This is a peer-reviewed, accepted author manuscript of the following research article: Murdy, S & Johnstone, J 2025, 'An analysis of the motivations of long-distance walkers: segmenting walkers on the West Highland Way', *Tourism Recreation Research*. https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2025.2457078

An analysis of the motivations of long-distance walkers: Segmenting walkers on the West Highland Way

Samantha Murdy[a]* and Jane Johnstone[b]

[a]*Peter Faber Business School, Australian Catholic University, Banyo, Australia;*
[b]*Strathclyde Business School, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, United Kingdom*

email: samantha.murdy@acu.edu.au

Acknowledgement: We would like to acknowledge and thank the West Highland Way Management Group for providing the funding which allowed us to undertake this research.

Dr Samantha Murdy is a Senior Lecturer in Marketing at the Peter Faber Business School at the Australian Catholic University. Her research explores tourism impacts, with a focus on destination branding, sustainability, visitor relationship management, and visitor behaviour.

Dr Jane Johnstone is a Lecturer in Marketing at Strathclyde Business School with interests in tourism and heritage, specifically related to sustainability and exploring a range of stakeholder perspectives.

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Abstract

Long-distance recreational walking has surged in popularity post-COVID, with trails facilitating nature-based tourism experiences. Understanding walker motivations is important for effective trail management, especially given the increasing numbers and the need to develop strategies to conserve these destinations. This study examines the motivations of 238 walkers undertaking a long-distance trail, specifically the West Highland Way in Scotland. A survey was conducted using social media and QR codes along the trail. Factor-cluster analysis is used to identify walker segments and consider their motivations for undertaking the trail. Five motivational constructs emerged: spiritual motivations, sites and education, new people and places, outdoor experience, and fulfilment of promise or tradition. Notably, the route lacked religious associations, contrasting with other studies on long-distance trails. Differences between segments were minor; however, domestic walkers exhibited higher motivations to fulfil promises and traditions, likely aligned with psychological and sociological factors.

Keywords: long-distance trails; motivations; pilgrimage; cluster analysis; exploratory factor analysis; factor-cluster segmentation

Introduction

Recreational walking has become more prevalent in recent years, with post-COVID numbers continuing to increase as people seek access to the outdoors after re-evaluating their relationship with nature (Buckley & Westaway, 2020). Thru-hiking, or the multiday hiking of long-distance trails, has seen an unprecedented surge in popularity, with expectations that this will continue to rise (Wilson et al., 2024). Recreational trails provide a directed, purposeful, interpreted, and often linear route (Timothy & Boyd, 2015), that traverses diverse terrains ranging from mountainous regions and rural

landscapes to urban walkways (Davies, 2021). This can provide nature-based tourism experiences across a range of activities, including, for example, walking, cycling, kayaking, and horse riding (Lukoseviciute et al., 2022). Trails offer benefits to walkers through health and well-being outcomes (Wolf & Wolfhart, 2014), relaxation and escapism (den Breejen, 2017), provision of access to heritage and cultural attractions (Olsen & Timothy, 2006), and organisation of the tourist experience (MacLeod, 2016). Trail tourism is relatively cost-effective for a wider range of people because it "does not require much physical or technical training or specialised equipment" (Lukoseviciute et al., 2022, p.367). Thus, the increased number of people outdoors has led to people from a wider range of backgrounds participating in walking and nature-based tourism (Davies, 2021).

Given the diverse and dynamic nature of participants and the type of trails they walk, it can be challenging to manage the tourist experience (den Breejen, 2007). Destination Management Organisations are typically defined by administrative boundaries tied to regional or international borders; however, when driven by consumer demand, there is potential for demand-based destinations to transcend such boundaries (Paulino & Prats, 2024), fostering a necessity for more dynamic and integrated approaches to destination management. This is especially the case for long-distance trails that cross multiple regions (Ward-Perkins et al., 2020), in which challenges may arise from managing a whole trail, through to the local level (Lin et al., 2024). Hiking tourism significantly contributes to destination development by stimulating local economies, as a substantial portion of the revenue generated through this activity remains within the community, supporting local businesses, services, and infrastructure (Luo & Shang, 2024). Therefore, it is important for the organisations responsible for

managing these trails to better understand walkers' motivations for dedicating time to completing these walks (Casais & Sousa, 2020).

