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Older Adventurers' Motivations in Ireland – Age is Not a Barrier

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Summary

The exponential ageing demographic has prompted governments and organisations such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) to seek innovative ways to promote healthy ageing (WHO, 2015). The recognition that physical activity (PA) in general and particularly outdoor PA contributes to wellbeing, healthy ageing and quality of life (QoL) is gaining momentum. There are obvious social and economic benefits to be achieved through encouraging PA as people age with regard to health, independence and functional ability. There is also a business case to be made regarding engaging with this exponentially growing section of society as poor health, dependency and diminished functional ability are a financial burden on the state and society. Outdoor adventure engagement may be a solution. However, a more proactive approach on the part of the adventure leisure and tourism sector to engage this exponentially growing market is needed. To achieve this, it is essential to understand motivations and tell the stories of those who do engage. Case studies that challenge stereotypes and negative perceptions of ageing, normalising participation in outdoor adventure are important. Participants' motivation to continue is their passion for the activity, connectedness with likeminded people and the natural environment. Older adventurers embrace opportunities to travel, develop skills, set goals, increase social networks or just have fun. The findings in this case study demonstrate the impact on wellbeing, autonomy, health, resilience and quality of life. In addition, older adventurers are motivated to maintain their fitness to continue their activity.

The Value and Interest of the Case Study

As people age, it is important to develop social networks, interests, engage in learning and to be actively engaged within their communities, using their experience and expertise to benefit their local communities. Outdoor adventure activity can facilitate this and enhance physical, mental, and social health. This case study presents the views of older outdoor adventurers who engage and the benefits gleaned through their participation. The findings demonstrate the heterogeneity and abilities of older people regarding their leisure activity. In the context of an ageing demographic and innovative approaches to active ageing, the findings from this case study are of value to governments, the outdoor leisure industry, and tourism and adventure providers to more proactively engage with the ageing demographic.

Background and Context

The background of this case study was to explore the potential of outdoor adventure activity to motivate older people towards positive health behaviour. Motivation is effectively what drives a person toward certain behaviour. There are diverse influencers of motivation, including but not limited to, needs, values and goals. In general, motivation may be extrinsic or intrinsic and is influenced by environments, opportunities to achieve, and positive and negative experiences (Ryan and Deci, 1985). In the context of self determination theory (SDT) Ryan and Deci (1985) suggest that opportunities for autonomy, competence and relatedness need to exist in order to promote intrinsic motivation. Older adventurers are motivated by the natural environment, social networking, learning new skills and to a lesser degree challenge or risk (Boyes, 2013; Pomfret and Bramwell, 2016; Hickman *et al.*, 2018; Gregory and Dimmock, 2019). Outdoor adventure activity has the potential to offer collegial communities where autonomous decisions are encouraged, competence developed and challenges can be aligned with the functional ability and skills of the participant. Additionally, passion to continue their adventure activities motivate older people to engage in physical activity (PA). Governments are seeking innovative approaches to engage older people in sustainable levels of PA. Outdoor adventure has the potential to achieve this, and more (Kluge, 2013; Buckley, 2018; Houge Mackenzie and Brymer, 2018).

Methods

To explore older adventurers' motivations, between 2019 and 2022 in Ireland the author participated with older adventurers in the activities of scuba diving, hill walking and sea swimming. This was followed by in-depth interviews with older adventurers (n = 32, ≥ 50 years of age). The choice of ≥ 50 years of age was based on it being an age where most people are facing retirement, have probably stopped engagement in traditional sports and are seeking to adopt new activities. The approach was interpretivist, and the analysis applied was thematic, using Nvivo 12 to code the data. Participants provided permission to use images and pseudonyms were used to individually identify each participant. 12 females and 20 males participated, the age range was between 50 and 85. Participants discussed motivations, health and wellbeing, social connections, relationships, confidence, resilience, travel, learning, personal development and leadership. The concept of 'if you can't see it, you can't be it' comes to mind. Therefore, this case study represents the voice of older adventurers regarding the benefits of their activities. These adventurers dispel the idea that outdoor adventure is the domain of adrenaline-seeking youth. In addition, they dispel the socially constructed idea that being older is a time to kick back and put the slippers on.

