such trips are viewed as a functional element that limits the experience, providing only point-to-point transportation. However, this study challenges the traditional approach and argues that particularly in the context of long-term, locally-oriented tours organised in Turkey's Eastern Black Sea region, the bus is not a vehicle that limits the experience; on the contrary, it can serve as a multidimensional platform that deepens, diversifies, and gives meaning to the experience. Indeed, in this context, the bus is not merely a means of transportation; it is repositioned as an experiential space where cultural narratives, nature observations, and social interactions intertwine (Farias, 2010; Ghanem & Shaaban, 2021).

The package tours examined in this study, known to the public as 'Black Sea Tours,' depart from various cities in Turkey and travel to the Eastern Black Sea region, covering multiple destinations along routes of about 1,000 kilometers, with typical durations of 5 to 7 days. These tours include highland destinations such as Pokut, Huser, and Ayder; UNESCO biosphere areas like Uzungöl and Karagöl; historical and cultural sites such as the Sumela Monastery, Atatürk Mansion, and Trabzon Hagia Sophia; and a diverse range of experiences including the coastline, forests, and river valleys. Participants are in constant visual and emotional contact with the landscape, not only at stationary travel and lodging points but also while traveling by bus. In this way, the journey can be viewed as both a physical transition and an experience that

enhances environmental awareness. Similar bus-based tours are also found on an international scale. Examples include panoramic mountain tours in the Swiss Alps, Rocky Mountain routes in Canada, the 'Golden Route' covering rural areas of Japan, and nature tours in Norwegian fjords. However, in these examples, transportation is often supported by alternatives such as trains, cable cars, or ferries, and the routes cover more accessible areas. The key factor that distinguishes Black Sea tours from others is that, due to the region's challenging topography, alternative transportation options (train, sea route, private vehicle) cannot be effectively utilised, making the bus not just an option but a necessary and integral component. Especially these rugged mountain roads can only be safely navigated by local drivers who are well-acquainted with the region, which further highlights the bus's importance as an experiential tool.

This study explores the relationship between nature-oriented sightseeing travel and well-being, particularly in the context of transportation methods, which has not been sufficiently investigated. It focuses on transportation modes, with a special emphasis on bus travel, to better understand how nature-oriented sightseeing travel influences well-being and how different modes of transportation shape this experience. In particular, it examines how bus journeys influence the quality of travel experiences and contribute to overall well-being. Rather than merely describing tourist motivations, the research analyzes how nature-oriented sightseeing bus travel reveals unique motivational patterns that differ from other travel forms. Although tourist motivations are a well-established topic in tourism research, this study shifts the focus from individual preferences to the formative role of the travel mode itself. In doing so, it positions transportation not just as a logistical element but as a transformative factor that reshapes the meaning of the travel experience, offering a theoretical and contextual contribution to tourism literature.

2. The Role of Escape and Seeking Motivation on Well-being

Understanding tourism motivations is essential in revealing the psychological reasons behind individuals' travel behavior. Iso-Ahola and Allen (1982) explained tourism motivations in two dimensions: escape and seeking. Ross and Iso-Ahola (1991) described them as personal escape/seeking motivations and interpersonal escape/seeking motivations. Iso-Ahola (1983) argues that the psychological benefits of recreational travel arise from the interaction of two fundamental motivational forces: escape from routine and stressful environments and seeking recreational opportunities for specific intrinsic rewards. This view emphasizes that individuals can achieve a more balanced and satisfying life in line with both escape and seeking motivations. Wolfe and Hsu (2004) suggest that individuals participate in leisure activities by seeking or escaping from something, and that these intrinsic factors are linked to their well-being (Wolfe & Hsu, 2004). It is well established that travel motivations influence individuals' well-being (Pearce & Lee, 2005; Yousaf et al., 2018; Zheng et al., 2021). Hindley and Font (2018) concluded that well-being and escape/seeking motivations can make tourists feel complete and meaningful by experiencing the beauty of natural environment and unique experiences (Hindley & Font, 2018). The presence of self-determination, sense of competence, challenge, learning, discovery, and relaxation dimensions provided by these motivations for the individual comes to the fore (Ross & Iso-Ahola, 1991).

Well-being theories constitute an important area of study in the literature (Diener, 1984; Chamberlain, 1988; Keyes, 1998; Suh et al., 1998; Bond & Hoffner, 2022; Martela, 2024). The eudaimonic dimension of well-being encompasses self-acceptance, life purpose, mastery, autonomy, positive relationships, and personal growth (Delle Fave, 2013). While psychological well-being (PWB), which is associated with the eudaimonic dimension of well-being in the literature, includes deep and meaningful elements of self-actualization, another classification called subjective well-being (SWB) defines hedonic happiness, which provides for positive emotions and general life satisfaction judgments (Kahneman et al., 1999; Ryan et al., 2006). In this study, hedonic well-being is associated with subjective well-being (SWB), focusing more on the immediate positive emotions and general life satisfaction experienced by the individual.

The role of nature-oriented sightseeing travel in enhancing individuals' well-being was emphasized by Kim et al. (2015). It was revealed that this type of tourism supports individuals' subjective well-being by connecting with natural environment (Kim et al., 2015). Diener (1994) stated that subjective well-being is a multidimensional phenomenon that encompasses individuals' emotional reactions, satisfaction with their living spaces, and overall life satisfaction (Diener, 1994). Iso-Ahola (1983) emphasized that tourism moti-

vations involve complex interactions between psychological and social factors, and it is essential to understand them from a social psychology perspective (Iso-Ahola, 1983). Accordingly, in this study, tourism motivations were evaluated based on Iso-Ahola's approach. Explaining the multidimensional structure of psychological well-being, Ryff and Keyes (1995) stated that elements such as self-acceptance, positive relationships, and personal growth play a crucial role in enhancing the quality of life for individuals (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

3. Nature-oriented Sightseeing Travel by Bus and Well-Being

While nature-oriented sightseeing travel offers the opportunity to experience natural environments and resources (Kim et al., 2015), it can significantly contribute to psychological well-being by allowing individuals to relax, recreate, and connect with nature (Valentine, 1992). Therefore, nature-oriented sightseeing travel is viewed as an opportunity to enhance the overall well-being of individuals (Zelenski & Nisbet, 2014; Çiki & Tanrıverdi, 2023). Research on the effects of nature-oriented sightseeing travel on well-being suggests that the natural environment supports well-being by alleviating stress in the human mind, restoring cognitive abilities, and promoting feelings of renewal. This effect manifests in redefining a sense of meaning and purpose in life, as well as emotional and spiritual development, and significant changes in behavior and lifestyle (Richardson & Insch, 2021). In their study, Zelenski and Nisbet (2014) concluded that a strong connection with the natural environment increases individuals' happiness levels and promotes more sustainable attitudes towards the environment (Zelenski & Nisbet, 2014). Similarly, these relationships suggest that individuals' intrinsic travel motivation strengthens their connection with nature, positively affecting ecological responsibility and subjective well-being (Çiki & Tanrıverdi, 2024). In an experimental study conducted by Guardini et al. (2023), the effects of travel experiences in nature on psychological well-being were examined. It was revealed that time spent in nature increased individuals' positive emotions, life energy, and optimism. Additionally, it was noted that such experiences have a transformational effect, strengthening feelings of gratitude in individuals (Guardini et al., 2023). This finding underscores the profound connection between nature-oriented sightseeing travel and individuals' inner worlds. In this context, Vespestad and Lindberg (2011) note that nature-oriented sightseeing travel is closely tied to the pursuit of authenticity. In their research, they stated that many tourists travel with the desire to experience nature in its authentic form. In this process, nature becomes a tool that enables individuals to discover their authentic selves (Vespestad & Lindberg, 2011). The positive effects of travel experiences on individuals' life satisfaction are not limited to nature-oriented sightseeing travel. In their study, Musa and Sim (2010) note that the travel opportunities provided by the transportation mode enhance individuals' well-being. The study also noted that older travelers often choose the bus or plane as their mode of transportation in travel planning (Musa & Sim, 2010). The link between nature-oriented sightseeing travel and well-being has rarely been explored in transportation modes. Zhang and Chan (2016) highlighted transportation infrastructure as vital for sustainable tourism development, which in turn influences destination choices (Yuo et al., 2023). For older adults, the mode of transportation has a significant impact on their travel experiences and well-being (Zhang, 2023). This study focuses on bus travel, which enables routine escape, renewal, and social interaction (Clayton et al., 2017; Yuo et al., 2023). Beyond facilitating access, transportation enhances the overall travel experience and contributes to overall well-being. This study examines nature-oriented sightseeing travel through the lens of escape and seeking motivations within the context of transportation.

4. Method

This study is structured within a qualitative research design and employs a comprehensive approach, allowing for an in-depth analysis of participants' experiences. The data collection method used was interviews. A semi-structured interview form was created to gain a detailed understanding of the escape-seeking and well-being aspects of the study. Scales from existing literature were used in developing the interview questions, with adaptations made from various sources (Iso-Ahola, 1982; Diener et al., 1984; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Uysal et al., 2015; Musselman, 2022). Interview questions were reviewed by five experts,

whose feedback was taken into consideration. After obtaining the expert opinions, permission was granted by the university's ethics commission. Between August 19, 2024, and October 19, 2024, interviews were conducted with 10 participants, totaling 8 hours and 42 minutes in duration. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, targeting individuals who recently participated in nature-oriented sightseeing bus tours in Türkiye's Black Sea region. The data collected were transcribed using MAXQDA 24 software, followed by content and thematic analysis. In content analysis, data were coded by grouping them into meaningful categories, and key themes. The coding process was performed independently by two researchers and then compared to ensure reliability. Recruitment was facilitated through tourism agencies, and in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals who completed the voluntary participation form after being informed about the study's purpose. Efforts were made to ensure diversity in age, motivation for participation, and previous tour experience. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved after 10 interviews, recurring themes emerged, and no new significant information was obtained, indicating sufficient depth and variation in interpretation. In addition to interviews, data were supplemented by participant observation, during which the researcher joined a tour and recorded observations throughout.

5. Findings

The study examined the effects of tourists' escaping and seeking motivations on well-being through nature-oriented sightseeing bus journeys; the findings revealed how these motivations shape individuals' experiences and well-being in the context of transportation modes. Table 1 displays the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participant Code	Age	Education Level	Occupation	Marital Status
P1	63	High school	Retired tourism professional	Single
P2	52	Associate degree	Imam	Married
P3	46	Associate degree	Retired from the medical field, part-time clinic worker	Married
P4	48	Doctorate	Lecturer	Married
P5	29	High school	Production manager	Single
P6	34	Associate degree	Production worker	Married
P7	30	Master's degree	Manager at a logistics company	Single
P8	60	High school (incomplete)	Retired housewife	Single
P9	60	Bachelor's degree	Mechanical engineer	Married
P10	61	Bachelor's degree	Geography teacher	Married

Source: Own Elaboration

The study participants are diverse in age, education, and professional backgrounds, ranging from 29 to 63 years old and from high school dropouts to PhD holders. They come from various fields, including retired tourism professionals, engineers, teachers, imams, academics, production managers, and logistics managers. This variety enriches the research by allowing us to explore a range of life experiences and perspectives. The themes, categories, and codes in Table 2, created within the study's scope, address the meanings individuals derive from nature-oriented sightseeing experiences, including escaping and seeking motivations, as well as bus travel experiences.

Table 2. Themes, Categories, and Codes

Theme	Category	Codes
Well-Being	Spiritual Well-Being	Gratitude
		Keeping Expectations Low
		Prayer
		Emotional Balance
		Fatalism
		Letting Go
	Cognitive Well-Being	Mental Relaxation
		Proximity to Ideals
		Life Responsibility
		Desire to Share Happiness
		Freedom
		Financial Concerns
	Nature-Oriented Sightseeing Well-Being	Pleasure Derived from Struggle
		Self-Discovery in Nature
		Awareness Brought by Nature
		Relaxation Through Nature
		Respect for Nature
		Remembrance of Nature
Motivations for Seeking and Escaping	Seeking	Physical and Mental Renewal
		Pursuit of Newness
		Longing to Touch the Future
		Seek for Slowness
		Personal Growth Seek
		Desire for Exploration
	Escaping	Escape from Societal Problems
		Escape from Monotony
		Escape from Life Responsibilities
		Escape from Hard Times
		Escape from Work-Related Issues
		Escape from Health Problems
Traveling by Bus	Emotional Aspects of Bus Travel	Dreaming While on the Bus
		Desire for Solo Travel
		Emotions at the End of the Journey
		Opportunity for Socialization
	Physical Conditions of Bus Travel	Positive Aspects of the Bus
		Reconnecting with Nature
		Negative Aspects of the Bus
		Gaining Information from a Guide
		Music Related to the Destination

Source: Own Elaboration

5.1 Well-Being

An analysis of participants' statements reveals insights into spiritual, cognitive, and nature-oriented sightseeing well-being, reflecting varied experiences and motivations. In this study, three thematic categories were identified through a content analysis of semi-structured interviews. These themes were interpreted not only through an inductive approach but also in conjunction with theoretical frameworks in the well-being literature (Ryff, 1989; Fisher, 1998; Keyes et al., 2002). The Spiritual and Cognitive Well-Being theme includes participants' experiences of inner awareness, seeking meaning, mental engagement, and learning during their interactions with nature, guided narratives, and group activities. Expressions such as *'I felt connected to nature,'* '*my heart was filled with peace,'* and *'I felt grateful for something'* reflect individuals' intuitive and emotional bonds with nature, while statements like "I think more carefully when throwing away rubbish" or *"what I learned from the guide changed my perspective on nature"* highlight cognitive awareness. These findings align with the potential for inner transformation offered by spiritual tourism and the dimension of spiritual well-being defined by Fisher (1998). Therefore, *spiritual well-being* is linked to practices that emphasize gratitude and trust, promoting balance and resilience. *Cognitive well-being* stems from mental fulfillment through learning and cultural engagement. *Nature-oriented sightseeing well-being* emphasizes the calming and restorative effects that individuals experience in nature.

5.1.1 Spiritual well-being

Participants indicate that spiritual well-being comes from self-orientation and a connection with a higher power. For example, participant 2 shares that silent prayer and solitude in nature enhance their spiritual peace, a reflection of experiences that emerged not during the bus journey itself, but in specific moments spent in nature, such as plateau walks, quiet scenic viewpoints, or early morning solitary time. These practices help individuals achieve spiritual depth by creating distance from the external world and fostering a sense of renewal. Participant 2 stated *that she "acts with an understanding of trustworthiness in the face of adversities and prefers to be grateful for the current situation instead of complaining*." This approach enables individuals to accept challenging life conditions and achieve spiritual balance more quickly. Spiritual well-being can be achieved through great spiritual experiences and focusing on the small details of daily life. Participant 8; *"I learned to be happy with small things. Even getting up in the morning and loving the flowers in my garden, digging in their soil, is a peaceful experience. Living with gratitude helps me see the positive aspects of life. This understanding strengthens me spiritually."* This statement reflects a transformation in lifestyle and a renewed awareness toward nature that emerged following the tour experience. It is essential to note that this shift is linked to a realization that emerged during the bus-based journey itself, suggesting that the reflective and emotionally engaging nature of the tour contributed to fostering sustained spiritual awareness and gratitude. Another element that stands out in the participants' statements is the ability to interpret events positively. Participant 3 describes life's challenging situations: "*I believe everything has a reason. For example, I respond positively to being late on a journey by saying, 'There must be good in this.' Tawakkul enables me to look at life more serenely and peacefully."* This perspective provides spiritual peace by reducing the pressure of uncontrollable events on the individual.

5.1.2 Cognitive well-being

Participant statements highlight key aspects of spiritual and mental well-being, including managing expectations, gaining freedom, experiencing spiritual fulfillment, connecting with nature, and maintaining mental balance. Many participants express a shift from valuing material possessions to prioritizing their spiritual and mental health. Participant 10 emphasizes that she avoids unnecessary material consumption to find spiritual peace and balance with the statement, *"I lead a minimalist life. I stopped buying extra things and saying, 'I want this too.' My life goals have changed, and I make choices accordingly.*" Participant 4 mentions the need for renewal to maintain her mental well-being despite pressures from work and family responsibilities: *"Going on this trip was a great benefit for my renewal. The stress of the associate professorship application process was exhausting, and this trip helped me clear my mind."* This illustrates how maintaining mental balance can impact a person's productivity and overall happiness. Participant 9 highlights the importance of setting new goals even after achieving spiritual ideals: *"I have achieved all my spiritual ideals,*

but if I do not set new projects and plans, I will face unhappiness. One should always have the desire to achieve what one hopes and dreams for." This shows that the individual views spiritual well-being as a continuous process of growth. Participant 9's statement illustrates that well-being, particularly after attaining one's spiritual ideals, is sustained not solely through emotional or transcendental fulfillment, but through active cognitive engagement. The emphasis on the need to continually set new goals and initiate projects underscores the role of higher-order cognitive processes—such as planning, future-oriented thinking, and meaning-making—in maintaining psychological well-being. This perspective aligns with the concept of proximity to ideals, suggesting that reaching an ideal is not a static endpoint but a cognitive position that necessitates ongoing goal recalibration to preserve a sense of purpose and fulfillment. Thus, well-being is revealed as a dynamic, cognitively sustained process rather than a final, achieved state. Participant 1 stresses the importance of economic and psychological freedom: "*The 4 years after my divorce were a turning point for me. Seeing that I was self-sufficient and feeling freer gave me great strength. A woman should have economic and psychological freedom and develop herself."* This highlights how personal freedom profoundly affects spiritual well-being. Participant 3 points out how mental well-being influences social relationships: "If I am mentally well, it reflects on everyone around me. If I am happy, my spouse, child, coworkers, and even my boss are happy." This demonstrates the positive effect of an individual's mental balance and peace of mind on their social environment.