Building on existing research, which primarily focuses on motivations for trail usage in the context of religious journeys (e.g., Amaro et al., 2018; Casais & Sousa, 2020; Roszak & Mróz, 2024; Vistad et al., 2020), this study extends this understanding by focusing on a secular route. As such, this paper aims to investigate the motivations of long-distance trail users and contributes to current research by providing new perspectives on the universal appeal and significance of trails, regardless of their religious associations.

Walker motivations

Push-pull motivations have previously been used to explain tourist behaviour (Dann, 1977) across a variety of contexts within the field of heritage, including national parks (Kim et al., 2003), ancestry (Murdy et al., 2018), and pilgrimages (Amaro et al., 2018; Casais & Sousa, 2020). However, given the large range of niche contexts that can be linked to heritage tourism with varying motivations (Apostolakis, 2003; Poria et al., 2006), exploration of motivations is essential for managing visitor expectations and experiences (Petr, 2015). Furthermore, recreational trails often encompass natural and built heritage sites of personal, local, and world significance, attracting thousands of visitors with a general interest but others with more personal attachments (Timothy, 1997; Timothy, 2020). Therefore, developing an understanding of multiple motivations has implications for heritage managers, as well as local communities and tourism providers.

When considering motivations, hikers are often not distinguished from the broader segment of nature-based tourists (Ng & Hsu, 2024). Furthermore, an even

smaller minority of people will ever embark on a long-distance trail; however, the demand for these experiences continues to grow rapidly (Basil, 2022). With an increase in offerings available for those who hike, as well as increasing numbers of hikers, comes an economic interest (Raya et al., 2018), as well as a need for destination and tourism organisations to better meet the demands of these tourists (Geiger et al., 2023). While there has also been an increase in the literature relating to hiking, as well as motivations (Basil, 2024), research to date has been rather sporadic (Geiger et al., 2023). As the economic and academic focus on hiking intensifies, it underscores the importance of understanding the diverse motivations that drive this activity, which have only been sporadically considered within the literature (Geiger et al., 2023).

World heritage long-distance trails such as the Camino de Santiago are often associated with pilgrimage, where pilgrims travel on foot, bicycle, or horse to reach sacred places (Murray & Graham, 1997; Amaro et al., 2018). However, several authors emphasise that travel motivations related to these trails are not necessarily for religious reasons (Casais & Sousa, 2020; Oviedo et al., 2014; Štefko et al., 2015) with many considered important heritage attractions (Amaro et al., 2016; Timothy & Boyd, 2006). Vistad et al. (2020) observed that hikers' motivations on the Saint Olav Ways in Norway were motivated by exercise in nature, a desire for a slower pace, knowledge and joy from nature, self-discovery, and engaging with locals and heritage. This corresponds with other studies, which highlight that pilgrims often value the journey itself more or as much as reaching the holy site, suggesting that personal growth and the travel experience are more significant than the destination (e.g., Casais & Sousa, 2020; Dreyer & Menzel, 2016).

Consequently, scholars underline the heterogeneity of motivations on pilgrimage trails alongside other long-distance routes, including the pursuit of a challenge, self-

exploration, physical and mental well-being, and social and cultural dimensions (Mayer & Lukács, 2021; Roszak & Mróz, 2024; Vistad et al., 2020), which suggest a need for exploration in various long-distance trail contexts. Furthermore, developing an understanding of visitor motivations can help increase both locals' and visitors' appreciation of trails and their socio-economic significance, as well as reducing potential conflict with stakeholders (Huddart & Stott, 2019; Luo & Shang, 2024; Macleod, 2017). As such, this study aims to contribute to contemporary research on the motivations of long-distance walkers on non-religious trails.