Why Adventure Activity

MO'C, a 75-year-old male hill walker, took up the activity of hill walking in 2018, at the age of 72. He said, "Life was a bit boring. So when this came along, I said, I love this. It was like a drug... I loved the chat, the camaraderie, the banter, the walking, and I loved going up the hills." A number of older adventurers described their engagement as being "like a drug," highlighting the potential for friendships, the experience of the natural environment and wellbeing. MO'C engages in local, national and international trips which included an impromptu trip to the Camino de Santiago, commenting:

"This mate asked me to go on the Camino, I agreed, not knowing what it was. I wouldn't have thought of myself as an adventurous person. I loved the whole adventure of the Camino. We went back three times." (M'OC, 75-year-old male).

Recurring motivational factors in this case study were social engagement and the natural environment. Participants were also cognisant of the importance of remaining fit to continue their activity. These findings corroborate those of others investigating PA in natural environments (Eigenschenk *et al.*, 2019). In this context, NB, a 73-year-old male scuba diver (Fig. 1), who commenced diving at 29, is an active diver, instructor and contributor to the administration and operations of his diving club remarked that "A huge cohort of our friends would be out of the diving family." In addition, NB commented that "In 1978, I met my current wife through the diving." Other participants also commented on the enhancement of their relationships through engagement in their activity, described later. NB, dives a number of times a week, skippers' the dive boat, and organises and leads trips. As part of his scuba diving and passion for the natural environment, NB took up photography and regularly dives throughout Ireland and overseas. He stated, "It takes you into another world. I do a little bit of



Fig. 1. NB (centre) & friends in Sandycove, Dublin. Shot taken at the annual club BBQ 2022. Courtesy of Joe Tierney.

underwater photography. You are always astounded by the colours." The idea that engagement in their activity stimulates other interests, such as photography, history, and the environment, was also mentioned.

Experiencing new things and being with friends was also referenced by younger participants. KP, a 58-year-old male scuba diver, commented, "I enjoy going out with my friends, I enjoy going to dive sites, I enjoy everything involved with it." TO'B, a 52-year-old scuba diver, remarked, "I love being in the water...and I love the social side of it." JL, a 63-year-old male hill walker and general adventurer, suggested, "I enjoy the mountains, the fact that...there is a whole community around the activity." He added, "I have different groups I can ring up and say are you coming for a walk." KC, a 63-year-old male who is a year-round distance sea swimmer, commented, "The social element is most important...Everything revolves around swimming; my social life revolves around sea swimming." The ability to build social networks as one ages is important (Gardner, 2011; Timonen *et al.*, 2011). In this context, participants spoke about the enhancement of personal relationships. SQ, a 53-year-old sea swimmer (Fig. 2), remarked that her 17-year-old son was trying sea swimming; "My son went down the last day of school, at the end of December..., he rang me and said we are going to the Forty Foot (A popular sea swimming location in Dublin)." SQ spoke enthusiastically about their subsequent conversation, "He was full of



Fig. 2. SQ (centre) her son (right) and friend (left) try a snorkel in County Wexford. Courtesy: Joe Tierney.

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chat with me, he said 'it was freezing, but amazing, I see what you talk about Mom.' SQ and her son now sea swim weekly winter and summer.

Couples interviewed also comment regarding the impact of their adventure leisure on their relationships with family and friends. GG, a 73-year-old male, and MG, a 71-year-old female, who are husband and wife, hill walkers and group leaders remarked:

"It blends into everything, we try to organise holidays around this, the kids will come out, the grandkids will come out, if we didn't do this we wouldn't have the quality of life that we enjoy, it's simple."