5.1.3 Nature-oriented sightseeing well-being

Participants indicate that the natural environment plays a multifaceted role in individual well-being, contributing to psychological relaxation, aesthetic pleasure, and coping with challenges. These elements promote mental and physical balance, resulting in increased life satisfaction. For example, Participant 5 emphasizes landscape's spiritual and mental healing powers: *"Being in places such as Ayder, Uzungöl, and Karagöl, feeling the smell and atmosphere of nature provided me with a mental renewal. A nature-oriented sightseeing tour allowed me to relax both mentally and physically."* Such experiences emphasize the importance of nature in individuals' spiritual renewal and awareness processes. Participant 9 states that time spent with nature increases awareness and helps individuals to renew themselves: *"Staying in nature makes me very happy. The air, nature, everything attracts my attention, keeping me more vigorous."* This statement clearly shows nature's mental and spiritual regeneration effect on individuals. Participant 7 states that nature-oriented sightseeing activities empower individuals and help them cope with difficulties: *"I feel stronger when I cope. I feel completely renewed at the end of such activities."* This statement shows that the physical challenges provided by nature contribute to individuals' personal development and psychological resilience. Participant 3 expresses the regenerative effect of nature as follows: "*Nature transforms the negative into positive. On this trip, I hugged the trees and felt the transformative power of nature."* This approach reveals that nature provides physical and spiritual renewal for individuals. This spontaneous power of nature helps reduce stress and allows individuals to regain their energy. Participant 8 explains the effect of nature on individual well-being with the following statement: *"I relax my brain a lot during nature-oriented sightseeing travels. I love nature and the soil; I feel a psychological heaviness if I do not engage with the soil."* Such experiences contribute to individuals' mental relaxation and help them release daily stress. Nature allows individuals to both connect with the community and isolate themselves. Participant 6 reveals the impact of nature on interpersonal relationships with the statement, *"I prefer to stay a little isolated on my nature-oriented sightseeing travels. However, I also like meeting new people and changing my prejudices in this process."* This statement indicates that nature provides individuals with both social and individual spaces.

5.2 Escaping and Seeking

After analyzing the participants' statements, several key findings emerged regarding the motivations for escaping and seeking. These two motivations hold distinct meanings within the context of individuals seeking to escape the stress, monotony, or specific challenges of their daily lives while also pursuing personal growth, rejuvenation, and self-discovery. Participant statements reveal that escape motivations vary in individual, social, and emotional dimensions. Escape from monotony, life's responsibilities, social problems, health problems, and difficult times plays an important role in individuals' search for mental

and emotional relief. Participants expressed the need to escape from daily monotony and repetitive routines. Participant 1 said, *"The environment I am in, the place I live in, turns into a routine after a while and becomes monotonous. One wants to escape that monotony and reset one's thoughts."* With these statements, he emphasizes that he prefers to travel to be renewed and mentally relaxed. This shows that the desire to escape routine is essential to individuals' escape motivations. The obligations of life are another critical factor that increases individuals' motivation to escape. Participant 2 said, *"I am a mother, a wife, I have many obligations at home. Sometimes I feel the need to get away from these responsibilities,"* expressing the desire of the individual to spare time for herself and get away from her responsibilities. Participants stated that they travel to escape the pressure created by political and economic conditions. Participant 4 said, *"The economic crisis and political uncertainty in the country affect me a lot. I joined the tour to get away from these."* This emphasizes the role of the socio-political atmosphere in motivating individuals to escape. Similarly, Participant 9 said, *"The political atmosphere in the country stressed me out. I joined a tour to get away from this pressure,"* expressing the individual's search for emotional relief. Such escapes play a crucial role in individuals' processes of coping with stress and achieving mental balance. Health problems also have a necessary place among escape motivations. Participant 7 said, *"I was diagnosed with lymphoma, and I am undergoing chemotherapy. I am physically exhausted, but I turned to travel to feel good in this process."* Her statements show that the individual seeks nature-oriented sightseeing relaxation to cope with health-related difficulties.

Participant expressions indicate that the motivations for seeking are multi-dimensional. Factors such as exploring new locations, fostering social connections, engaging with natural environment, and achieving physical rejuvenation contribute to individuals enhancing their mental and emotional well-being. Traveling allows individuals to escape daily life routines, rediscover themselves, strengthen their physical health, and establish meaningful connections with their social environment. Participant 7 states that traveling is an essential tool that increases the happiness of individuals, as evidenced by the statement, *"Traveling, discovering new places, being social, and making new friends make me happy."* New experiences allow individuals to gain emotional enrichment and strengthen their social ties. Participant 3 said, *"I felt like I had a mold on my back and let it go. Mentally, I have incredible comfort. My positive emotions are at the forefront."* She reveals the relaxing and renewing effects of travel on individuals through her statements. Participant 10 said, *"As I age, I face life more comfortably. When my phone rings, I am no longer stressed; I think it must be a friend calling." Participant 10* expresses that travel reduces daily stress and provides emotional serenity. Individuals also see travel as an opportunity to improve themselves and structure their plans for the future. Participant 8 emphasizes the importance of individual development in the search and renewal processes: "*I wish I had planned better in the past. Now I try to discover things that make me happy; I read books and go to courses."* Individuals often prefer to be in touch with nature and occasionally isolate themselves during their travels. Participant 5 emphasizes the role of nature in the mental and emotional renewal processes of individuals by saying, "*I have traveled in Europe, but I generally preferred to be isolated and in touch with nature rather than the texture of cities."* Travel allows individuals to interact with local people and develop a sense of trust. Participant 5 reveals the importance of social interactions on individuals' happiness and fulfillment by stating, *"I like talking to local people. Their spontaneity gives me confidence, and this makes me happy."*

5.3 Traveling by Bus

Upon analyzing the participants' statements, it becomes clear that traveling by bus plays a significant role in individual physical and emotional experiences. Beyond being just a means of transportation, the bus offers a multifaceted experience that strengthens individuals' social bonds, increases their environmental awareness, and provides personal satisfaction.

5.3.1 Emotional Aspects of Bus Travel

Participant statements suggest that bus travel provides a multifaceted experience that addresses individuals' diverse social, cultural, emotional, and mental needs. Elements such as building social bonds, exploring new places, experiencing nostalgia, and mental renewal create a meaningful experience for individuals traveling by bus. Traveling by bus allows individuals to dream and be alone with themselves.

Participant 10 stated that the journey enriches the inner worlds of individuals by saying, *"I can dream while traveling by bus; I think about what happened in the house I see. Such experiences give me peace."* This situation suggests that travel enhances individuals' creativity and mental awareness. Participant 4 said, *"Seeing the sea and trees while traveling on the bus relaxes me. Watching nature makes traveling more enjoyable."* This expresses the relaxing effect of nature on the journey. Interaction with nature provides emotional satisfaction beyond physical conditions. Individuals traveling by bus state that they find opportunities for renewal and relaxation during breaks. Participant 3 said, *"When we get tired, we stop somewhere, have tea, and refresh ourselves. That is why I like traveling by bus so much."* She states that traveling provides individuals with physical and mental renewal. For some participants, traveling by bus has a nostalgic meaning and provides psychological relief. Participant 2 emphasizes the individual and emotional sense of bus travel by saying, *"I define traveling by bus as a feeling like 'the soul reuniting with the Divine.' I have loved traveling by bus since I was a child. It is almost a therapy for me."* For the participants, traveling by bus offers the opportunity to meet new people and establish social bonds. Participant 9 said, *"On long journeys, there can be cohesion in the bus. You can meet people close to your values."* This emphasizes the positive impact of travel on social ties. Bus trips and tours enable participants to explore new places and gain a deeper understanding of them through guided services. Participant 5 said, *"Guides tell us where to stop and give us historical and geographical information. At the end of the tour, I return with new information and experiences in my pocket."* She states that guiding services enrich individuals' travel experience. Similarly, Participant 4 expressed the emotional depth she felt during the guide's narration with the words: *"When the guide is narrating, I feel like I am in the moment; the narrative draws me in"*. This statement highlights how storytelling can create a meaningful emotional connection even within the physical space of the bus. Through narration, the journey transforms from a simple act of transportation to an emotionally engaging experience. This emotional connection is also reflected in Participant 7's statement: *"When I focus on the stories, I do not even realise where the road is going; it feels like time has stopped"*. The participant's experience illustrates how the guide's narration on the bus can temporarily detach individuals from their surroundings and draw them into a narrative-driven emotional space, proving that intense emotional experiences are not limited to reaching a destination but are actively shaped along the way. All these experiences occur within the shared physical and social environment of the bus, demonstrating that transportation becomes part of the emotional journey. The guide's storytelling, enriched with cultural references and evocative language, transforms the bus interior from a mundane setting into a lively emotional space where imagination is sparked, inner reflection is encouraged, and emotional bonds to place and story are formed.

5.3.2 Physical Conditions of Bus Travel
Participant statements reveal the multifaceted effects of the physical conditions of traveling by bus on the travel experience. The physical condition of the bus has a significant impact on the travel experience. Participant 7 said, *"It is essential for me that the bus is clean. The fact that the bus driver drives carefully and obeys traffic rules also makes the journey more enjoyable."* This emphasizes the importance of physical conditions on individual satisfaction. Stopping at rest stops is one of the unique features of traveling by bus. Participant 1 states that stopping enriches the travel experience by saying, *"Stopping at facilities while traveling by bus has a unique taste and pleasure."* Such stops allow individuals to relax and meet their needs during the journey. The equipment and comfort level of the buses are also factors that affect the travel experience. Participant 4 stated that the physical conditions inside the bus vary according to individual perception, saying, *"Although problems such as narrow seats and inability to stretch the legs are physically uncomfortable, watching the surrounding scenery makes you forget these discomforts."* Some participants expressed discomfort while traveling by bus. Participant 10 emphasizes the negative aspects of traveling by saying, *"I am very uncomfortable with the smell and excessive noise. The fact that people do not use deodorant or unnecessary conversations demotivates me a lot."* The music played during bus travel and the availability of food and beverage facilities were also observed as factors that positively affected the experience. For example, Participant 6 *said, "The information provided by the guide and the music playing on the bus made me very happy. I also like to have something to eat and drink during the journey."*, indicating that in-bus activities added meaning to the journey.

6. Conclusion

In this study, the experiences and motivations of individuals traveling by bus were examined multidimensionally, and the effects of travel on physical, psychological, and social well-being were investigated. The findings indicate that travel promotes life satisfaction, mental rejuvenation, and socio-cultural engagement. Filep and Deery (2010) highlight that travel enhances emotional well-being and social connections. Their research indicates that travel provides psychological renewal and social interaction, extending beyond physical mobility. Motivations such as escaping daily stress (Crompton, 1979; Iso-Ahola, 1983) and pursuing novelty and personal growth (Iso-Ahola, 1983; Pearce & Lee, 2005) underscore travel's role in promoting mental relaxation and development. Initially intended to examine only subjective well-being dimensions, the study revealed, through in-depth analysis, that the participants' experiences also included eudaimonic elements, such as meaningfulness, personal growth, and life purpose, and that these aspects had a transformative quality. Participants noted that their travels had a significant impact on their personal and cultural development, providing valuable insights into diverse cultures and offering opportunities for meaningful interactions. Additionally, this experience encouraged a greater sense of inner awareness. A key finding of the study is that the concepts of escaping and seeking motivations differ from approaches in the literature regarding transportation modes and nature-oriented sightseeing travel. While these motivations are generally addressed through psychological and sociocultural factors, this study contributes to the literature by focusing on how transportation modes and nature-oriented sightseeing travel shape motivations. By strengthening the motivations of escape and search, nature-oriented sightseeing travel by bus transforms travel from a mere transportation process into an experience that contributes to psychological and spiritual well-being. The ever-changing landscapes and the journey intertwined with nature increase mental renewal by supporting escape motivation while strengthening seek motivation, allowing individuals to explore both the outer and inner worlds. Participant testimonies demonstrate that an orientation towards nature is not limited to individual escape or exploration, but is a multi-layered process shaped by social, economic, and environmental contexts. Nature-oriented sightseeing travel combines dynamics such as getting away from the stress of urban life (escape) and integration with nature and the search for meaning (seek). These motivations are not limited to individual preferences but are also shaped by social and environmental factors. Since the personal and collective transformation offered by travel diversifies the experiences of escape and seeking, addressing these processes with a more flexible and inclusive approach is necessary.

One of the findings of this study is that bus trips contribute to the spiritual experience by increasing individuals' interaction with the natural environment. Spiritual well-being is a multidimensional process that enriches inner journeys and awareness (Kujawa, 2017). Srivastava (2023) emphasises that spiritual tourism is an attractive and developing topic in tourism research. Although the literature discusses its effects on spiritual and mental health, the connection between bus journeys and spiritual well-being remains largely unexplored. This study demonstrates that bus trips facilitate mental and spiritual renewal, transforming into a spiritual experience that transcends the physical transportation process. Cohen's (1972) concept of the 'environmental bubble' suggests that tourists surround themselves with familiar and safe spaces to protect themselves from foreign environments. In contrast, Jennings and Weiler (2006) point out that vehicles can serve not only a physical function but also an experiential one. This study presents a finding that repositioning the bus as a multi-layered experiential space bridges these two approaches. In Black Sea tours, the bus is not merely a means of transportation; it functions as a social space where attention, emotional interaction, and a sense of community are intensified, transforming into a unique experiential platform that deepens participants' relationship with the natural environment and culture. The narratives provided by guides, such as local life practices, traditions, symbolic meanings, and folk culture, enable tourists to engage with the travel experience not just as passive observers but as emotionally and cognitively involved participants (Crespi-Vallbona, 2021). These narratives, delivered within the moving space of the bus, help frame the surrounding environment and foster a deeper connection with the journey. Instead of being limited to informational content, the guide's narration stimulates the imagination and emotional responses of the participants, turning the passing scenery into something personally meaningful. One of the key findings of the study is that the guide's role as a narrator greatly contributes

to emotional and cognitive engagement. The cultural and geographical stories shared during the bus ride help participants interpret the visual landscape in real-time, strengthening their attachment to the places they pass. Despite being confined to and moving within the mobile setting of the bus, participants reported feeling integrated with their surroundings, as if they were not just moving through space but also emotionally and mentally anchoring themselves in it. In this way, the bus becomes a "moving stage," a space where stories, memories, and emotions are activated. The narrative does more than describe the landscape; it fosters a form of emotional settlement, where travelers begin to relate to the environment and internalize the journey. As a result, the bus becomes a meaningful experiential space far beyond a simple means of transport, where emotional resonance, cultural understanding, and inner reflection come together through the power of storytelling. In this context, the study makes a unique contribution to the literature on the experiential potential of transportation, demonstrating that the bus has evolved from a passive carrier to an active experiential component. The multi-day, guided, and thematic nature tours, conducted by bus and discussed in this study, go beyond being merely a passive form of travel, offering participants a multi-layered experience that continuously provides visual, cultural, and cognitive stimuli. Enriched with activities such as walking, nature observation, guided narrations, and group interactions, these tours transform participants into active agents within the process. According to qualitative data, participants experienced sensations similar to some of the fundamental components of the flow experience, such as mental engagement, increased concentration, and spontaneous focus, particularly during moments of direct contact with nature and during meaning-focused activities guided by the tour leader.