Method

The West Highland Way (WHW) is a 96-mile trail in Scotland. Typically, the trail takes people between five and nine days to complete and is a popular tourist attraction serviced by various businesses along the route, including baggage handlers, who will move walkers' luggage between stops. A series of go-along interviews (c.f. Garcia et al, 2012; Johnstone et al., 2019) were conducted with 124 walkers across 54 groups as part of a larger study. The purpose of these interviews was to ask people a range of questions focused on how long they were expecting the trail to take, their interactions and experiences on the trails, and, importantly, what motivated them to do the trail. The motivations derived from the interviews matched the scales Amaro et al. (2018) used, with the exclusion of religious motivations. Given the walk does not have a specific religious purpose, nor was it a motivating reason expressed in any of the qualitative interviews, this construct was removed. One other item was changed from 'Visiting great monuments of worship (Cathedrals)' to 'Visiting well-known sites along the Way'. Scales were measured using a Likert scale anchored at 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree).

An online questionnaire was initially collected using QR codes on the West Highland Way at key locations. Ethics approval was received from [INSERT] for both the go-along interviews and the survey with informed consent obtained from participants. Given the dynamic nature of motivations, collecting data during the experience was deemed the most appropriate method (den Breejen, 2007). This study was conducted with the support of the WHW Management Group, the body that assists with the management and maintenance of the trail, and as such, permission was obtained from each of the local authorities to post the sign. Signs were posted in locations where they would be seen predominantly by those walking the WHW but nearer to towns so as not to impact the surroundings when people sought remoteness. The WHW Management Group also approached those who had recently walked the WHW through their social media page.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Results

A total of 238 participants were included as they had walked the trail within the last year. The majority of respondents were from Scotland and the wider UK (70.6%). There was a wide range of ages across participants, with one participant selecting ‘under 16’, while the oldest respondent was 78, and ages were grouped for analysis. In terms of gender, more males (54.1%) responded than females (44.2%). A range of ethnicities based on the Scottish Government’s (2021) census groupings were presented, but only those with responses are included. The majority of respondents were White (94.7%). The lack of diversity in the outdoor sector, especially within the UK, is a problem that has been facing the sector for decades (Bailey, 2021), and is emphasised in the results.

Factor-cluster segmentation analysis has previously received critique for lacking distinction between segments (Dolnicar, 2019; Dolnicar & Grun, 2008; Otoo et al., 2020). However, the approach allows for an initial factor analysis phase to ensure multiple items (which may belong to one factor) will not heavily skew the segmentation results (Otoo et al., 2020). Furthermore, given the rigorous and structured approach to the analysis, it is more useful than creating segments artificially (Dolnicar, 2019). The use of the factor-cluster approach has been prevalent within the tourism literature (see Albayrak & Caber, 2018; Caber et al., 2019; Errichiello et al., 2019; Murdy et al., 2018; Otoo et al., 2020; Ramires et al., 2018; Soldatenko & Backer, 2019; Wen et al., 2020). As such, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted with the 20 items taken from Amaro et al. (2018), resulting in five constructs, with some items loading onto slightly different factors (see Table 1 for EFA results and scale descriptives).

The derived factor structure was deemed to be a good fit based on an evaluation of the KMO, eigenvalues and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Bryman & Cramer, 2009; Coakes et al., 2010; Tabacknick & Fidell, 2007): KMO=.75; Variance explained=61.75%; p=<.001. Cronbach's (1951) Alphas were conducted for all constructs except 'Fulfill promise/ tradition' and were deemed to be acceptable as they were above the 0.6 cut-off. Given 'Fulfill promise/ tradition' only contained two items, Cronbach's Alpha was not deemed an appropriate internal reliability measure. Spearman-Brown coefficient was deemed the most appropriate evaluation of a two-item construct (Eisinga et al., 2013) and was above a cut-off of 0.4 (Fleiss et al., 2013). The authors also note that one item (outdoor experience) is negatively skewed, which, given the context in question, would seem logical.