AH, a 54-year-old female, and MH, a 57-year-old male, are hill walkers (Fig. 3) and also remarked on the impact of their leisure on their relationship. MH commented:

"It is something we can do together. I don't go to the gym, my wife doesn't go running, although started recently. Hiking, we are both going at the same pace, we do it together... That's a big plus for us."

AH, corroborates MH, suggesting "We started going out without the group, now that we are familiar with routes and learning how to use maps and a compass."

Learning and personal development are aspects of outdoor adventure that were frequently mentioned. To summarise on 'why' outdoor adventure activity for older participants, a better question might be: why not? During interviews, participants described the positive impact on wellbeing, social networks, engagement with the natural environment and learning. Additionally, engagement provides opportunities to travel and enhances relationships. These findings corroborate other research on outdoor adventure and older people (Boyes, 2013; Hickman *et al.*, 2018; Gregory and Dimmock, 2019).



Fig. 3. AH & MH climbing the Spink a mountain at Glendalough, County Wicklow. Courtesy: Joe Tierney.

Nature Connectedness, Personal Development and Travel

Passion for the natural environment is consistent across the range of older adventurers interviewed. Travel to experience different environments, blue water, culture, climates or engage in events is an aspect of these activities. Additionally, there are opportunities for learning and personal development in a structured and unstructured way.

Referring to increased nature connectedness as people age, SQ, a 53-year-old female sea swimmer, commented, "It is about...embracing nature, I never hugged trees when I was in my thirties." KC, a 63-year-old male distance sea swimmer and occasional scuba diver, suggested "...You are getting outside in nature and the older you get the more you appreciate the natural environment." Commenting on the importance of the natural environment as she got older, CO'DS, an 80-year-old year round sea swimmer, remarked "It's lovely to see the changing seasons, you notice the leaves falling, and you notice the birds singing." This passion for the natural environment and the location where participants engage in their activity promotes an interest in protecting this environment. BM, a 66-year-old scuba diver, commented, "It gives you a connection with the marine environment. That opens a wider issue to marine conservation, overfishing, pollution, plastics..." BM actions his interest and compassion for the environment, stating that "...I am a member of Birdwatch Ireland, a voluntary conservation organisation... protecting wild birds and their environment." In a volunteer capacity, BM travels nationally and internationally, monitoring wildlife and environments and to meet with other conservationists. JL, a 63-year-old male hill walker and general outdoor adventurer, emphasised the importance of engagement with and preservation of the natural environment, commenting that "...Enjoying it, that's fundamental. But also to respect it, to leave no trace is important." JL is involved in building mountain tracks, utilising a technique first established by the Romans using sheep's wool and local stone to protect peatland in the North West of Ireland.

PT, is an 85-year-old year round sea swimmer (Fig. 4), who voluntarily maintained the facility where he swam. When asked who supplied the materials to paint the building, PT responded, "We got that in the recycling, half gallons and brought it down until we had enough." Transport of the paint was conducted on bicycles, also recycled from the local recycling facility. At the time of writing, PT was cycling an 11 km round trip each day to swim at the Great South Wall, Dublin, an activity he commenced upon retirement at 65 years of age.

Sharing knowledge and the opportunity to learn was prevalent across all activities. Sea swimmers share knowledge about the location, tidal movements and in some cases the history of the area. Scuba divers complete initial training, after which there are endless opportunities for learning. Hill walkers learn about the natural environment, navigation and map reading. Across all groups, leadership skills evolve. NB, a 73-year-old male scuba diver (Fig. 1), described opportunities for personal development through his scuba diving, "*One of the best courses I ever did for personal development, and confidence development was the Monitor 1 course (the first instructor level course with Diving Ireland) ... I thank diving for...channeling me into those areas.*" AMcM, a 55-year-old hill walker, suggested she is not a leader or good at learning from books. She said, "I'm no good at reading and then looking up and seeing where it is." However, she leads walks for her friends, suggesting she learns through experience and reflection, "The learning is very subtle, it nearly creeps up on you, it's only nearly on reflection



Fig. 4. PT (left) at the Great South Wall, Dublin. Courtesy: Joe Tierney.

than when you're actually there." This is an important point, as people learn in different ways and learning through engagement in the outdoors is often subtle. GG, a 73-year-old male hill walker, described this, "If you keep doing it, whether you like it or not you become better at it."