Participants reported that observing nature during the journey increased their awareness and provided them with spiritual serenity. It was concluded that bus journeys create a meditative effect, supporting inner awareness and spiritual satisfaction, which are key components of spiritual well-being. Changing landscapes strengthen the spiritual awareness of individuals by providing continuous contact with nature. Furthermore, bus journeys offer opportunities for socialization and personal growth, suggesting that spiritual tourism is shaped by a sense of inner return and a desire for community. These findings reveal that transportation choices significantly impact physical mobility and psychological and spiritual well-being, underscoring the role of transportation in spiritual tourism. A key insight is the importance of gratitude in spiritual well-being, as participants noted its role in enhancing happiness and life satisfaction by reducing negative thoughts and promoting positivity. This aligns with studies linking gratitude to lower stress and higher life satisfaction (Wood et al., 2007). Participants also viewed gratitude as an ongoing awareness practice, focusing on significant events and everyday joys (Emmons & Kneezel, 2005; Elosúa, 2015; Watkins et al., 2022). Participants expressed that gratitude is vital for coping with challenges and facilitates the acceptance of negativity. Notably, these participants are Muslims, and their perspectives on gratitude and fate align with Islamic teachings on resilience. The Islamic faith teaches that everything happens according to God's will, and believers should trust only in Him. This understanding aligns with the notion that humans can only experience what is predetermined, and that trust and surrender are crucial in this process. This perspective supports individuals in accepting their experiences and developing a strong sense of solidarity in their inner journey. This study highlights that nature-oriented sightseeing travel enhances gratitude. In this context, the connection to nature from an Islamic perspective can enhance individuals' spiritual awareness and foster a more profound sense of gratitude. Consequently, the spiritual dimension offered by nature-oriented sightseeing travel can hold significant meaning for individuals from diverse cultural and faith backgrounds. It would be beneficial to investigate such experiences within an interreligious and intercultural framework and analyze them through the lens of other belief systems.

While the continuity of natural elements fosters inner peace, it also supports connecting with the natural environment and cultivating gratitude. Changing landscapes increases individuals' spiritual awareness, helping them to relax their minds and develop a more sensitive perspective on their surroundings. These powerful emotional experiences increase individuals' desire to revisit, enabling the sustainability of nature-oriented sightseeing travel. The connection with nature increases individuals' tendency to seek similar experiences, creating a sustainable cycle that supports their psychological well-being (Zelenski & Nisbet, 2014; Kim et al., 2015; Winter et al., 2019; Guardini et al., 2023; Ciki & Tanrıverdi, 2024). In this context, nature-oriented sightseeing bus journeys are described as having the potential to create awareness,

gratitude, and meaningful experiences. These journeys emphasize the positive impact of nature-oriented sightseeing travel on individuals' psychological well-being. Participants stated that this type of travel is not only seen as a mode of transportation but also offers a meaningful experience that enhances mindfulness and promotes psychological well-being through interaction with the natural environment. However, how this experience is shaped in different cultural groups and age categories is essential for future research. Although the effects of nature-oriented sightseeing bus travel on individuals' psychological well-being have been addressed in this study, more comprehensive and systematic analyses have emerged. Particularly in long-term follow-up studies, the enduring effects of these experiences can be explored in greater depth. Additionally, cross-cultural comparisons can be conducted to assess how the experience varies across different social contexts. While this study represents a vital step in understanding the emotional and cognitive experiences associated with this specific form of travel, further research is required to enhance the theoretical framework surrounding nature-oriented sightseeing travel experiences.

However, it is also clear that the content of nature-oriented sightseeing travel needs to be expanded. Similarly, Yetgin and Ünal (2024) reported that the market size of nature-oriented sightseeing travel types has increased, offering attractive opportunities for entrepreneurs. In trips to historical and cultural destinations, increasing the number of planned stopover points, hiking trails, or visits to rural areas will strengthen the diversity of tourism and the spiritual satisfaction individuals derive from their travel experiences. Practices such as improving guidance services, increasing on-bus comfort, and enhancing the quality of stopovers can make bus travel experiences more enjoyable; however, one limitation of this study is the relatively small number of participants. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 10 participants, which were sufficient to reach thematic saturation. Future research should consider expanding the sample size to include a more diverse group of participants, thereby strengthening the robustness and transferability of the results. In this context, this study concludes that travel experiences that increase interaction with nature strengthen individuals' feelings of gratitude and support their spiritual and psychological well-being. New approaches to be developed in the tourism sector that consider these factors will enable the spread of a tourism approach that allows individuals to establish a deeper and more meaningful connection with the natural environment and themselves.

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Linking Visitors' Push Motivation to Emotional Involvement and their Satisfaction towards Sustainable Farm Tourism

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how visitors' push motivations—novelty and prestige, Relaxation, and relationship enhancement—influence emotional involvement and overall Satisfaction within the context of sustainable farm tourism in Wayanad, Kerala. Primary data were collected from 385 visitors across five selected sustainable farm tourism sites using a structured questionnaire. The proposed research model was tested using PLS-SEM approach in Smart PLS 4.0. The findings indicate that all push motivations significantly and positively affect emotional involvement, with relationship enhancement exerting the strongest influence, followed by novelty and prestige and Relaxation. Emotional involvement was found to have a substantial positive effect on visitor satisfaction. In addition, push motivations directly influence Satisfaction, with relationship enhancement and Relaxation emerging as key predictors, while novelty and prestige show a comparatively weaker yet significant effect. Mediation analysis confirms that emotional involvement partially mediates the relationship between push motivations and Satisfaction. The study highlights the importance of emotionally engaging, socially interactive, and relaxing farm tourism experiences in enhancing visitor satisfaction and promoting sustainable rural tourism development.

KEYWORDS

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1. Introduction

In recent years, farm tourism has developed into a distinct category of rural tourism, offering visitors genuine, experience-driven interactions while also contributing to rural development and economic diversification (Flanigan et al., 2014). Farm tourism fosters meaningful connections among visitors, agriculture, and rural communities by enabling tourists to contribute in farm-based activities such as farm walk, organic farming, fruit picking, and traditional food preparation (Kastenholz et al., 1999). Through leisure and educational offerings—including farm tours, pick-your-own produce programmes, and farm-to-table experiences—agritourism not only enhances farmers' income opportunities but also increases public awareness of agricultural practices and sustainability (Baby & Kim, 2024).

Despite its growing global relevance, farm tourism remains relatively underexplored in the Indian context, particularly in ecologically rich yet economically sensitive regions such as Wayanad, Kerala (Gulsia & Yadav, 2022). Farm tourism has the potential to revitalise rural economies by generating alternative livelihoods, promoting sustainable land use, and delivering distinctive visitor experiences rooted in local culture and nature (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). With its fertile agricultural landscape, strong agrarian traditions, and proximity to major urban centres, Wayanad provides an ideal setting to examine how farm tourism can simultaneously fulfil visitors' experiential and emotional needs while fostering sustainable regional development (Punia, 1994; Munjal, 2019).

Tourism scholars commonly explain travel motivation as a combination of internal psychological drivers and external destination attributes that jointly influence travel decisions (Dann, 1977, 1981). Travel motivations—such as the pursuit of novelty & prestige, escape and relaxation from routine, and social connection—significantly influence travel decisions and shape how visitors engage with tourism experiences (Tsai et al., 2016). These intrinsic motivations are particularly relevant in farm tourism, where emotional engagement with nature, family, and rural lifestyles often defines the quality of visitor experience.

Prior studies have demonstrated that tourist motivations significantly influence emotional responses and Satisfaction (SAT), both of which are central to the overall evaluation of the tourism experience (Hsu et al., 2010). When visitors' motivations align with destination offerings, satisfaction levels are more likely to be enhanced (Uysal et al., 2009; Prayag et al., 2017). For instance, tourists motivated by cultural exploration tend to report higher Satisfaction when destinations successfully deliver culturally immersive experiences (Kim & Lee, 2018). Conversely, a mismatch between visitor motivations and destination attributes—such as adventure-seeking tourists encountering predominantly relaxation-oriented activities—may result in dissatisfaction (Gao & Kerstetter, 2018; Li & Kovacs, 2024).

Scholars continue to debate whether tourist satisfaction is primarily shaped by pre-travel motivations or by on-site experiences. While Gnoth (1997) and Pearce (2012) argue that motivation influences Satisfaction through expectation formation, others contend that the quality of actual experiences and services at the terminus plays a more decisive role (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Empirical evidence suggests that Satisfaction is often more strongly influenced by emotional and experiential evaluations formed during the visit than by initial travel intentions alone (Correia et al., 2013). This highlights the importance of emotional involvement—defined as the degree of personal relevance, interest, and affective engagement experienced during tourism activities—in shaping visitor satisfaction (Kyle et al., 2004).

The chosen farms in Wayanad, Kerala, closely adhere to the sustainable tourism principles established by UNWTO (UNWTO, 2019), emphasising environmental protection, social inclusion, and the promotion of long-term economic viability. Government planning document for Wayanad highlights the emphasis on ecologically sensitive land use, community-oriented development, and conservation-focused agriculture (Kerala Town Planning Development, 2018). The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) advocates for agricultural strategies that sustain equilibrium between productivity and environmental preservation (FAO, 2020). These farms utilise organic farming and permaculture methods that diminish synthetic inputs, enhance soil structure, and promote biological variety (Pretty, 2008). Cultural preservation is apparent, since many places uphold regional traditions—Hiliya Resort, for instance, showcases ancient Kerala architecture and offers visitors a culturally immersive experience (UNWTO, 2019). Economically, farms invigorate rural economies by offering diverse tourism services, including farm stays, guided tours, and farm-to-table dining (Barbieri, 2013). Dew Drops Farm Stay further promotes agricultural education pro-

grams, fostering job development and increasing public knowledge of sustainable farming among tourists and residents (Tew & Barbieri, 2012).

In the context of Indian farm tourism, particularly in regions such as Wayanad, the relationship among push motivations, emotional involvement, and visitor satisfaction remains insufficiently examined. Although previous research has extensively explored push–pull motivations across various tourism settings (Dann, 1981; Uysal et al., 2009; Hsu et al., 2010), limited empirical attention has been given to understanding how push motivations influence emotional involvement and Satisfaction in sustainable farm tourism destinations (Prayag et al., 2017; Hosany et al., 2020). Moreover, the mediating role of emotional involvement in linking push motivations to visitor satisfaction has not been adequately investigated in the context of Farm tourism, especially in Wayanad, Kerala.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines the influence of push motivations—namely novelty, Relaxation, and enhancing relationships—on visitors' emotional involvement and Satisfaction in sustainable farm tourism settings in Wayanad, Kerala. Specifically, the study aims to (i) assess the impact of push motivations on visitor satisfaction, (ii) evaluate the influence of push motivations on emotional involvement, and (iii) examine the mediating role of emotional involvement in the relationship between push motivations and visitor satisfaction.

This study offers three key contributions. First, it extends push–pull motivation theory by empirically demonstrating how push motivations shape emotional involvement during on-site experiences rather than merely influencing travel decisions. Second, it establishes emotional involvement as a partial mediator between push motivations and Satisfaction, enriching experience-based tourism theory. Third, by focusing on sustainable farm tourism in Wayanad, Kerala, this research provides context-specific evidence from an underexplored developing-country setting, thereby broadening the geographical and conceptual scope of farm tourism literature.

2. Review of Literature and Development of Hypothesis

2.1 Push-Pull Theory

Push motivations in farm tourism are primarily driven by tourists' desire for relaxation, learning, and escape from routine experiences. Multiple studies provide evidence for these motivations. Valencia et al. (2022) revealed that while pull motives are stronger, push motivations still play a significant role in destination choice. Interestingly, motivations vary by context (Crompton, 1979; Kim et al., 2003). The study noted that for foreign tourists, eco-friendliness is a key push motivation, while domestic tourists are more driven by mental refreshment and recreation (George & Babu, 2020). Further, confirmed the importance of understanding these nuanced motivational factors for tailoring tourism experiences.

2.2 Emotional Involvement (INVO)

Emotional involvement in farm tourism represents a multidimensional experience that influences both tourists and hosts. Prior research suggests that farm tourism interactions often involve emotional labor and meaningful exchanges between farmers and visitors (Grolleau et al., 2023). For tourists, engagement with rural landscapes and farm environments evokes strong emotional responses, transforming tourism from a transactional activity into an immersive experience (Jepson & Sharpley, 2015). Emotional involvement is particularly pronounced when visitors actively participate in farm activities, fostering deeper connections and personal fulfilment.

2.3 Satisfaction (SAT)

Visitor satisfaction in farm tourism is influenced by multiple factors, including service quality, pricing, natural resources, and experiential attributes (Kline et al., 2016; Wang & Hao, 2023). Previous studies report high satisfaction levels among farm tourists, particularly in Relation to authentic farm experiences, safety, and scenic environments (Loureiro, 2014; Su et al., 2020). However, Satisfaction is context-specific and

shaped by visitors' intrinsic motivations and environmental behavior (Baby & Kim, 2024), highlighting the need for holistic and experience-oriented farm tourism offerings.

2.4 Hypothesis Development

2.4.1 Push Motivation (PMOV) and Emotional Involvement (INVO)

One definition of motivation is "the combination of intrinsic factors that motivate an individual to engage in a certain behaviour or set of activities" (Dann, 1981; Pearce, 1983). Motivation has also been conceptualized as psychological and biological needs and desires. Why people travel and what they seek to experience is a tough issue to investigate through a tourism paradigm because it is fundamentally related to humanity and human nature. The characteristics and occurrences linked to motivation have been studied from a variety of academic perspectives. As per (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977; Gnoth, 1997), motivation can be described as both internal and external motives, as well as emotional and cognitive causes. Wants, feelings, and innate drives are all examples of internal motivators.

H_1. Push Motivation (PMOV) has a positive and significant relationship with INVO.
H_1 **(a)**. Novelty and Prestige (NOVP) have a positive and significant relationship with INVO.
H_1 **(b)**. Enhancing Relation (ENHR) has a positive and significant relationship with INVO.
H_1 **(c)**. Relaxation (RELAX) has a positive and significant relationship with INVO.

2.4.2 Emotional Involvement and Satisfaction (SAT)

Examining visitor SAT from the perspective of visitors to museums and tourist locations, Xu et al. (2019) investigated the part that both positive and negative emotions play. While negative emotions would limit enjoyment, Absalon et al. (2022) proposed a conceptual framework implying good emotions during the travelling process. At last, it was found that visitors' emotional reactions influence their level of pleasure (Ma et al., 2018). Moreover, the INVO is favourably linked with visitor SAT (Prayag & Ryan, 2012). Prayag et al. (2013) also showed that tourists are more satisfied the more positive emotional connection they experience. Accordingly, it was hypothesised that:

H_2. INVO has a positive and significant relationship with visitor SAT.

2.4.3 Push motivation (PMOT) and Satisfaction (SAT)

Studies have shown that internal motives such as Relaxation, novelty, social interaction, and prestige positively influence travel decisions and overall Satisfaction by fulfilling tourists' psychological and experiential needs (Mohammad & Som, 2010; Baniya & Paudel, 2016; Said & Maryono, 2018). When pleasure and personal fulfilment are primary travel drivers, push motivations encourage tourists to engage more deeply with agricultural tourism activities, leading to more favorable evaluations of their experiences (Correia et al., 2015). Push motivations have been found to significantly affect travel choices and experiential outcomes across diverse tourism contexts, ultimately enhancing visitor satisfaction when these internal needs are met (Tsai & Sakulsinlapakorn, 2016; Sastre & Phakdee-Auksorn, 2017). Thus, push motivation (PMOT) is a key antecedent of visitor satisfaction in farm tourism settings. Said and Maryono (2018) also investigated motivation as a push element for visiting a tourism farm and found that it has quite a positive impact on visitor satisfaction. With pleasure, the most sought-after experience pushes incentive drives prospective guests towards a tourism experience in a particular agricultural tourism (Correia et al., 2015). Moreover, Tsai and Sakulsinlapakorn (2016) contend that push incentive affects the travel choices of visitors, therefore fulfilling their own needs for agricultural tourism. Thus, the following Theory emerged:

H_3. PMOT has a positive and significant relationship with visitor SAT.
H_3 **(a)**. NOVP has a positive and significant relationship with visitor SAT.
H_3 **(b)**. ENHR has a positive and significant relationship with visitor SAT.
H_3 **(c)**. RELAX has a positive and significant relationship with visitor SAT.

2.4.4 Emotional Involvement (INVO) as a mediator

INVO (Yao, 2013) emphasised the mediating function of tourists' emotional engagement with the place in establishing the relationship between their motivation and SAT. The poll assessed visitor satisfaction through emotional and cognitive factors. The emotional engagement of tourists is referred to as their emotive dimension, whereas the characteristics of the place are considered their cognitive dimension. These two types of attributes served as mediators to assess visitor SAT (Yao, 2013). Affective measurement has emerged as a significant study area related to post-consumption satisfaction evaluation, influenced by the aforementioned elements (Prayag et al., 2017; Xu et al., 2019; Hosany et al., 2020). It was postulated that:

> **H4**. INVO mediates the relationship between PMOV and SAT.
> **H4 (a)**. INVO mediates the relationship between NOVP and SAT.
> **H4 (b)**. INVO mediates the relationship between ENHR and SAT.
> **H4 (c)**. INVO mediates the relationship between RELAX and SAT.