Table 1. EFA and scale descriptives

Factor and Items	N	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Factor Loading
Spiritual Motivations						
Experiencing a simpler lifestyle	236	3.36	1.24	-.443	-.690	.775
The feeling of freedom	236	4.08	.98	-1.165	1.054	.769
Enjoy solitude and inner peace	237	4.06	.98	-1.003	.549	.766
Detachment from material goods	233	3.09	1.27	-.124	-.946	.756
Spiritual and quiet journey	235	3.35	1.22	-.333	-.754	.737
Getting a change from a busy job	233	3.86	1.29			.559
α						.837
Variance explained (%)						25.59
Sites and education						
Visiting historical places	238	2.93	1.02	.072	-.399	.858
Learning culture of the area	235	3.31	1.02	-.338	-.339	.785
Visiting well known sites along the Way	236	3.02	.95	-.034	-.097	.739
Learning new things to increase knowledge	237	3.14	1.07	-.281	-.384	.692
α						.814
Variance explained (%)						12.88
New people and places						
Going places friends have never been	236	2.48	1.38	.371	-1.172	.800
Going places I have not been	236	3.53	1.24	-.617	-.534	.723
Getting away from home	236	3.52	1.18	-.492	-.473	.622
Meeting new people	237	2.82	1.12	.009	-.534	.539
α						.698
Variance explained (%)						9.22
Outdoor/ Experience						
Physical activity (e.g. health)	238	4.27	.76	-1.026	1.35	.797
Outdoor experience, walking in nature	236	4.64	.64	-2.423	8.67	.633
Experiencing new/different	231	3.86	.96	-.914	.746	.611
Seeing as much as possible	238	4.01	.88	-.928	.957	.590
α						.723
Variance explained (%)						7.93
Fulfil promise/ tradition						
To fulfil promise	237	2.62	1.48	.310	.158	.822
By tradition	236	1.75	1.19	1.436	.158	.628
α						.514*
Variance explained (%)						6.14

*Note: Spearman-Brown coefficient used instead of Cronbach's Alpha given only two items in the construct.

Using Lee et al. (2006), Murdy et al. (2017), and Otoo et al. (2020) as a basis, this study considers segments derived from the constructs identified in the EFA. A *K*-means clustering procedure was used, and a three-cluster solution was deemed most appropriate based on plotting the coefficient of the sum of squared error and assessing the elbow of the graph. Cluster differences were assessed using chi-square analysis for walker characteristics (see Table 2) and Scheffe multiple range tests for differences

across scaled questions (see Table 3). The ANOVA results emphasised the differences between the clusters (Lee et al., 2006).

Table 2. Cluster differences by walkers' characteristics.

Characteristics	**Cluster I (n=67)**	**Cluster II (n=83)**	**Cluster III (n=87)**
Direction of travel#			
South to North	62	80	84
North to South	2	1	2
Country of residence			
Scotland	32	27	19
Rest of UK (England, Wales, Northern Ireland)	14	19	35
Europe	4	14	14
North America	6	11	8
Australasia (Asia/Australia/ New Zealand)	1	1	1
Age range			
25 or under	0	5	6
26-35	8	14	20
36-45	12	13	18
46-55	18	20	18
56+	21	22	17
Gender*			
Male	34	37	40
Female	24	29	36
Non-binary/third gender	0	1	0
Prefer not to say	0	2	1
Ethnicity			
White	52	68	74
Asian, Asian Scottish, Asian British	3	1	0
Other ethnic group	1	1	0
Prefer not to say	1	1	3
Group numbers			
Solo	15	17	25
2	31	36	42
3	3	12	4
4 or more	10	9	9
Baggage transfer			
Yes	41	50	49
No	26	32	38
Have you done the West Highland Way before?			
Yes	32	30	36
No	27	44	44

Note: # low cell counts; * Categories have either been removed or combined (only if appropriate) to allow for valid Chi-Square tests to be undertaken. This has been outlined more thoroughly in the discussion of the results.