In the context of learning from others, TO'B, a 52-year-old male scuba diver, commented, "There is always learning from social engagements...you will always learn something engaged in conversation." LH, a 54-year-old female sea swimmer, corroborated this, describing how she learned about the tides and currents, "I have picked up all this knowledge talking to people." SC, a 53-year-old male scuba diver and instructor, believes learning continues throughout the life course, "Even as an instructor with 1000s of dives, the next dive I do, I'll learn something that I didn't know before." There are numerous opportunities for formal learning in adventure leisure. For example, sea swimmers advance their speed by attending pool/sea coaching sessions, navigation courses are available for hill walkers, and there are several courses available for scuba divers. BM, a 66-year-old male scuba diver, remarked, "the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) has an endless list of specialities that you can do...depending on interests."

Travel is a feature for older outdoor adventurers. Hill walkers travel to climb different mountains and in different climates; scuba divers, to experience diverse sea life and better visibility; and sea swimmers, to engage in different events or to experience a variety of swimming locations, often as part of a holiday. MG, a 71-year-old female hill walker, mentioned the mental health benefits, social aspect and travel of her leisure, "It relaxes me... I have met lots of friends; we have amazing holidays that I would never have done." CO'DS, an 80-year-old female sea swimmer, travels to train and compete, "I would do two training camps on Lanzarote...I would go to Spain, I would do other competitions in Britain." LH, a 54-year-old sea swimmer who took up the activity at 46 years of age for social reasons, remarked, "If there were swims anywhere in the country, I would definitely travel." Scuba divers also mention travel. TO'B, a 52-year-old male diver, suggested, "Going to the likes of Spain, L'esterit... being in Egypt, experiencing a different culture..." as part of his outdoor adventure travel experiences. This interest in travel spans the age range of scuba divers. NB, a 73-year-old male diver, stated, "...We've done some fantastic trips. The Red Sea, Maldives, Bali, Cayman Islands." The feelings of 'vacation' are part and parcel of engagement in outdoor adventure for the study participants. SQ, a 53-year-old female sea swimmer (Fig. 2), suggested, "There is a sense of vacation, even if you are only just dropping in on your lunch break." Engaging and travelling impacts on wellbeing. JL, a 63-year-old hill walker and frequent traveler to engage in outdoor adventure activities, remarked, "Once you are doing it you are happy in mind, happy in body, there are so many positives." KP, a 58-year-old male scuba diver who travels regularly to dive, suggested, "I feel good that I do something with my spare time, that I meet people to socialise. It is a big part of my life."

Wellbeing, Health and Quality of Life

Quality of life (QoL), while subjective, has five distinct aspects; physical health, mental health, social engagement, functioning in role activities and wellbeing. These aspects are impacted by the environments in which we work and play. Throughout the life course PA impacts the functional ability and, consequently, QoL as one ages (Acree *et al.*, 2006).