2.5 Conceptual Framework

Motivation is a core concept in psychology and behavioural sciences that explains why individuals engage in particular activities to achieve specific goals. In tourism research, motivation is commonly categorized into intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions (Bianchi et al., 2025). Intrinsic motivation stems from internal needs like enjoyment, curiosity, and personal fulfilment, whereas extrinsic motivation is motivated by external rewards, recognition, or social status (Decrop & Snelders, 2004). In the context of farm tourism, visitors are often motivated by experiential factors such as novelty and prestige, relationship enhancement, and Relaxation, which together shape their overall travel experience.

Building on motivation theory, involvement plays a critical role in translating tourists' motivations into meaningful experiences. Involvement reflects the degree of personal relevance and emotional attachment individuals feel toward an activity or destination (Bryan, 1977). Tourism experiences that align with visitors' intrinsic motivations tend to generate higher emotional involvement, particularly when tourists actively participate in farm-based activities. Emotional involvement (INVO), therefore, acts as a key psychological mechanism linking motivation to post-consumption outcomes such as Satisfaction. Prior research emphasizes the importance of emotions in shaping consumer satisfaction. Studies by Jeong and Lee (2006) and Westbrook (1987) suggest that both cognitive evaluations and emotional responses influence consumption experiences. Oliver (2006) further proposed that Satisfaction results from a combination of cognitive judgments and affective reactions. In hedonic consumption contexts such as tourism, emotional responses often play a more dominant role than cognitive assessments (Kempf, 1999). Farm tourism, characterized by sensory stimulation, Relaxation, and experiential enjoyment, aligns strongly with hedonic consumption, making emotional involvement particularly influential in shaping visitor satisfaction.

Tourism experiences are largely pleasure-oriented and designed to evoke positive emotions, fantasy, and enjoyment (Babin et al., 1994; Holbrook, 2006). Holidays are widely recognized as emotionally rich experiences that promote Relaxation, happiness, and psychological well-being (Goossens, 2000; Gretzel et al., 2006; Williams, 2006). Getting emotionally immersed in a trip increases the likelihood that visitors will have a positive image of their experience and report higher levels of SAT. This study builds on previous research by suggesting a model wherein factors like prestige and novelty, the strength of interpersonal connections, and the ability to relax are the driving forces behind tourist happiness. The role of emotional engagement is to mediate the connection between motivating variables and SAT, therefore strengthening the link. You can see the suggested connections in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Research Model
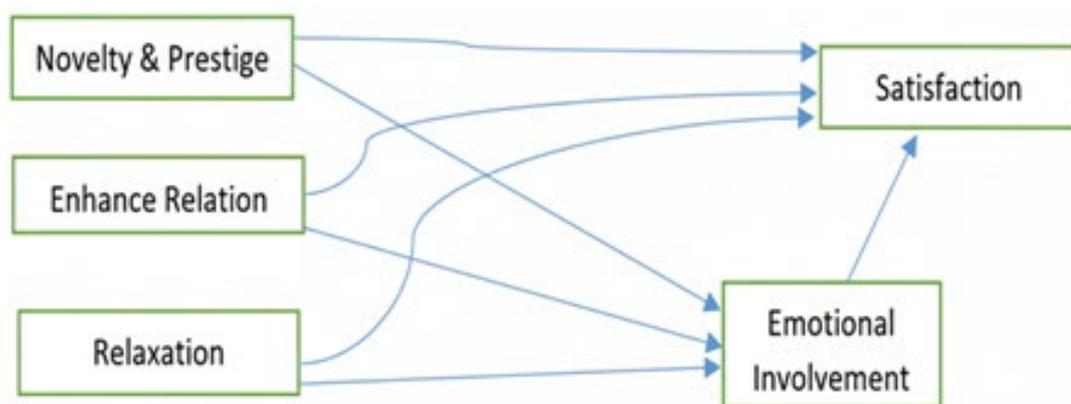
Source: Survey's Data

3. Methodology

3.1 Study Area

This study employed a cross-sectional quantitative research design to examine tourists' perceptions and SAT with sustainable farm tourism in Wayanad, Kerala. Primary data were collected from visitors who had actively participated in farm-based activities at five major sustainable farm sites: BlackHole Farms & Retreats (Periya), Hiliya Resort (Sulthan Bathery), Agronest Farm & Resort (Cheeral), Dew Drops Farm Stay (near Kalpetta), and Syam Farms Villa (Wayanad). These farms were selected based on their engagement in organic farming, biodiversity conservation, cultural preservation, and community interaction, consistent with UNWTO and FAO sustainable tourism principles (Table 1).A non-probability sampling approach was adopted, combining convenience sampling to access visitors readily available at the farms, and purposive sampling to ensure inclusion of respondents with genuine farm tourism experiences. Data collection was conducted over a five-month period (August–December 2024). A total of 550 questionnaires were distributed via on-site intercept surveys, and 385 usable responses were retained after excluding incomplete surveys, yielding an effective response rate of 70%. The data were collected from five farm tourism destinations in Wayanad, Kerala, with the number of respondents varying across sites depending on visitor availability during the survey period. Participation in the study was voluntary, and respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality in accordance with standard ethical research guidelines. Data for this study were obtained directly from farm tourism visitors through a structured questionnaire administered during on-site visits.

3.2 Measures

The questionnaire comprised 18 measurement items adapted from previously validated scales in sustainable tourism and visitor behavior literature, with contextual modifications for the Wayanad farm tourism setting. To improve the quality and reliability of the responses, they were recorded on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates strongly disagree and 5 indicates strongly agree (Reichel et al., 2000). Multiple components made up the questionnaire. The first section collected respondents' demographic and screening information using five closed-ended items, which are efficient to administer and require minimal interviewer involvement (William et al., 2013). Sections two through five measured the key constructs of this study, with measurement items adapted. Push motivation was assessed through the dimensions of enhancing relationships, measured using four items (Mohammad, 2010; Baniya & Paudel, 2016; Sastre & Phakdee, 2017), novelty and prestige, measured using three items (Hanqin & Lam, 1999; Mohammad & Som, 2010; Baniya & Paudel, 2016), and Relaxation, measured using four items (Kim, 2006; Baniya & Pau-

del, 2016). Emotional involvement was measured using four items adapted from Yao (2013), and Biswas et al. (2021). Visitor satisfaction was assessed using a three-item scale adapted from prior studies (Yao, 2013; Aliman et al., 2014).

Before the main survey, a pilot study with 100 respondents was conducted to assess the clarity and reliability of the assessment items. Following the findings of the pilot research, two items (SAT4 and NOVP4) were removed due to poor performance. The final data was collected using an e-questionnaire generated with Google Forms and administered during site visits to the selected farm tourism. Minor adjustments have been made to improve content authenticity. The data was analysed using PLS-SEM via SmartPLS 3.0, allowing for a full examination of both the measurement model, which includes reliability and validity, and the structural model, which addresses the hypothesised correlations. The reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. Convergent validity was assessed using Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and discriminant validity was verified using the HTMT ratio (Hair et al., 2019). The structural model assessed the hypothesised correlations, providing significant insights into how sustainable agricultural methods affect tourist experiences and satisfaction. To ensure that respondents understood the finalised questionnaire, it was delivered in English, Hindi, and Malayalam.

Table 1. Farm Tourism in Wayanad, Kerala

S.No.	Farm Name	Location	Sustainable Farm Activities
1	BlackHole Farms & Retreats	Periya, Wayanad	Organic farming, permaculture walks, cycling, fishing, eco-trekking
2	Hiliya Resort	Sulthan Bathery, Wayanad	Organic spice and fruit farming, traditional Kerala architecture, farm walks
3	Agronest Farm & Resort	Cheeral, Wayanad	Paddy cultivation, rural immersion, nature trails, bird watching
4	Dew Drops Farm Stay	Near Kalpetta, Wayanad	Organic farm activities, agri-education, nature interaction programs
5	Syam Farms Villa	Wayanad	Herbal and fruit gardens, organic living education, nature-based wellness

Source: Compiled by the authors from farm websites, 2024

4. Results

4.1 Respondents Profile

Table 1 shows the 385 respondents' demographics. Visitors were 42% male and 58% female. The bulk of respondents were 27–38 years old (37%), followed by 39–49 (27%). Most visitors traveled with friends (36%), while 25% traveled with colleagues and 24% with family members. In terms of occupation, professionals constituted the largest group (35%), followed by self-employed respondents (25%) and students (24%).

Table 2. Respondents' Profile

	Variables	Visitors'	N	Percentage
Gender	Male	385	162	42
	Female		223	58
Age	16 – 26	385	57	15
	27 – 38		144	37
	39 – 49		103	27
	50 – 60		53	14
	61 and above		28	7
Travel with whom	Alone	385	58	15
	with family		93	24
	Friends		137	36
	with colleagues		97	25
Occupation	Students	385	93	24
	Salaried		56	14
	Self employed		95	25
	Professional		135	35
	Any other		6	2

Source: Own Elaboration

4.2 Outer Model Assessment

The reliability and validity are estimated and analysed by measurement models (Table 3) (Hair Jr. et al., 2014). Composite reliability can be used to measure the internal consistencies of variables, whereas outward loading can be used to assess the reliability of elements. Variable relationship is not an abnormality provided its reliability and validity have been proved (Peter & Churchill, 1986). The results were obtained in the scope of PLS-SEM analysis of the measurement model conducted on Smart PLS 3.0 (Hair Jr. et al., 2014). The current study clarified the structure and demonstrated the correlation of factors based on earlier studies. The model fit was assessed using standardized model fit indices provided by SmartPLS. The SRMR value for both the saturated and estimated models was 0.072, which is below the recommended threshold of 0.08, indicating an acceptable model fit. The discrepancy measures d_ULS (1.419) and d_G (0.818) were within acceptable limits, suggesting a reasonable correspondence between the empirical and model-implied correlation matrices. The Normed Fit Index (NFI) value of 0.785 indicates a moderate model fit, which is acceptable in exploratory and prediction-oriented PLS-SEM studies. Hair et al. (2019): NFI > 0.70 acceptable for exploratory PLS-SEM. Overall, the model demonstrates an adequate goodness-of-fit, supporting its suitability for hypothesis testing. These findings offer convergent validity in the analysis of the measurement model. The figures indicated that construct elements appeared to have a high relationship with valid convergent validity in that their loading, AVE, Alpha, and CR values were more than 0.70. Table 1.2 indicates the results of testing the validity, reliability, and factor loading of the items of the PLS measurement model, respectively. As stated by Baby and Kim (2024), the internal consistency level must be no less than 0.70 as required by Cronbach's alpha. Based on Cronbach's alpha, there was a value of Alpha and CR above 0.70 for the selected variables. Fornell and Larcker (1981) discovered that the discriminant validity, reliability, and convergent validity average variance extracted (AVE) figures were above 0.50. Hair Jr. et al. (2014) stated that all the metrics presented in (Figure 3) possessed appropriate levels of Cronbach alpha, CR, and AVE, indicating 0.6, 0.7, and 0.5, respectively.

Table 3. Reliability and Convergent Validity of Lower Order Constructs

Variables	Items	Outer loadings	VIF	Cronbach's alpha	RHO_A	Composite reliability	AVE
Enhancing Relation	ENHR1	0.906	2.972	0.884	0.893	0.92	0.743
	ENHR2	0.882	2.515				
	ENHR3	0.829	2.184				
	ENHR4	0.826	2.045				
Novelty & Prestige	NOVP1	0.861	1.736	0.75	0.768	0.856	0.665
	NOVP2	0.828	1.447				
	NOVP3	0.755	1.477				
Relaxation	RELAX1	0.715	1.543	0.742	0.781	0.829	0.548
	RELAX2	0.721	1.581				
	RELAX3	0.762	1.8				
	RELAX4	0.762	1.159				
Involvement (Emotional involvement)	INVO1	0.876	2.571	0.882	0.883	0.919	0.739
	INVO2	0.887	2.599				
	INVO3	0.814	1.82				
	INVO4	0.859	2.366				
Satisfaction	SAT1	0.832	1.587	0.823	0.824	0.895	0.739
	SAT2	0.867	2.127				
	SAT3	0.88	2.182				

Source: Own Elaboration

4.3 Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was produced as to the oppositional connection of the latent variable and the square root of the average. Determine if the average variance is discriminantly valid; it should be 0.50 or higher. To prove discriminant validity, the square root of the mean should be bigger than the latent variables (Ab Hamid et al., 2017). According to these results, the assessment model has convergent validity. With loading, AVE, Alpha, and CR all above 0.70, the statistic showed high nexus and genuine convergent validity. You may find these numbers in Table 1.3. The HTMT will be 1, which means there is no discriminant validity, if the null hypothesis is rejected (Sarstedt et al., 2014). After confirming the validity and reliability of all the variables, structural route analysis was carried out. Given the necessity of structural route analysis, we proceeded in this manner. Results on the HTMT that were less than 1 demonstrated the discriminant validity. To ensure the model has external coherence, we have utilised Table 4 to compare latent variables in order to verify discriminant validity in this research investigation n. The following AVEs were so acquired: 0.743 for Enhancing Relation, 0.665 for Novelty & Prestige, 0.548 for Relaxation, 0.739 for Emotional Involvement, and 0.739 for Satisfaction. Table 4 shows that discriminant validity is demonstrated by the square root of AVE being larger than the latent variable correlation.

Table 4. Discriminant Validity

Variables	Emotional Involvement (INVO)	Enhancing Relation (ENR)	Novelty & Prestige (NOVP)	Relaxation (REL)	Satisfaction (SAT)
Emotional Involvement (INVO)	0.859				
Enhancing Relation (ENR)	0.817	0.862			
Novelty & Prestige (NOVP)	0.788	0.765	0.816		
Relaxation (REL)	0.708	0.609	0.644	0.740	
Satisfaction (SAT)	0.838	0.793	0.756	0.707	0.860

Source: Own Elaboration

4.4 Structural Equation Model

PLS-SEM bootstrapping found positive structural model route coefficients that support a hypothesis. (Table 5) & (Table 6) provide route correlations and hypothesis testing choices showing that PLS-SEM evaluations of customer behaviour predict psychological well-being. Researchers' hypothesis testing results (Hair et al., 2014), (Figure 2) structural model.