Table 3. Summary statistics of cluster analysis of walkers' tourist motivations.

	Clusters			F-Value	Scheffe multiple range tests		
	I n=67	II n=83	III N=87		I-II	I-III	II-III
Spiritual Motivations	4.08	2.94	3.97	60.58	***	.63[a]	***
Sites and education	3.36	2.56	3.41	36.27	***	.91[a]	***
New people and places	3.56	2.36	3.43	66.59	***	.55[a]	***
Outdoor/ Experience	4.29	3.86	4.44	24.52	***	.27[a]	***
Fulfil promise/ tradition	3.60	1.63	1.63	212.24	***	***	1.00 [a]

Note. * <.001;** [a]No significant difference.

Differences were also explored across demographics more broadly; for example, females were more likely to travel in larger groups ((df=2, N=200) = 10.30, p<.01) or use baggage transfer ((df=1, N=201) = 5.23, p=.02). However, there were no differences based on gender for the constructs identified in the EFA (see Table 3). Given the lack of diversity in relation to ethnicity, no comparisons could be considered. When evaluating the results from the factor-cluster approach, differences in demographics across clusters were less obvious. There was one critical significant difference in the chi-square tests ((df=8, N=206) = 19.04, p=.02), with proportionally more living in Scotland in Cluster 1, whereas the other locations of residence were proportionally higher in clusters 2 and 3. With higher fulfilment of promises and tradition noted by Cluster 1, which is predominantly made up of those who are Scottish, this further emphasises the notion that consumers behave differently when at home versus when they are travelling, given their behaviour is driven by different economic, psychological, and sociological factors (Holmes et al., 2021). In the interviews conducted in the first phase, it was found that many Scots were undertaking the walk for charitable and fundraising reasons. Thus, it could be proposed that fulfilment of promises and tradition tie to fundraising efforts.

Given the small portion of those who did not select male or female (n=4), differences were considered between males and females with no significant differences

by gender across clusters ((df=6, N=204) = 4.34, p=.63). No differences were found between clusters regarding age ((df=10, N=212) = 12.81, p=.24), whether someone had done the WHW before or not ((df=2, N=213) = 2.53, p=.28), or group size ((df=6, N=213) = 8.87, p=.18).

Conclusion

Existing research investigating the motivations of hikers on long-distance trails centres on pilgrimage trails associated with religion, for example, St Olavs Ways in Norway and the Camino de Santiago in Spain (e.g., Amaro et al. 2018; Roszak & Mróz, 2024; Vistad et al. 2020). While these studies note the similarities between long-distance hikers and pilgrims on these routes, our study centres on a long-established route not associated with any religion, thus emphasising a key difference from the prior academic literature. Expanding the research scope provides new perspectives on motivations, universal appeal and significance of long-distance trails, regardless of their religious associations.

Several theoretical implications stem from this study. First, the confirmation of five distinct motivational constructs adds nuance to the existing literature on long-distance waking, which has predominantly focused on pilgrimage trails with religious connotations. This study highlights that long-distance walking motivations are multifaceted and can be deeply personal and culturally specific, particularly in non-religious contexts. Second, the use of factor-cluster analysis to segment walkers based on their motivations demonstrates the utility of this methodological approach in tourism research. Although the differences were minor, the approach effectively revealed subtle variations in motivations among domestic and international walkers. This segmentation method can be applied to other trails worldwide to identify diverse walker profiles, informing targeted management and marketing strategies. By advancing the

methodological toolkit available for studying trail use, this research encourages further exploration of how different segments of walkers interact with trails in varied environmental and cultural contexts.

Lastly, this study challenges the prevailing emphasis on religious motivations in long-distance walking research by exploring a trail devoid of religious significance. The findings suggest that non-religious trails can elicit a range of motivations that are as profound and varied as those associated with pilgrimage routes. This opens new avenues for theoretical exploration, particularly in understanding the role of cultural, psychological, and sociological factors in shaping motivations for long-distance walking. Future research could expand on these findings by investigating how such motivations differ across trails in different cultural settings, contributing to a more comprehensive theory of recreational walking and its diverse drivers.