The challenge is how to motivate older people to engage regularly in sustainable levels of relevant PA. Outdoor adventure offers stimulating activity, opportunities for learning, social networks and physical exercise in one package. Respondents outlined how adventure activity impacts QoL, describing their motivation to remain fit as a reason to continue their activity. GM, a 76-year-old male scuba diver (Fig. 6), proposed that, "It gives you the motivation to look after your health, it works backwards that way." Regarding fitness, his activity and ability to enjoy life, PB, a 71-year-old male hill walker, remarked, "I keep fit to climb the mountains, but the mountains keep me fit to enjoy life." MO'C, a 75-year-old male hill walker (Fig. 1), in the context of a Covid-19 induced lockdown and motivation to stay fit to get back to his hill walking, commented, "It was two things, keep fit and get back to the Cooleys." This motivation to stay fit and maintain the functional ability to continue activity was evident across the age range of respondents. AMcM, 55-year-old female hill walker, commented, "I can actually walk and hike as long as I keep doing it and stay fit." GG, a 73-year-old male hill walker and group leader (Fig. 5), stated, "I only want to stay fit enough to do this in comfort." GG leads groups on some of the most challenging peaks in Ireland and overseas. Remarking on the impact of this on QoL, GG suggested, "If we didn't do it our quality of life wouldn't be as good. It blends into everything."

Respondents described their adventure activity as a 'package,' with broad benefits impacting their QoL; "It's the whole package..., out in the air, meeting people... It's a great sense of achievement" (AH, 54-year-old, female hill walker). LH, a 54-year-old sea swimmer, spoke about commencing her activity to meet new people, "It probably wasn't the swimming if I am honest. I came to live in Dublin, I didn't have family...there was a social aspect to

it.” LH is now a member of a sea swimming group called the Dublin Distance Dippers. This group comprises distance swimmers and dippers. They meet regularly in different locations. Members engage based on their ability and the social aspect is vital. KP, a 58-year-old male scuba diver and member of a group who travels regularly throughout Ireland and internationally, remarked, “I like it... going out with friends, going to dive sites, I enjoy everything involved with it.” TO’B, a 52-year-old male scuba diver, commented regarding the impact on his QoL, “It improves my quality of life, I look forward to it, it makes you happy, content. You feel like you are living, you are not just existing.”

A number of participants commented on dealing with challenging life issues. CO’DS, an 80-year-old female sea swimmer, said, “I’ve got a good quality of life...I lost my husband two years ago...I always swam, and it was a great help to get over his loss.” LC, a 50-year-old female sea swimmer who took up the activity at 49 years of age, remarked, “It has helped me become stronger and more determined person. It’s given me a broader outlook on life. I can embrace life.” GC, a 52-year-old male scuba diver, stated, “When you are in the gutter or feeling a bit down, it gives you a level of resilience and determination.” From a physical health perspective, RO’C a 71-year-old female sea swimmer who took up the activity at 69, suggested, “For 20 years I have got chest infections every winter...for two years, I haven’t had a chest infection or a cold. It’s not a coincidence that I took up sea swimming.”

Regarding the impact of her sea swimming and some serious health challenges, MM, a 79-year-old female sea swimmer, commented, “I have breast cancer, and lung cancer. I find I can’t walk that good, I get out of breath. But I can swim in the sea and stay in the water and I never get out of breath.” MM added, “I feel much better in my mental health and physical health...when I get out of the water.”

Overall, older outdoor adventurers reported a positive impact across the domains of physical, mental and social health in relation to their outdoor adventure.

Barriers to Participation

Barriers primarily relate to family, work and other commitments, though health issues are foremost. However, participants suggested they would find a way to engage at some level. This ‘can do and will do’ attitude was typical of the older adventurers interviewed. Other potential barriers are; processes and politics in clubs, cliques that are not inclusive, and other peoples’ perception of ageing.

In the context of health, JL, a 63-year-old male hill walker, remarked, “The only barrier is ill health; I cannot envisage any other barrier.” GG, a 73-year-old male hill walker and group leader (Fig. 5), suggested “I had to stop for a while when I fell...”. MG and GG (hill walkers and group leaders) both commented on the potential negative

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Fig. 5. GG (left) – leading trek on a snowy peak in West Wicklow. Courtesy: Joe Tierney.