Table 5. Hypothesis Testing Result

H	Paths	Path coefficient	T statistics	P-value	Result
	Novelty & Prestige (NOVP) -> Emotional Involvement (INVO)	0.283	6.955	0	Support
H1	Enhancing Relation (ENHR) -> Emotional Involvement (INVO)	0.445	11.093	0	Support
	Relaxation (RELAX) -> Emotional Involvement (INVO)	0.256	7.318	0	Support
	Novelty & Prestige (NOVP) -> SAT	0.121	2.618	0.009	Support
H3	ENHR -> Satisfaction (SAT)	0.434	8.473	0	Support
	Relaxation (RELAX) -> Satisfaction (SAT)	0.293	6.944	0	Support
H2	Emotional Involvement (INVO) -> Satisfaction (SAT)	0.399	5.398	0	Support
	ENHR -> Emotional Involvement (INVO) -> Satisfaction (SAT)	0.177	5.265	0	Support
H4	Novelty & Prestige (NOVP) -> Emotional Involvement (INVO) -> Satisfaction (SAT)	0.113	4.245	0	Support
	Relaxation (RELAX) -> Emotional Involvement (INVO) -> Satisfaction (SAT)	0.102	3.766	0	Support

Source: Own Elaboration

Figure 2. Measurement Model
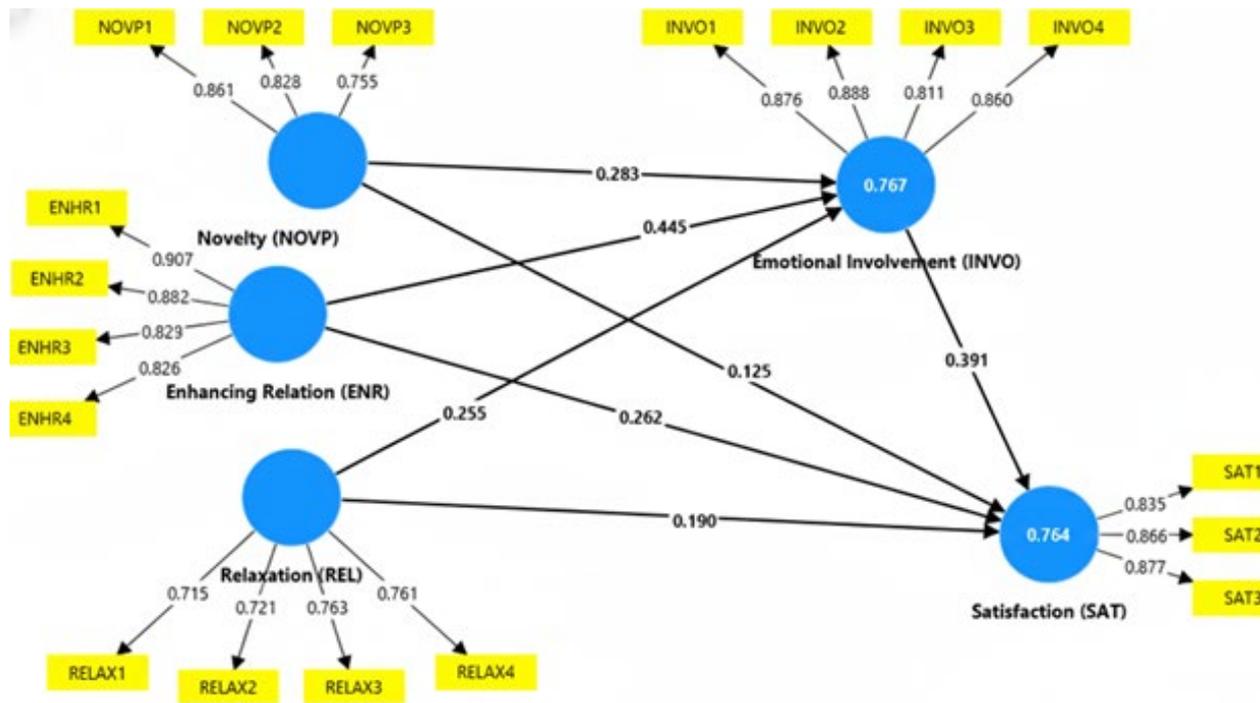
Source: PLS-SEM Output

4.5 Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Relationship between Push Motivation and Emotional Involvement. Hypothesis 1 examined the effect of PMOV → Enhancing Relation (ENHR), Novelty and Prestige (NOVP), and Relaxation (RELAX)—on Emotional Involvement (INVO). The results reveal that all three push motivation dimensions have a positive and statistically significant influence on INVO. Among them, ENHR exerts the strongest effect (β = 0.445, t = 11.093, p < 0.001), followed by Novelty & Prestige (NOVP) (β = 0.283, t = 6.955, p < 0.001) and Relaxation (RELAX) (β = 0.256, t = 7.318, p < 0.001). These findings indicate that relationship enhancement shows a dominant role in shaping tourists' emotional engagement, while novelty-seeking and Relaxation also significantly contribute. Therefore, Hypothesis H1 is supported (Table 5). Hypothesis 2 (H2): Relationship between INVO and SAT. Hypothesis 2 tested the impact of Emotional Involvement (INVO) on Satisfaction (SAT). The analysis demonstrates a strong and significant positive relationship between INVO and SAT (β = 0.399, t = 5.398, p < 0.001). This result confirms that emotionally involved tourists tend to report higher levels of SAT. Hence, Hypothesis H2 is supported (Table 5). Hypothesis 3 (H3): Relationship between PMOT and SAT: Examined the direct effect of PMOV factors on SAT. The analysis demonstrates that Enhancing Relation (ENHR) has the strongest direct influence on Satisfaction (β = 0.434, t = 8.473, p < 0.001), followed by Relaxation (RELAX) (β = 0.293, t = 6.944, p < 0.001). Novelty & Prestige (NOVP) also shows a positive but comparatively weaker effect on Satisfaction (β = 0.121, t = 2.618, p = 0.009). All paths are statistically significant, suggesting that social interaction and Relaxation are the primary drivers of Satisfaction, while Novelty and Prestige have a secondary but meaningful role. Thus, Hypothesis H3 is supported (Table 5). Hypothesis 4 (H4): Mediating Effect of INVO: Hypothesis 4 assessed the mediating role of INVO in the relationship between PMOV and SAT. The mediation analysis reveals significant indirect effects for all constructs. The strongest indirect effect is observed for Enhancing Relation (ENHR → INVO → SAT) (β = 0.177, t = 5.265, p < 0.001). This is followed by Novelty and Prestige (NOVP → INVO → SAT) (β = 0.113, t = 4.245, p < 0.001) and Relaxation (RELAX → INVO → SAT) (β = 0.102, t = 3.766, p < 0.001). These findings confirm that INOV significantly mediates the relationship between PMOV and SAT. Accordingly, Hypothesis H4 is accepted (Table 5).

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how visitors' push motivations—novelty and prestige, relaxation, and relationship enhancement—influence emotional involvement and overall satisfaction in sustainable farm tourism, with emotional involvement acting as a mediating mechanism. The empirical findings strongly support the proposed conceptual framework and provide meaningful insights into the experiential dynamics of farm tourism in Wayanad, Kerala.

First, the results confirm Hypothesis H1, demonstrating that all three push motivation dimensions have a significant and positive effect on emotional involvement. Among them, relationship enhancement emerged as the strongest predictor, indicating that visitors' desire to strengthen social bonds with family, friends, and local communities plays a crucial role in shaping emotional engagement. This finding aligns with prior rural and farm tourism research, which emphasizes social interaction, shared activities, and host–guest relationships as central elements of emotionally rich tourism experiences (Kastenholz et al., 1999; Jepson & Sharpley, 2015). Farm tourism environments naturally facilitate interpersonal interaction through collective participation in farming activities, communal dining, and informal interactions with hosts, thereby deepening visitors' emotional attachment. Novelty and prestige also exert a significant influence on emotional involvement, supporting the argument that unique, authentic, and culturally distinctive experiences stimulate curiosity and emotional immersion. Exposure to organic farming practices, rural lifestyles, and traditional agricultural knowledge in Wayanad provides visitors with a sense of uniqueness and personal enrichment, consistent with hedonic consumption and experiential tourism theory (Holbrook, 2006). Similarly, the positive effect of relaxation highlights the restorative role of nature-based tourism, reinforcing findings from well-being and rural tourism literature that link tranquil environments with emotional rejuvenation (Goossens, 2000).

Second, the findings strongly support Hypothesis H2, confirming that emotional involvement has a significant positive effect on visitor satisfaction. This result indicates that satisfaction in farm tourism is not solely an outcome of functional service attributes but is largely shaped by visitors' emotional responses during on-site experiences. Emotionally engaged tourists are more likely to evaluate their experiences positively, supporting prior research that positions affective responses as a key determinant of satisfaction in tourism settings (Prayag & Ryan, 2012). Third, Hypothesis H3 is fully supported, as push motivations directly influence satisfaction. Relationship enhancement and relaxation show particularly strong effects, suggesting that social fulfilment and psychological escape are primary drivers of satisfaction in sustainable farm tourism. Novelty and prestige, while significant, exert a comparatively weaker effect, indicating that emotional and relational benefits outweigh symbolic motivations in this context. Finally, the mediation analysis supports Hypothesis H4, confirming that emotional involvement partially mediates the relationship between push motivations and satisfaction. This finding highlights emotional involvement as a critical psychological mechanism that translates internal motivations into positive evaluative outcomes, thereby extending experience-based tourism theory. Overall, the discussion underscores the central role of emotions in transforming farm tourism experiences into sources of satisfaction and well-being.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

This study offers meaningful theoretical contributions to tourism motivation and experience research by deepening the understanding of how internal motivations shape emotionally driven outcomes in sustainable farm tourism. Building on classic push–pull motivation theory (Dann, 1977; Crompton, 1979), the findings challenge the traditional view that push motivations operate only at the pre-travel decision stage. Instead, the results demonstrate that intrinsic motivations such as relaxation, novelty, and relationship enhancement continue to influence tourists during the on-site experience by shaping their emotional involvement and subsequent satisfaction. This advances existing theory by positioning motivation as a continuous and evolving process rather than a one-time trigger for travel intention. Further, this study strengthens experience-based tourism theory by empirically establishing emotional involvement as a key psychological mechanism linking motivation and satisfaction. While previous studies acknowledge emotions as outcomes of tourism experiences (Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Hosany et al., 2020), limited empirical work has examined how emotions function as mediators within motivation–satisfaction relationships,

particularly in rural or farm tourism contexts. By demonstrating the partial mediating role of emotional involvement, this research responds directly to calls for greater integration of affective processes in tourism models (Prayag et al., 2017). Emotional involvement is therefore conceptualised not merely as an experiential by-product but as an active driver of satisfaction formation. Finally, the study enriches sustainable and rural tourism literature by offering evidence from an emerging farm tourism destination in India, a context that remains underrepresented in theory development. The prominence of social bonding and emotional connectedness supports relational tourism perspectives (Jepson & Sharpley, 2015) and suggests that sustainability value extends beyond environmental practices to include emotional and social fulfilment. Collectively, the study refines existing theoretical frameworks by integrating motivation, emotion, and satisfaction into a cohesive explanatory model.

5.2 Practical Implications

The findings provide clear and actionable insights for destination management organisations (DMOs), farm tourism operators, and policymakers seeking to strengthen sustainable farm tourism development. Rather than promoting farm tourism solely as a rural or nature-based product, DMOs should reposition destinations as emotionally engaging and socially meaningful experiences. Since relationship enhancement strongly influences emotional involvement and satisfaction, marketing strategies should highlight shared activities such as family farming experiences, group participation, cultural storytelling, and host–guest interactions. Visual and narrative content used in destination branding should emphasise togetherness, authenticity, and emotional connection.

At the operational level, farm tourism providers should deliberately design experiences that encourage emotional participation. Hands-on farming, interactive workshops, guided farm walks, and community-led events can deepen visitors' emotional engagement. Operators should be trained to act as experience facilitators rather than passive service providers. DMOs can support this shift by offering training programmes focused on experiential design, visitor engagement, and emotional storytelling techniques. The strong role of relaxation also suggests the need for restorative tourism planning. DMOs should promote slow-tourism elements such as peaceful farm stays, nature-based wellness activities, flexible itineraries, and digital-detox spaces. Infrastructure development should prioritise calm, low-impact environments that support psychological well-being without undermining sustainability principles. From a policy perspective, emotional involvement and visitor satisfaction should be incorporated into destination performance evaluation frameworks. Beyond visitor numbers, DMOs should track experiential quality indicators, including emotional engagement and perceived well-being. Finally, destination marketing should move away from generic sustainability claims and instead communicate emotion-based value propositions, reinforcing farm tourism as a source of relaxation, connection, and personal fulfilment—key drivers of repeat visitation and long-term destination loyalty.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the relationships between visitors' push motivations, emotional involvement, and satisfaction within the context of sustainable farm tourism in Wayanad, Kerala. By employing a PLS-SEM approach, the research provides robust empirical evidence that intrinsic motivations significantly shape visitors' emotional engagement and satisfaction with farm tourism experiences.

The findings demonstrate that push motivations—particularly relationship enhancement and relaxation—are critical determinants of both emotional involvement and satisfaction. Visitors who seek meaningful social interactions, family bonding, and stress relief are more likely to become emotionally engaged during farm tourism experiences and, in turn, report higher levels of satisfaction. While novelty and prestige also contribute positively, their comparatively weaker influence suggests that symbolic benefits are secondary to emotional and relational fulfilment in sustainable farm tourism settings. One of the key contributions of this study lies in establishing emotional involvement as a partial mediator between push motivations and satisfaction. This result confirms that visitor satisfaction is shaped not only by pre-travel motivations but also by the depth of emotional engagement formed during on-site experiences. Emotion-

al involvement thus acts as a bridge between internal motivations and post-consumption evaluations, reinforcing the importance of affective processes in tourism experience formation. From a theoretical perspective, the study extends push–pull motivation theory by demonstrating that push motivations continue to influence tourists beyond destination choice and actively shape experiential and emotional outcomes. By integrating emotional involvement into the motivation–satisfaction relationship, the study enriches experience-based tourism theory and contributes to the growing body of literature emphasizing emotions as central to visitor behaviour. Furthermore, by focusing on sustainable farm tourism in an underexplored Indian context, the research broadens the geographical scope of farm tourism scholarship.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that farm tourism operators should prioritise emotionally engaging experiences that encourage social interaction, participation, and relaxation. Hands-on farming activities, family-oriented programmes, storytelling, and host–guest interaction can significantly enhance emotional involvement and satisfaction. Destination marketers should highlight the emotional, restorative, and relational benefits of farm tourism rather than focusing solely on novelty. Policymakers and tourism planners should support sustainable farm tourism through training, infrastructure development, and community-based initiatives that strengthen emotional connections between visitors, local communities, and the natural environment.

Despite its contributions, the study is not without limitations. The focus on a single destination and cross-sectional data limits generalisability. Future research could adopt longitudinal designs, compare multiple regions, or examine the role of digital engagement and technological interventions in enhancing emotional involvement. Overall, this study reinforces the importance of emotionally enriched experiences in achieving visitor satisfaction and long-term sustainability in farm tourism destinations.

6.1 Limitations of the Study and Future Directions

First, this study only looks at farm tourism in Wayanad, Kerala. This suggests that the findings may not be applicable to other regions with varying cultures, visitor preferences, or agricultural configurations. Visitors from other parts of the world may have different goals and experiences. Secondly, things that might affect visitor happiness, like weather, cultural factors, or economic variables, were not taken into account. Last but not least, the data was only taken at one point in time, so it doesn't take into account how visitors' goals or levels of satisfaction change over time.

Future research should look into comparison assessments with other rural destinations, as well as how digital interventions like virtual leisure farm experiences and augmented reality (AR) might increase tourists' emotional connections to farm tourism venues. Exploring the impact of digital engagement or comparing farm tourism motivation across different demographic groups.

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Table 1. Appendix

Variables	Items	Description	Indicator Loadings
Enhancing Relation	ENHR1	I am interested in interacting with new individuals during my visit.	(Baniya & Paude, 2016; Mohammad, 2010; Sastre & Phakdee, 2017).
	ENHR2	I enjoy sharing my farm tourism experiences with other after returning home.	
	ENHR3	I am interested in improving my interaction and communication with local people.	
	ENHR4	Visiting a farm allow me to spend quality time with my family.	
Novelty and Prestige	NOVP1	I like farm tourism destination that feel new and different.	(Hanqin & Lam, 1999; Baniya & Paudel, 2016; Mohammad & Som, 2010).
	NOVP2	I prefer visiting farm tourism places that impress my friends and family.	
	NOVP3	Visiting such places makes me feel proud and special.	
Relaxation	RELAX1	I visit farm tourism destinations to relax and feel refreshed.	(Kim, 2006; Baniya & Paudel, 2016).
	RELAX2	I visit farms to recover from physical and mental fatigue.	
	RELAX3	Visiting a farm helps me relive stress from work.	
	RELAX4	I come to farm tourism destinations to escape my daily routine.	
Emotional Involvement	INVO1	It is very special for me to visit farm.	(Biswas, 2021; Yao, 2013; Biswas et al., 2021).
	INVO2	I got pleasure from visiting the farm visit.	
	INVO3	I feel emotionally attached to the farm during my visit.	
	INVO4	Visiting a farm means a lot to me emotionally.	
Satisfaction	SAT1	Overall, I am satisfied with my farm tourism experience.	(Yao, 2013; Aliman et al., 2014).
	SAT2	I am satisfied with my decision to visit farm.	
	SAT3	This farm tourism experience met my expectations.	

Agile4ALL – An Agile Human Resources Pilot Implementation in an Algarve Tourism SME

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ABSTRACT

This human resources management project was carried out by the University of the Algarve to apply an innovative vision of agile practices to the hospitality and tourism sector. Recently, agile human resources have attracted increasing interest among professionals. Starting with the Agile Manifesto, this approach was initially implemented in the information technology sector to combine processes and tools, such as Lean, Kanban and Scrum, to improve organisational performance. Agile companies are more informal and use open communication, as well as showing greater motivation and productivity. However, the transition to agile operations is disruptive. Some common failures are a sense of culture shock and a lack of support for and knowledge about agile practices, which require an appropriate communication strategy that involves all stakeholders in a continuous feedback loop. The project pilot was implemented in a small and medium-sized company in the Algarve tourism sector. The goal was to analyse the feasibility of transforming a traditional organisation into an agile one, with human resources employees and management acting as the main promoters of this process. The results confirm that an agile transformation is possible, but seasonality factors and the participants' availability must be considered for this process to be successful. A set of follow-up studies is proposed for future research.

KEYWORDS

ARTICLE HISTORY

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1. Introduction

Agile human resources (HR) practices are attracting increasing interest from HR professionals because greater organisational agility is needed to deal with uncertain environments (McMackin & Heffernan, 2021). The first agile methodologies were presented by the Agile Manifesto, which was written by software developers (Beck et al., 2001) seeking more flexible, adaptive approaches to their work. This manifesto highlights values and principles that prioritise individuals, interactions, functional solutions and customer collaboration over static or rigid processes and tools.