These findings, more broadly, show some interesting insight and potential considerations for encouraging greater inclusivity within the outdoors. A key area of concern in promoting outdoor recreation is a lack of diversity and inclusivity, which has often been a topic of conversation in academic literature (Ho & Chang, 2021; Cerveny et al., 2024; Li et al., 2021). While acknowledging the variety of contexts that cannot be homogenised, Cooke et al. (2016, p. 247) assert that common concerns persist across different natural environments that host tourism activities and local visitors and where "cultural, historical and power relations" operate. In North America, for example, Cooke et al. (2016, p. 252) highlight issues of representation in "taken-for-granted leisure spaces", bringing attention to how mountain places often "privilege dominant interests", underscoring the need to address underlying social dynamics. However, representation in an outdoor setting is important because it not only builds a sense of belongingness, but also enhances perceptions of safety (Martin et al., 2024).

Government agencies have a responsibility to ensure inclusivity and equality, as highlighted by Cerveny et al. (2024), who emphasise that the lack of diversity in promotional materials for outdoor programs may inadvertently exclude underrepresented groups. This underscores the critical role of research in identifying such disparities and informing strategies for creating more inclusive and supportive environments. Specifically, in Scotland, a number of initiatives have recently been implemented to encourage inclusivity in experiencing natural environments, stressing that "people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds should have the opportunity to experience these landscapes" (Loch Lomond & the Trossachs National Park, 2018). The findings from this study show that participants are predominantly male (54.1%) and of White ethnicity (94.7%). There was also a significant number of respondents from the UK (77.6%), highlighting the trail's domestic appeal. The lack of responses from ethnicities other than 'White' indicates the potential lack of diversity on the trails and emphasises the need to encourage inclusivity in the outdoors, a concern mirrored in Cooke et al.'s (2016) study where landscapes often reflect and perpetuate White privilege and exclusion.

Regarding gender, previous discussion on outdoor activities highlights a lack of representation (Bailey, 2021) and social constructions that reinforce restrictions around gender and sexuality norms (Carter & Rose, 2024), including initial concerns about safety from females (Whittington et al., 2024). Findings from this study show women were less likely to hike solo and more likely to rely on the use of baggage services to assist them on their journey. While there is little accessible or official data collected for trail demographics globally, our findings on gender and ethnicity are consistent with other research conducted by trail enthusiasts, highlighting a lack of inclusivity. For example, hikers on the Pacific Crest Trail are predominantly male or white (Halfway

Anywhere, 2023), those on the Bibbulmun track are predominantly from Western Australia, the state where the track is located (The Adventure Gene, 2022), and respondents to a survey on the Shikoku Henro route in Japan were predominantly from America and Europe (Henro, 2017) with online comments highlighting females' concerns around safety. While these examples are related to the Global North, it is also important to consider the lack of accessible data across trails and countries, which would provide an accurate account of who is walking a trail to allow for more purposeful messaging and management of trails.

Interestingly, there were no significant demographic or behavioural differences between clusters. The only differences were around the motivations of walkers, separating them into lower motivations versus higher motivations, with an additional consideration around promise-keeping and tradition. There are a number of people, especially from Scotland, who walk the route to encourage fundraising for charities, which could be tied to the fulfilment of promises or tradition and is currently an under-researched consideration of walker motivations. Thus, future research should be conducted to explore the role walking for charity plays in the decision-making and motivation to do a long-distance trail, as well as the types of charities that benefit from such support. Further to this, certain destinations hold personal, local, or national significance, which is potentially key to evaluating the key differences between clusters. Thus, walkers can be split into high and low motivation across four of the constructs, with a third group who not only have high motivations spiritually to meet/ see new people/places, to obtain education on the area, and be outdoors, but also to fulfil a promise (or tradition).

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