Fig. 6. GM (right) – ready for a dive in Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin. Courtesy: Joe Tierney.

impact of the attitude of some groups. GG remarked on the attitude of the group “It was like the Special Branch or the Foreign Legion.” MG said “They didn’t let you in, there was never any fun when you were out with them.” MG and GG run an inclusive, volunteer-led walking group for different abilities, on occasion facilitating in excess of thirty walkers. Fun and inclusion are always aspects of their walks.

Regarding health issues, two respondents with cardiac issues keep fit and complete annual medicals to ensure fitness to dive. GM, a 76-year-old male scuba diver (Fig. 6), remarked, “As long as I feel ok, every year I have to get my medical done.” GM has a pacemaker and prior to diving consulted with his cardiologists to ensure fitness to dive. NB, a 73-year-old male scuba diver (Fig. 1) and instructor, said “I’ll dive as long as I can get medically cleared to dive.” NB also had a cardiac issue and had had heart surgery at 65 years of age. He said, “I had my heart bypass and aortic valve replaced, the biggest thing on my mind was would I get back diving again.”

Participants remarked on the potential negative impact of their own and others perceptions. CC, a 66-year-old scuba diver and instructor who first experienced the activity while on holiday in Majorca at the age of 48, commented that “I never thought I could get into diving, I thought it was an elite sport for people that had good eyesight and were strong swimmers.” CC, sea swims regularly to maintain his fitness for diving, describing himself as a weak swimmer.

CC also commented on the negative impact of others’ perception of ageing, “There are perceived barriers... in terms of age, suddenly you are 60 or 70 and everything changes.” Regarding stereotyping, LC a 50-year-old female sea swimmer, stated that “I think age stereotyping is a barrier.” While age stereotyping is considered damaging, it is not experienced within older adventurers’ activity communities. However, NB (Fig. 1) remarked on the attitude of others, “People say oh, ‘I’m too old to do that.’ That was never my attitude, you’re as old as you’re fit and competent.” One challenge is people themselves and their perception of age and adventure activity. Consequently, it is important for the adventure industry to proactively promote older adventurers’ engagement. In the context of the visibility of older adventurers, NF a 55-year-old female scuba diver and doctor suggested:

“I think we’ve got to influence perceptions that younger people have of people, I would say from the age of 50 upwards. Making them realise throughout their lives that this [outdoor adventure and older peoples engagement] is normal and should be normal. I think that’s huge, we’ve got to influence more broadly.”

Conclusion

Through the eyes of older outdoor adventurers, this case study demonstrates the considerable benefits to be achieved from engagement in these leisure activities. As a direct result of their activity, older adventurers describe

positive impacts on health and wellbeing, enhancement of social networks, greater resilience, opportunities for learning, and personal development. This is relevant to policy makers, outdoor adventure providers and those seeking to promote sustainable engagement in PA to older people.

Many respondents developed leadership skills and lead their groups as volunteers and/or professionals. Their attitude is 'can and will do,' they meet challenges head on and are willing to adapt to continue their activities. Outwardly, older adventurers do not allow the naysayers or negative socially constructed views about ageing to discourage them from participating in what they enjoy. They are valued members of their outdoor adventure communities and contribute to those communities by leading, motivating others, and in many cases protecting their environments. All the respondents engage at a level that suits their functional ability and interest, adapting accordingly, and recognising that participation enhances relationships and quality of life.

The benefits of engagement for those who participate in the outdoor adventure are clear. It is in the best interests of active and successful ageing that socially constructed myths surrounding ageing are removed. Visibility of older outdoor adventurers can help to achieve this. However, outdoor adventure providers must recognise the capabilities and heterogeneity of older people, promote participation and normalise their engagement in outdoor adventure. The ingredients are the same for older people as they are for younger people – fun, facilities and facilitation. The potential outcomes of this readiness to engage with this exponentially growing market is likely to be increased numbers of older people, more active, more often, in the outdoors. This has clear socioeconomic benefits for the industry and the broader community. As this case study demonstrates, many older people are interested in outdoor adventure. Outdoor adventure ought not to be perceived as a domain of younger people.

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