Early adopters of the agile approach focused mainly on the principles of iterative development, continuous feedback and adaptability, which facilitate better collaboration and faster delivery. Lean, Kanban and Scrum have since become the most popular tools for agile teams. After the initial success of these methods in software development, they expanded beyond their software roots (Google TechTalks, 2009) into varied industries such as finance, healthcare and marketing.

Non-technical teams have also adopted agile practices to improve their collaboration, response to changing markets and customer satisfaction (Rigby, 2021), especially as fast-paced innovation has turn into a strategic imperative for most companies and thus become high priority. To achieve this goal, companies observed trends in Silicon Valley and software companies and emulated their agile project management (Cappelli & Tavis, 2018). In the 2010s, new approaches emerged (e.g. the Scalable Agile Framework, Large-Scale Scrum and Disciplined Agile) to provide guidance on how to apply agile principles to extremely complex company-wide projects (Leffingwell, 2011).

During this period, organisations also realised that success was best achieved by aligning agile principles with their cultures. Transparency, collaboration and continuous improvement became fundamental values, promoting an environment conducive to agile practices (Dikert et al., 2016). This trend gave birth to movements such as the Agile HR Manifesto – a group of HR professionals who seek to promote the agile philosophy within organisations (Agile HR Manifesto, 2021).

The present research comprised the final phase of a master's-level study, namely, the implementation of a pilot project in a small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) in the Algarve tourism sector. The goal was to answer the following question: To what extent is agile HR transformation viable in SMEs in the hospitality and tourism (H&T) sector?

To this end, the remaining sections are as follow. The second section contains a literature review addressing four questions:

- What is agile HR?
- How did agile HR develop?
- What are the main advantages and disadvantages of transforming a traditional organisation into an agile one?
- How can HR management help their organisation successfully implement an agile transformation?

The third section describes the methodology, while the fourth section reports the results. The fifth section provides the discussion, and the final section presents the conclusions, limitations and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

The agile approach was first broadly defined by the Agile Manifesto (Agile Manifesto, 2001; Teich & Faddoul, 2013) as a methodology that emphasises continuous process improvement to maximise customer value while minimising waste. Agile practices focus on self-organising and multi-functional teams' iterative growth based on disciplined project management (Jafa et al., 2022). According to the "2022 State of Agile Report," 89% of respondents mentioned that high-performance agile teams have people-centric values, a clearly defined culture, tools and leadership empowerment (State of Agile, 2023, p. 3).

Strategic HR management has developed two distinct ways of looking at agile methods. The first is "HR for agile," which "refers to the design and implementation of HR systems to support [a]gile [practices] in . . . organisation[s]" (McMackin & Heffernan, 2021). The other perspective is "agile HR," which is the adoption

of agile methods and processes as an operational model by HR departments. In agile HR organisations, HR personnel provide the same services as in traditional organisations (e.g. hiring, professional development and performance management), but their practices adjust to ongoing changes in their company's culture and way of working (Gothelf, 2019).

Agile organisations contrast with traditional businesses in terms of project management, as the former tend to be more informal and open in their way of communicating, have more flexible competency management practices and implement mainly non-material incentives. Agile entities also have a flatter organisational structure and a lower ratio of managers to teams (Melnik & Maurer, 2006; McHugh et al., 2013; Zavyalova et al., 2020). According to Serrador and Pinto (2015), companies that implement agile methods additionally report a higher success rate in project execution, greater efficiency and more stakeholder satisfaction. Stakeholders, in this context, are any organisation, project or initiative that have a direct or indirect influence on a company or that are affected by its actions and decisions.

Not all businesses have successfully converted to more agile operations. The main challenges identified are resistance to organisational transformation, corporate culture clashes, absence of proper information technology tools, difficulty implementing agile practices and lack of management support. The "2022 State of Agile Report" further states that respondents' biggest concerns are low leadership buy-in (42%), insufficient knowledge of agile concepts (40%), widespread resistance to change (40%) and insufficient support and/or sponsorship from company managers (39%) (State of Agile, 2023).

Espinosa-Curiel et al. (2018) observe that "the transformation process requires several changes in relationships and interactions between employees." An appropriate employee communication and relationship strategy is, therefore, essential for traditional organisations to change successfully into agile ones. The present study examined the practical results of an agile HR pilot implementation in an H&T SME to determine the extent to which agile HR transformation is viable in SMEs in the H&T sector. To address this question, the available literature about agile HR practices was reviewed and a model developed of the agile HR transformation process (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Proposed Agile Human Resources Transformation
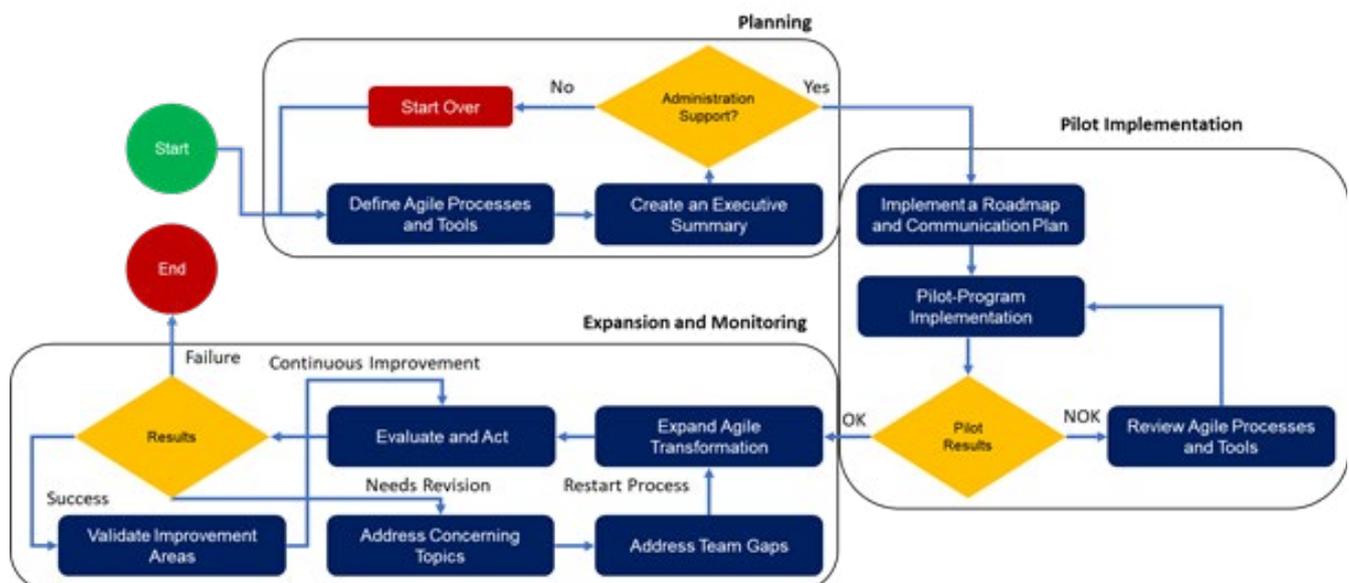
Source: Own Elaboration (2024)

Figure 1 above shows the four main phases of agile HR transformation: planning, pilot implementation, expansion and monitoring. The literature suggests that HR works best as an "Agile Transformation Department" whose staff members promote agile transformation under the supervision of HR managers and senior executives. This pivotal role ensures a smooth transition and fosters employee engagement in fulfilling six responsibilities (McKinsey, 2021), of which the first is creating a transformation roadmap for

implementing agile strategies across the organisation. The second task is boosting capabilities including hiring and upskilling talent, and the third is serving as culture and change champions within the company. The fourth responsibility is coaching senior leaders, while the fifth is managing the interdependencies required in agile transformation processes. The last is creating and refining best practices while the agile transformation takes place. Various well-known agile transformation use cases are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Case Studies of Agile Human Resources (HR) Implementation

Business Name	Business Category	State before Agile HR	Migration to Agile HR	Highlights after Agile HR
Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria (Forcano, 2018)	Private banking	Clear strategic vision but issues with execution New competitors moving faster	Launched pilots in Spain and Latin America (LAT) in 2014 Combined product and engineering teams in multidisciplinary, co-located teams Produced successful results inspiring implementation in talent and culture (T&C) departments in 2016 Created a pool of people fully dedicated to projects in all T&C units in Spain and LAT Moved 10% of teams to project-based organisations By 2017, moved entire team to agile HR in Spain and over 2,000 other employees in 10 countries	Broke up previous functional units and hierarchies into four distinct groups – "Front," "Disciplines," "Solutions Development" and "Employee Experience" – each with its own specialties: Front (10–15%) – business partners offering strategic advice and support Disciplines (10–15%) – small teams defining HR strategy, models, policies, tools and platforms Solutions Development (25–30%) – multidisciplinary HR teams executing projects using Scrum Employee Experience (40–50%) – teams executing end-to-end processes, delivering value to internal customers. Implemented Lean and Kanban principles Created new roles and responsibilities, ceremonies, people management models and communication tools Promoted acceptance of the agile approach across the organisation
Sky (Ballard-Pateman, 2022; Jeffery, 2018)	Media	Slow paced delivery of value Wasted time and resources due to perfectionism Influence of highly paid people's opinion Siloed HR work	Adopted a "test and learn" approach Implemented a three-month pilot for learning and development (L&D) team Focused on producing minimum viable products for priority delivery Used agile tools (e.g. Kanban and Scrum) Conducted 1–2 day "swarms" (i.e. meetings) for quick problem resolution Operated in agile "squads" (i.e. teams) with scrum masters and product owners	Increased support for managers fivefold at a lower cost Involved 60% of managers in online L&D activities quarterly Offered more opportunities for employee development Built effective sprint teams with equal members and focused on overall goals

Vero (Agile HR Community, 2022a)	Public administration	Organisation led by strong individual domain experts Limited collaboration and inclusion in leadership teams Difficulty adapting to large-scale organisational changes, such as becoming customer-focused and adopting agile ways of working	Built a cohesive leadership team with executive training and coaching Focused workshops on belonging, inclusion and trust-building Co-created change roadmaps and alignment with transformation programmes Facilitated feedback loops between sponsors and programmes Trained leaders in agile techniques such as listening, prioritising and involving others	Improved leadership team cohesion Established a culture of trust and respect for those leading changes Invested in the long-lasting adoption of agile planning and prioritisation techniques Effectively resolved tensions and impediments that were hindering progress
Thales (Agile HR Community, 2022b)	Security and defence	Technical acquisition (TA) partners working individually, with limited collaboration and communication Siloed services delivered separately to different business units Digitalisation and movement towards agile processes without TA team adopting these practices	Provided certified agile HR training to the entire TA team Used HR Scrum to help the team set up agile tools and processes, including backlogs, Kanban boards, value flows, estimation and velocity metrics Redesigned work processes and scaled their approach with 30+ people	Increased team performance by 72% within nine months Generated higher engagement, belonging and enjoyment at work Allowed the HR team to become fully self-managing and proficient in agile processes and tools Future-proofed the team to handle growing workloads, such as the surge in remote recruitment during the coronavirus disease-19 pandemic

Source: Own Elaboration (2024)

3. Methodology

3.1 Instruments

Research needs a solid theoretical foundation and carefully thought-out methodology to ensure the collection of the right information and appropriate sample with minimal errors (Gonçalves, 2014). For the present project, a combination of measurement instruments were used, especially qualitative techniques typically associated with unstructured collection methods (Drenth, 1998).

Qualitative research focusses on interpreting phenomena through observation, description, understanding and meaning. The data are gathered without preconceived hypotheses as these are constructed only after observation (Pocinho, 2012). This approach seeks to understand participants' viewpoints by asking guiding questions instead of testing hypotheses statistically, thereby exploring values, beliefs, representations, habits, attitudes and opinions.

The current study relied on open-format interviews, group interviews (i.e. focus groups), brainstorming and audiovisual recordings. These techniques are described in Table 2.

Table 2. Qualitative Research Methodologies Used in Pilot Project

Technique	Description	Advantages	Phases/Characteristics
Open-ended interviews (Íñigo & Mazo, 2008)	Unstructured technique in which the interviewee describes their interpretation of the research subject	Can be conducted in any circumstances to gather in-depth data	1. Definition of research objective 2. Creation of interview guide 3. Selection of participants 4. Execution of interview 5. Analysis of information
Focus groups (Íñigo & Mazo, 2008; Millward, 2000; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003)	Group information collection technique focused on clarifying specific data about a particular group	Can provide a more natural environment for participants and generate data through their interactions	Researcher-led discussion based on questions with variable response formats
Participant -observation (Sackett & Larson, 1990)	Technique used in natural groups in real contexts, with the researchers' unintrusive participation in the study group	Can be effective in restricted groups and for deepening organisational behaviours	Unintrusive participation of researcher
Brainstorming (Sofia José & Simão Neves, 2014)	Meetings used to encourage unrestricted mental activity, originating in 1930s marketing	Can find innovative and creative ideas for solving problems	Specialists gathering relevant information

Source: Own Elaboration (2024)

The project used the above instruments in combination with the OPERA and Metaplan techniques. OPERA (**O**wn Opinion, **P**eer Opinion, **E**xpose, **R**ank and **A**rrange) is a co-creation method that combines systematic thinking with creative problem-solving processes to develop thoughts and suggestions collaboratively in answer to a main question. This technique is typically applied in team meetings, processes (e.g. brainstorming) or workshops, in five phases: (1) individual opinion, (2) pair opinion, (3) facts presentation, (4) idea ranking and (5) idea organisation.

The Metaplan moderation method is a proven, effective way to reach a common understanding in group discussions (Metaplan, 2021). The facilitator provides didactic materials to the participants, such as whiteboards, cardboards and rectangular, oval and round cards (e.g. post-it notes, pins, markers and stickers) that can be combined with co-creation methods (e.g. OPERA). Metaplan is an interactive presentation method in which, during the presentation phase, the facilitator and/or participants have to face the others. At the end of the presentation, the facilitator typically takes a photo of what has been discussed, which serves as a record of the commitments made to specific ideas.

The final tool was the five whys, two hows (5W2H) method, also known as the "curious tool." This technique is a checklist of specific questions that can characterise and/or clarify a particular situation, problem, solution or action plan (Moura, n.d.). The participants answer questions beginning with the following words: what, why, where, when, who, how and how much. The goal is to gather as much information as possible about the activity planned, ranging from more general details, such as what the activity is and why it needs to be carried out, to more specific information, such as the delivery deadline and the person responsible for the activity.

The 5W2H technique can efficiently fulfil varied purposes, namely, reducing idleness, improving communication, increasing the capacity for on-time deliveries, facilitating resource planning and increasing productivity. An effective 5W2H analysis must do three things (5W2H Analysis, 2024), of which the first is to define who is the facilitator of the discussion (i.e. the person responsible for moderating the meeting). The second is to encourage brainstorming, during which the questions are answered in no particular order. The last is to create a descriptive record of the responses at the end of the discussion, organising the topics based on the questions answered using the 5W2H method.

Digital tools were also used to complement the above instruments (i.e. videoconferencing software [e.g. Microsoft Teams]) (Microsoft, 2024) in order to conduct some training remotely and answer questions throughout the pilot programme (e.g. via group chat). Another helpful tool was Open Artificial Intelligence's (AI) Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformer (ChatGPT) (OpenAI, 2024).

The data were manually collected using the qualitative methodologies selected for the pilot project. The authors of this paper were all present in the sessions, contributing to the notes, which were subsequently

compared with the work done by Ballard-Pateman (2022), Capelli and Tavis (2018), Forcano (2018), Jeffery (2018) and Narasimhan et al. (2018). The cited researchers made HR managers primarily responsible for the agile transformation process (Jenkins et al., 2011). The data collected and the notes from the authors of the present article were compared and discussed after the sessions, so only the information that all the authors concurred was valid appears in this paper.

3.2 Procedures

The procedures followed throughout the project were based on the aforementioned instruments and the plan-do-check-action project management approach (Hayes, 2012). The entire process comprised the agile HR transformation shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Agile Human Resources (HR) Transformation Phases

Phase	Description
Determine agile processes and tools	Determine which processes and tools will be used to transform the organisation into an agile entity
Create awareness (State of Agile, 2023)	Create awareness among upper-level management of agile methodology so that they understand the advantages of implementing agile strategies across their organisation (e.g. presenting success stories of agile transformation processes while also speaking openly about the potential challenges of changing an organisation into an agile one and the ways these can be overcome)
Plan roadmap and communication strategy (Bhandari, 2023; Hennink, 2007; Silva et al., 2014)	Plan a roadmap and communication strategy that involves all potential stakeholders in the company (i.e. executives, managers, employees and HR teams) so that the transformation process is clear to all participants, using multiple qualitative data collection methods (e.g. a focus group comprised of pre-selected individuals with similar interests, especially agile processes and tools, who will comprise a small multidisciplinary team that [1] discusses specific issues related to the agile transformation to encourage a range of responses and greater understanding of the participants' attitudes, behaviour, opinions or perceptions and [2] will supervise the agile process, in combination with structured/open interviews or internal polls)
Implement pilot projects (Ballard-Pateman, 2022; Biron et al., 2021; Forcano, 2018; Narasimhan et al., 2018)	Implement the agile processes and tools in small-scale pilot projects across the organisation after the agile transformation roadmap and communication plan are defined and priorities within the organisation are set, using a skunkworks approach to promote experimentation
Evaluate results	Evaluate the results of the pilot projects and discuss them using a Lean/continuous improvement approach: What went well (keep doing), what did not go so well (stop doing) and what needs to be improved?

Source: Own Elaboration (2024)

The above methods enabled an innovative pilot project to be launched, hereafter designated as "Agile-4ALL." This project concentrated on providing SMEs with training and business consultancy in HR management. The main objective was to facilitate continuous improvement within these organisations using an agile HR approach combined with qualitative (e.g. focus groups) and digital tools (e.g. ChatGPT) with the aim of making tangible improvements in team productivity, HR and operational results.

The conceptual framework for Agile4ALL centred around four key points. First, a focus on people generates competitive advantages in constantly changing business environments. Second, proactive responses to change are created through collaborative networks and open communication. Third, continuous improvement is needed in all organisations, and, last, a significant part of organisational problems can be solved internally. In its pilot version, the Agile4ALL programme was divided into five phases (see Table 4).

Table 4. Agile4ALL Project Phases

Phase	Description
1	Raising awareness among the company's management of the advantages of the Agile4ALL programme
2	Defining agile processes and tools, selecting those most suitable for implementation and mapping stakeholders' role in the pilot
3	Applying a communication strategy and roadmap with feedback collected from employees through discussion groups
4	Implementing the pilot by training participants in agile concepts and holding weekly follow-up, monitoring and feedback meetings
5	Evaluating results by collecting and assessing outcomes via questionnaires and interviews that ensure continuous feedback

Source: Own Elaboration (2024)

More extensive research is needed on agile HR practices in H&T SMEs, especially in the Algarve, so this study implemented Agile4ALL in a business with these characteristics and location. The aim was to answer the following research question: To what extent are agile HR transformation programmes viable for SMEs in sectors such as H&T? Table 5 lists the research objectives based on this question.

Table 5. Research Objectives

General Objective	Specific Objectives
Determine the feasibility of implementing an agile human resources (HR) transformation in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), especially in a non-information technology sector such as hospitality and tourism.	Identify, based on the feedback obtained during the project's pilot programme, which practices are positive determinants of agile HR transformations in SMEs.
	Ascertain, using the same feedback, which practices are negative determinants of SMEs' agile HR transformations.
	Determine, based on this feedback, whether the agile HR practices used in large companies can be applied by SMEs.
	Establish the feasibility of an agile reorganisation of a tourism SME by comparing the practices implemented with those reported in the relevant literature.

Source: Own Elaboration (2024)

To this end, multiple SMEs in the Algarve's H&T sector were contacted, and one company was selected as the pilot client. An agreement was reached with the SME to execute the project as described in Figure 2. The programme lasted 12 weeks, with each remote or in-person meeting lasting up to one hour.
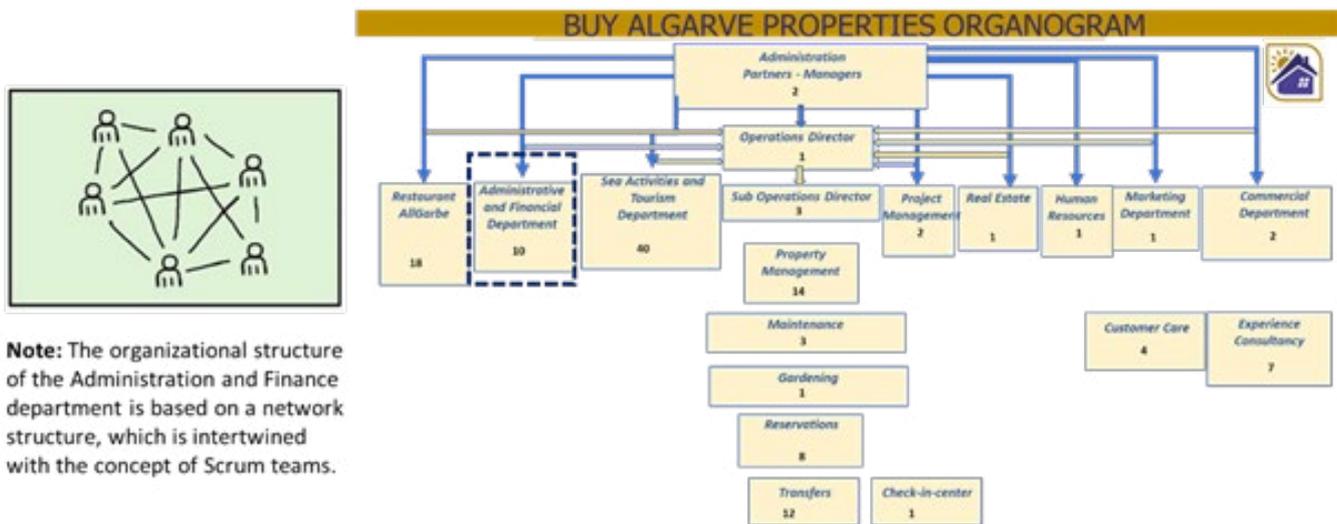
Figure 2. Summary of Agile4ALL Activities

Note: OPERA = Own Opinion, Peer Opinion, Expose, Rank and Arrange; SWOT = strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats; HR = human resources.
Source: Own Elaboration (2024)

3.3 Business Description

The company chosen for the pilot was Buy Algarve Properties (BAP), which is part of a multinational tourism corporation founded in 2013 that belongs to the Properties4U group. BAP is a medium-sized business located in the Albufeira Council, with 129 employees as of August 2024. Its business activities fall under the travel agency activities code. The areas of activity are represented by the organogram in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Buy Algarve Properties Organisational Chart

Note: The organizational structure of the Administration and Finance department is based on a network structure, which is intertwined with the concept of Scrum teams.

Source: Buy Algarve Properties (2024)

The Agile4ALL programme was described to the BAP administration, after which they agreed that, due its characteristics, the Administrative and Financial (A&F) Department would be the best team for the pilot. The A&F team's size was adequate for the programme activities, and the members were also more readily available for the practical implementation.

3.4 Sample

For this project, the sample consisted of a 10-member group from the A&F Department of BAP. This team had relatively homogeneous characteristics in terms of their areas of expertise (i.e. predominantly management), with their ages falling between 30 and 50 years old. Nine participants were female, but the department head was male. This sample was considered of special interest to this study due to the department's importance in decision-making processes focussed on various aspects of the company's operations and the team's need to provide accurate information to other internal departments.

4. Observations and Results

The activities described in Figure 2 above took place, and the following observations were made. In Sessions I and II, a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis was conducted (see Figure 4). Only internal human factors were discussed, so other variables normally covered by SWOT analyses were considered outside the scope of this study. The results, especially the strengths and weaknesses, reveal that BAP's main strong points are a comprehensive range of customer services, organisational creativity and adaptability and a great working environment. In addition, BAP is a competitive company with ambitious goals. Conversely, its weak points are no leisure areas for employees and a high turnover especially in departments that are more dependent on seasonal factors. Internal processes are also poorly automated, and internal communication between teams is poor.

Figure 4. Buy Algarve Properties Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) Analysis
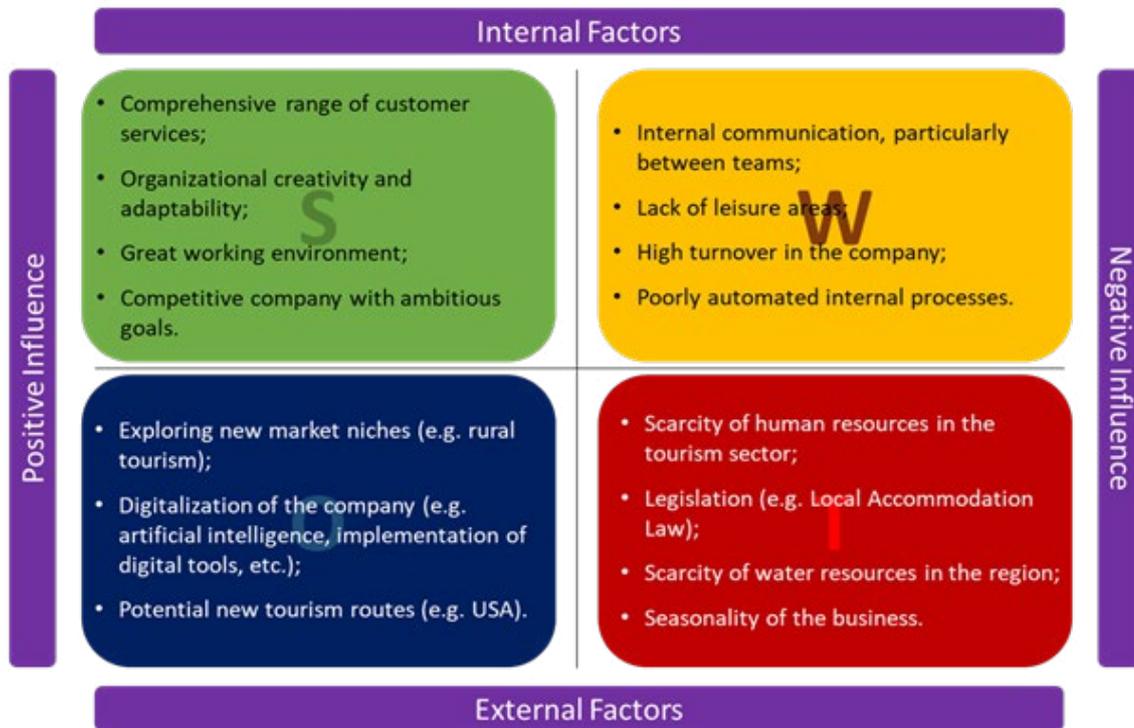
Source: Own Elaboration (2024)

In the next session (i.e. Session III), the SWOT analysis was discussed. The need for more internal communication between teams was frequently mentioned and corroborated by the findings of the evaluation of organisational culture (i.e. a score of 2.63 out of 5 points) (see Figure 5a).

Figure 5. Organisational Culture: (a) Weak Points and (b) Strong Points
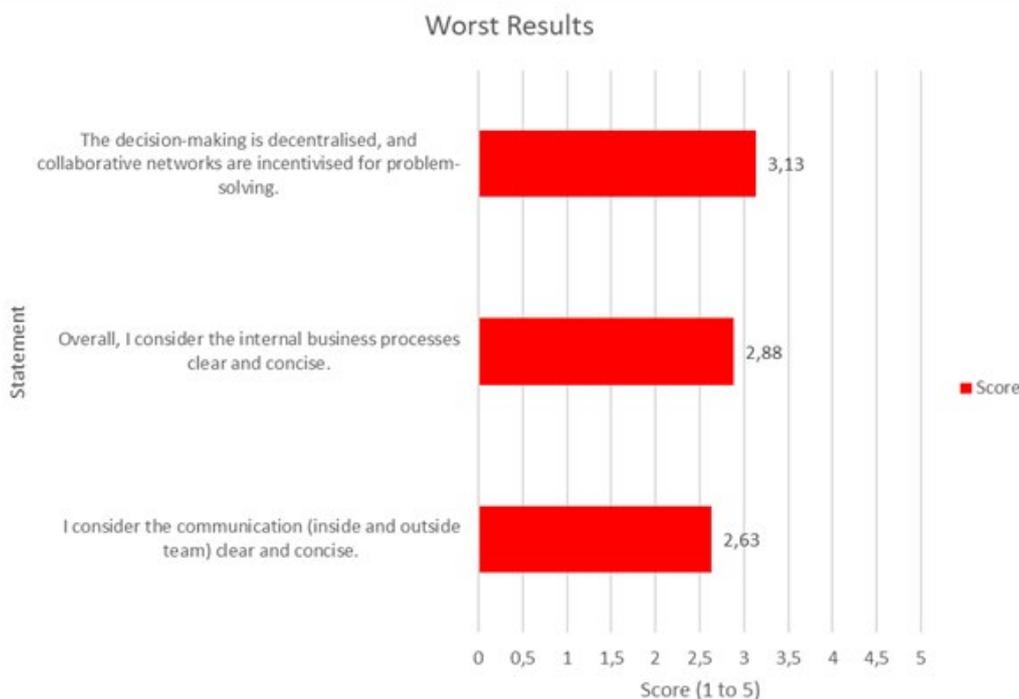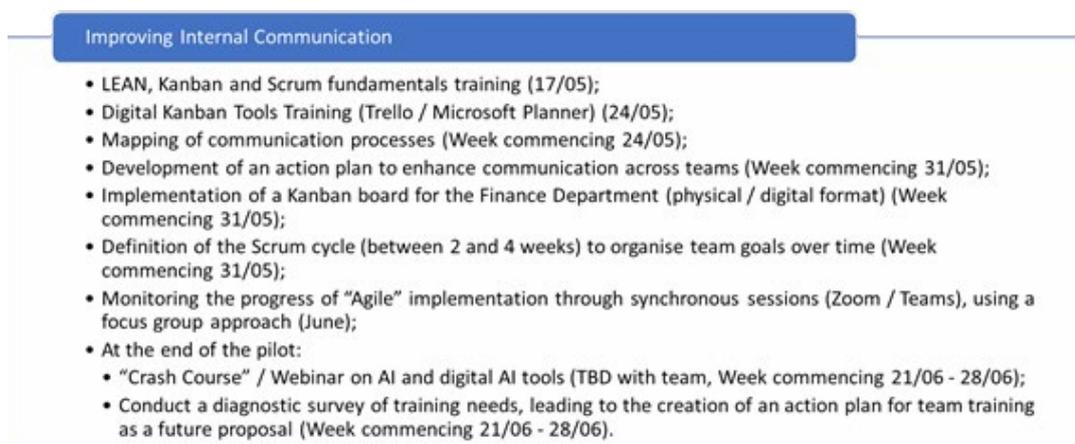
Source: Own Elaboration (2024)

Two cultural features match the SWOT analysis's strong points (see Figure 5b above): an excellent working environment and organisational adaptability. Another positive feature comprises overall recognition of personal work (4.14 out of 5 points), achievements and individual contributions (4.13 out of 5 points). Similarly, the BAP leadership is a favourable factor in terms of personal and professional development (4.13 out of 5 points), which is mentioned in the literature (State of Agile, 2023, p. 3). Based on the Session III results (i.e. the organisational culture survey), the pilot proposal shown in Figure 6 was drawn up in Session IV, with the aim of improving internal communication.

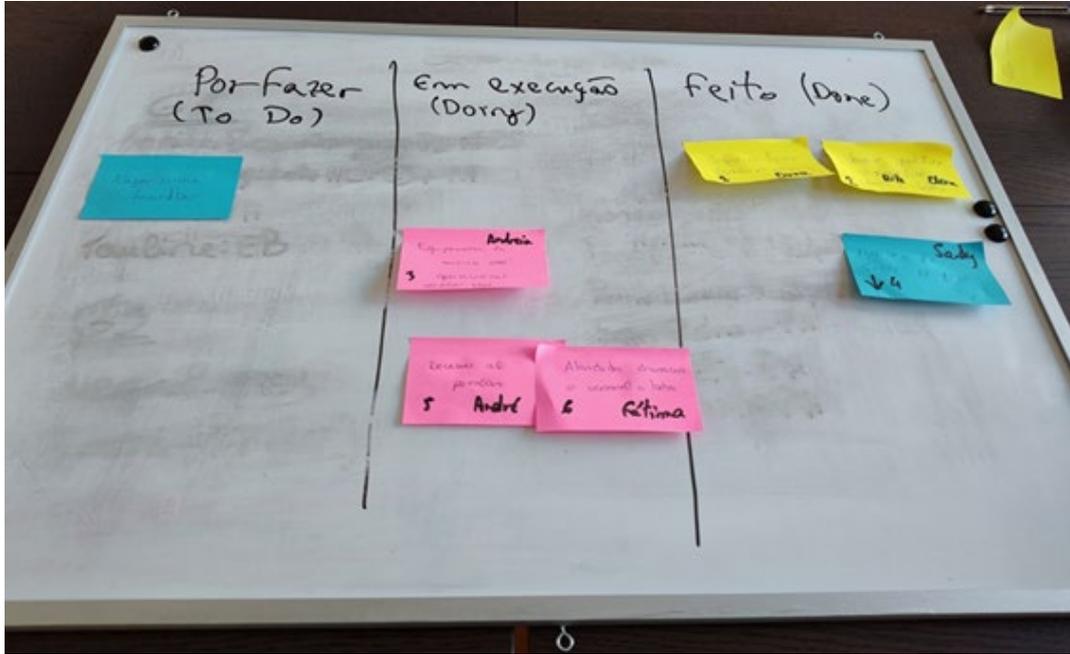**Figure 6.** Internal Communication Proposal

Note: AI = Artificial Intelligence; TBD = To be defined
Source: Own Elaboration (2024)

Besides the internal communication proposal, Session IV provided training in agile essentials. The latter included a physical Kanban board activity explaining, step-by-step, how tasks from the "To Do" column are assigned until they are considered "Done" and how they can be separated into Scrum cycles. This training was intended for those who were unfamiliar with agile concepts to ensure these employees un-

derstood the ways agile processes and tools can help improve team performance (e.g. see the physical Kanban board in Figure 7).

Figure 7. Physical Kanban Board

Source: Own Elaboration (2024)

The communication improvement proposal was approved by the A&F team leader and members, so, in Session V, a focus group activity was conducted on this topic. Overall, the team's internal communication was self-assessed as effective and high quality, with face-to-face (F2F) communication predominating. In contrast, interactions with other teams were considered limited and dependent on informal tools (e.g. WhatsApp) rather than standardised tools.

The participants also mentioned that BAP lacks a standardised communication policy, with each team using their own tools, about which the administration complains. The most frequently used tools are email and WhatsApp or similar messaging programmes. The A&F Department was further asked about their perspective on the main blocking points of communication, and the focus group concurred that people are the main issue.

One example given was that the company usually operates from 7 in the morning until 11 at night, but reservations are done 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Employees arrive in the office and need to look for booking information first thing in the morning. However, other teams are slow to reply to the A&F team's requests, especially for invoicing, and contacting suppliers is typically faster for this specific purpose.

The team were then asked how the internal communication process could be improved. They said that digitalising and integrating their own reservations software and applications with other digital tools would make communication more automated and streamlined.

At the end of Session V, the facilitator-consultant further recommended that the team use their Microsoft Office 365 tools (e.g. Microsoft Teams) more frequently for communication between multiple teams. They could also use agile digital tools (e.g. the digital Kanban board and Microsoft Planner) and ask HR to implement a standard operating procedure for information and communication processes.

Session VI thus comprised a discussion of the focus group results with the A&F leadership and HR team. At the end, a communication process workflow was proposed (see Figure 8).

**Figure 8.** Internal Communication Workflow Proposal
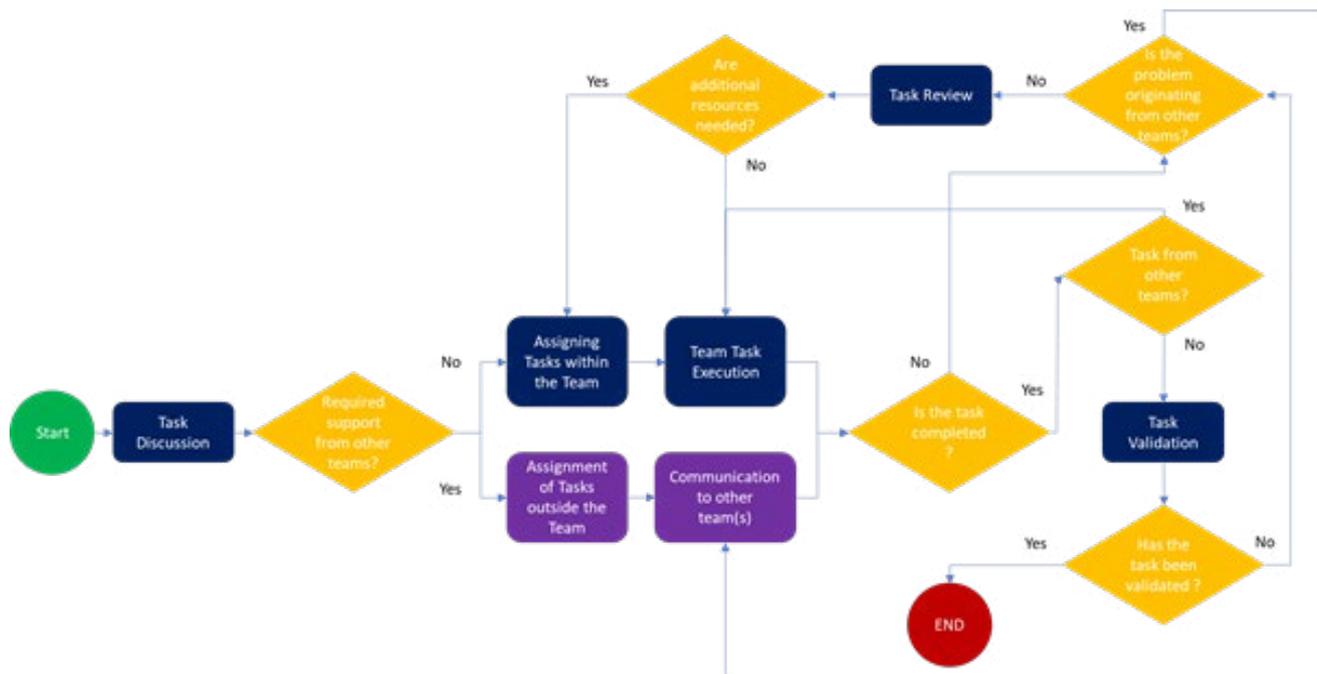
Source: Own Elaboration (2024)

In Figure 8 above, the elements in dark blue describe the communication tasks related to the A&F team itself, whereas the items in purple are the external teams' procedures. The starting point is an internal discussion of all tasks (i.e. assigned to internal or external teams). Next, the pilot participants need to decide whether external team support is necessary (i.e. falls outside the A&F team's purview).

When tasks are considered to be completed (i.e. either by the A&F team or external team), the specific procedures are evaluated for whether they have been concluded. If a task is assigned to an external team, that procedure is reviewed to see if it needs the A&F team's additional involvement. If a task involves the A&F team, it is assigned to team members. Conversely, if it is considered incomplete, that procedure is evaluated to determine if the issue is due to an external team or if some aspect has to be more clearly specified by the A&F team.

In addition, if incomplete tasks are identified as dependent on an external team, that team is informed, and the procedures reassigned to them. However, if the problem lies with the A&F team (e.g. improperly defined task requisites), then that procedure is reviewed, and those members must also check whether additional resources (e.g. people or new assignments) are needed. Finally, if tasks are considered to be completed and they have been assigned to the A&F team, these validated procedures are closed. Incomplete tasks are returned to the relevant team, and the procedures follow the same flow until the "Task is done?" gateway is reached.

After the communication flow proposal, the facilitator-consultant also recommended that the BAP HR team and A&F leadership set up a one-month training and trial period for using Microsoft Planner as a digital Kanban tool within the A&F team. The objective was to demonstrate how communication and task definition could be improved within and between different teams. Figure 9 shows an example of a digital Kanban board implemented by the team. This figure is in Portuguese because it originates from BAP.

Figure 9. Digital Kanban Board (A&F Department)
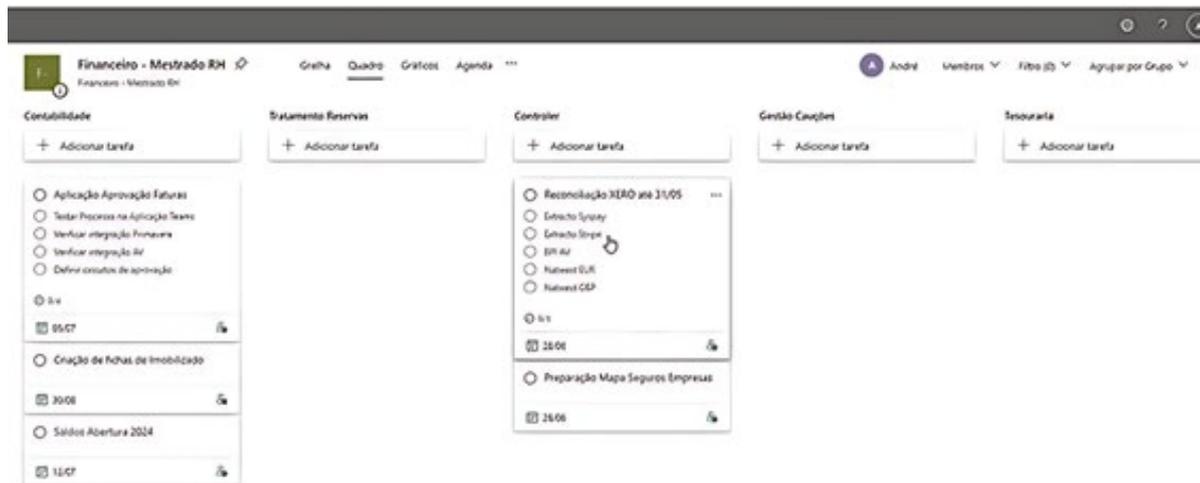
Source: Buy Algarve Properties (2024)

This last stage of the pilot programme was less successful than previous steps because the peak season had started and the participants were less available. The A&F team also mentioned that, although they found the digital Kanban tool to be useful, they favoured using F2F communication internally. Finally, they would have preferred to implement Microsoft Planner in a new pilot involving more teams.

The trial finished with all the tasks of the Agile4ALL pilot considered to be done. A future partnership was proposed to the client in order to expand the pilot programme to include other teams. The final Agile4ALL session comprised a crash course in how to use AI tools (e.g. ChatGPT) and a training needs assessment questionnaire to be shared with BAP's HR Department.

5. Discussion

The above observations facilitated the identification of determinants that can be favourable or unfavourable to agile HR transformation processes. Table 6 provides a summary of the positive determinants and an overview of their effects.

Table 6. Positive Determinants for Agile Human Resources (HR) Transformation Processes

Determinants	Overview
Use of interactive methods to explain agile concepts (e.g. OPERA and Metaplan)	Facilitates group dynamics Promotes greater openness to feedback (Metaplan, 2021; urbact.eu, 2024) Explains agile concepts in practical ways
Intrinsic motivation and team adaptability	Improves productivity Fosters higher resilience during changes Encourages more openness to feedback (Arndt, 2020)
Team network structure	Preserves information about organisational relationships between employees Facilitates more openness to more informal communication (e.g. face-to-face) (Brass, 1985; Tröster et al., 2014; Zavyalova et al., 2020)
Participants' availability	Provides a greater diversity of opinions and group dynamics
Focus group approach	Encourages more participation and diverse opinions from team members (Silva et al., 2014; Trad, 2009)
Open and informal communication	Fosters greater cooperation between participants and facilitators (Zavyalova et al., 2020)
Moderator's technical knowledge of agile HR concepts	Comprises a critical condition for knowledge transfer processes of agile HR practices and addresses technical gaps within pilot teams

Note: OPERA = Own Opinion, Peer Opinion, Expose, Rank and Arrange.
Source: Own Elaboration (2024)

Based on the results in Table 6 above, the conclusion was reached that combining interactive methods (e.g. focus groups) and/or open and informal communication promotes group dynamics and participation, better transmission of agile HR concepts and greater co-operation between the participants and facilitators. In addition, these determinants depend positively on teams' intrinsic motivation, adaptability, structure – especially network structures – and availability (i.e. more participants providing a more diverse opinions and stronger group dynamics). Another determining factor is the facilitators' technical knowledge of agile HR concepts, which is crucial to overcoming the team members' technical gaps.

Table 7 lists the negative determinants identified, namely, the team's poor technical knowledge of agile HR concepts, the participants' availability – especially at the start of the high season in the Algarve – and resistance to change. For example, the facilitator explained that BAP needs to improve internal communication processes and formulate standardised internal communication procedures, but resistance to change delayed the adoption of new agile processes within the A&F team. Thus, to address the listed issues, facilitators must use more transparent communication to explain agile transformation processes concisely, as well as applying a relationship strategy to pilot teams (Espinosa-Curiel et al., 2018) and critical stakeholders (e.g. the leadership and management).

Table 7. Negative Determinants for Agile Human Resources (HR) Transformation Processes

Determinants	Overview
Little technical knowledge about agile concepts	Delays teams' adoption of agile practices (State of Agile, 2023; digital.ai, 2024)
Participants' availability	Limits agile implementation, especially at the beginning of peak seasons (i.e. June in the Algarve), restricting pilot programmes in the tourism sector to implementations between the end of a peak season and the beginning of the next one
Resistance to change	Delays the team's adoption of new processes

Source: Own Elaboration (2024)

6. Conclusion

The present study found that implementing agile HR projects in H&T SMEs is viable. However, some findings need to be taken into account, of which the first is the seasonality of this sector. The results reveal that the smaller number of team members and their heavier workload at the beginning of the peak season can be limiting factors, especially given the participants' reduced availability to attend the pilot sessions. Thus, these agile pilot programmes should be implemented between peak seasons.

The second finding is mentioned in the agile HR literature. That is, experts strongly recommend making sure the administration is supportive of each pilot project to increase the chances of success. The last finding is that the pilot programme's expectations and strategic objectives have to be explained to the team leaders and HR. If they have no knowledge or are unaware of these goals, the implementation can be seriously hampered or even unachievable, as well as meeting greater resistance to change from pilot teams.

Similar to other countries, most of Portugal's tourism companies are SMEs, which need to develop and adapt extremely quickly. The chosen company operates nation-wide, with local branches in the Algarve. The important A&F Department experienced positive internal results from this agile HR management strategy, so the top administration can learn from this positive example and use it as a starting point for a company-wide agile transformation and for other H&T businesses.

For this pilot programme, the adoption of agile processes and tools was facilitated by the company's and the specific team's size, thereby confirming the findings reported in the literature. The team structure was akin to a Scrum team, which facilitated the implementation of agile HR practices.

However, the study ascertained that the lack of a theoretical and practical understanding of agile tools and processes can hinder and/or restrict the adoption of these practices, which also matched the limitations mentioned in the literature. Thus, facilitators must bridge any pilot team members' technical gaps

to allow everyone to achieve a similar level of knowledge of agile HR practices. Another issue that arose during the pilot programme was the need to formalise the company's communication processes since these were decentralised and unstandardised. This limitation inspired the proposed flowchart of intra- and inter-departmental communication (see Figure 8 above).

The conclusion was reached that, among the methods implemented, the focus group was a particularly effective way of identifying organisational problems. This tool fostered greater openness and involvement among the participants, especially in combination with interactive techniques such as OPERA and Meta-plan. In addition, physical and digital Kanban tools (e.g. Microsoft Planner) can potentially improve internal communication. In the current study, the gains were less significant than expected given a preference for F2F communication approach due to the existing communication and team network structures. Finally, the results of the pilot indicate that, with a well-defined, properly timed strategy, an agile HR approach can improve overall organisational efficiency.

In a nutshell, the Agile4ALL is a viable approach to implementing agile HR practices in H&T SMEs despite the constraints encountered throughout the project. Overall, this programme has the potential for improving businesses' operations through agile HR management.

6.1 Limitations and Future Research

As in all academic studies, this research had limitations. The study was designed as a time-constrained pilot project, so a few points need to be addressed in future research. First, the sample comprised a limited number of H&T companies in the Algarve, namely, a single branch (i.e. BAP). Other businesses in this sector and region should be analysed to ensure more comprehensive results.

Second, the participants' availability limited the end-to-end implementation of the project, which had to be restricted to the pilot phase. Best practices suggest at least 6 to 9 months for future implementations to allow for greater practical consolidation of team members' knowledge about agile processes and tools. Thus, future pilot programmes need to be extended to facilitate the deeper assessment and integration of agile HR practices.

Third, the project was limited geographically to the Algarve because this region has a larger influx of summer tourists. Similar pilot programmes should be tested in different regions and/or tourist areas with contrasting tourism characteristics.

Fourth, this pilot was additionally restricted to the H&T sector and SMEs. Researchers could conduct multi-case studies across diverse SMEs and sectors to enhance generalisability. Investigations can also examine the impact of organisational size, culture and external environmental factors on agile HR adoption. To this end, practical experimentation needs to be carried out in companies from other sectors and/or of other sizes in order to ensure a broader comparison of how agile HR transformations unfold in organisations with different characteristics.

Last, the present project with agile instruments was restricted to a single team, especially the digital Kanban board. Future studies of agile tool implementation should also include pilot projects with more than a single team to assess various teams' adoption of agile HR practices. Finally, scholars could investigate how AI and digital tools facilitate agile HR transformations.

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