

Where Mountains Meet Mind: Understanding the Lived Experiences of Hikers in Nature

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ABSTRACT

Urbanization has significantly impacted individuals' well-being, increasing stress, mental fatigue, and reducing overall quality of life. As a response, many turn to nature-based activities like hiking to restore balance and improve mental health. This study explores hikers' lived experiences, including their motivations, challenges, and the mental health benefits of engaging in nature. In-depth interviews were conducted with nine (9) faculty members from one of the higher education institutions in Davao City. Findings revealed that hiking effectively reduces stress, restores attention, and strengthens emotional resilience. Participants identified hiking as a coping mechanism against urban stressors, providing solitude, physical activity, and scenic experiences that enhance well-being. This study also highlights social connections within Filipino hiking culture, emphasizing collective motivation, safety, and emotional support. The need for intervention against urban stress underscores hiking as a therapeutic intervention for mental health, advocating for its integration into wellness programs, educational initiatives, and urban planning.

Keywords: Hiking, urban stress, Filipino hiking culture, attention restoration, stress reduction theory, well-being SDG 3 Good Health and Well-being

INTRODUCTION

Urbanization has significantly affected how individuals manifest their health, well-being, attitudes, and behavior towards nature (Colleony et al., 2019). It has been established through the biophilia concept that between nature and humans, there is a fundamental biological bond, genetic bond, and even emotional component (Gaekwad et al., 2022). This theory has expanded upon the links between humans and nature in the environment. Increases in stress and lowered mental health are mainly caused by two issues urban regions frequently experience, which are overcrowding and noise pollution. The rampant depletion of green spaces, which causes fewer avenues for healing encounters, leads to the severity of the problems. There is a surge of evidence that links outdoor and indoor poor air quality with worsened mental health-specific disorders. Considering these factors, people must realize the need to reconnect with nature. Time spent in natural settings is associated with positive mental benefits, specifically improvements in an individual's cognitive, mental, and emotional well-being (Weir, 2020).

Hiking is described as walking through natural environments along designated paths or trails. In hiking, the difficulty can range from easy walks in nearby areas such as parks to strenuous treks on remote,

long-distance trails in the wilderness (Teegelbeckers, 2024). Choosing rural areas was a key reason due to the abundance of untainted natural environment for holidays. The experience of escaping the bustling city life, relaxation, and the sense of freedom are what travelers seek during their travels (Demirović, 2019). Forests and urban green spaces in natural environments possess high-impact health resources. It has been suggested that studying various types of natural areas and the possibility of their integration into public health systems is essential to maximize the benefits. Several pieces of evidence supporting the health-related benefits of forests could help elevate their role in individual preventive care, reducing the burden on public health systems in return. Forests are now not just viewed as leisure spaces. However, they are considered an integral factor in public health strategy, where promoting nature-related activities becomes part of health care. However, incorporating said activities into medical practice requires a more precise and detailed understanding since it necessitates understanding how forests impact health and which specific activities within natural environments contribute to those benefits (Pichler et al., 2022).

Faculty members often lead sedentary lifestyles due to the demands of teaching, research, and administrative work, which can negatively impact their physical and mental well-being. Engaging in outdoor activities such as hiking can serve as a valuable method for stress management, physical health improvement, and fostering professional collaboration (Huber et al., 2023). Motivation for such activities is shaped by both push and pull factors, which are interconnected (Demirović, 2019). Push motivation occurs when individuals engage in an activity to fulfill a need or achieve a goal, often driven by external pressures to avoid adverse outcomes. In contrast, pull motivation refers to intrinsic motivation, when individuals are naturally drawn to an activity due to enjoyment or personal fulfillment (UPSYS Education, 2024). Additionally, the motivation of hikers in selecting specific trails: some are driven solely by the desire for physical exertion and adventure, while others seek relaxation and a retreat from urban life (Molokáč et al., 2022; Kołodziejczyk, 2024). Professionals, including faculty members, have been shown to benefit from hiking to improve both physical and mental well-being, with long-term effects on aerobic capacity and stress reduction (Huber et al., 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and stress in contemporary society, highlighting the critical need to develop and promote effective, accessible strategies for improving mental health and overall well-being (Santomauro et al., 2021). Substantial evidence has been provided that shows the benefits of spending time in natural environments (Pichler et al., 2022). However, the study has focused on a broad population, often in Western or urbanized contexts, and explores how reconnecting with nature through hiking supports an individual's mental health. Although studies indicated universal benefits of nature-based activities, the context within the Philippine population remains in the shadows and is understudied. The Philippines has rich biodiversity, tropical climate, and diverse geography, offering a unique hiking environment. Another gap is found between the psychosocial dynamics of hiking and the mental health effects within Filipino communities. It is well established that Filipino culture strongly emphasizes close-knit communities and interpersonal relationships. With that in mind, social and collective psychological benefits from group hiking might not be captured in the current online research that often examines hiking as an individual activity. Ensuring healthy lives and promoting individual well-being, the study aligns with the third SDG, Sustainable Development Goal, Good Health and Well-being. To contribute to understanding the potential mental health benefits of outdoor activities, particularly hiking, we explore the lived experiences of hikers in nature. This knowledge-informed strategy on enhancing physical and

psychological well-being is encouraged by nature-based interventions. Due to the promotion of activities that connect individuals with natural environments, the study supported efforts on reducing stress, improving mood, and fostering resilience, which aligns with the broader aim of achieving sustainable health outcomes for diverse populations.

This qualitative phenomenological research study aims to examine Stephen and Rachel Kaplan's Attention Restoration Theory (1989, 1995) and Ulrich's Stress Reduction Theory (1983), which tackles and explores the mental health benefits of spending time in nature. This study aims to explore hikers' lived experiences during and after nature-based activities, focusing on their psychological and emotional shifts. Study aims to explore the following questions: (1) analyze the challenges and coping strategies hikers face, focusing on how these experiences alleviate the detrimental impacts of urban living on mental health, and (2) collect insights on how specific aspects of nature such as physical activity, solitude, and scenery enhance well-being and motivate people to spend more time outdoors.

Significant value has been offered to individuals and institutions alike if the mental health benefits of hikers' nature experiences have been understood. This study deepened the understanding of how hiking as a recreational activity positively impacts an individual's mental well-being. These insights can be used by educators such as professors and teachers to promote hiking as a tool for mental health improvement by encouraging it as a self-care strategy for stress relief. In order to potentially boost productivity and reduce stress levels among students and faculty, universities can utilize the findings of this study to develop interventions and programs that incorporate hiking into individuals' mental health initiatives. Students can benefit from the results of this study by providing practical ways to reduce stress, improve concentration, and enhance academic performance through outdoor activities such as hiking. The hikers themselves will gain a deeper appreciation of how hiking contributed to their mental well-being, motivating them to continue engaging in more beneficial pursuits. Future researchers can use this study as a reference for exploring related topics or conducting further research into this particular field of knowledge, particularly the mental health benefits of hiking, which will lead to broader applications in different populations or settings.

The guiding theoretical frameworks for this study are the Attention Restoration Theory (ART) and the Stress Reduction Theory (SRT). Proposed by Kaplan and Kaplan, ART explains that natural environments can help restore depleted cognitive resources of an individual by engaging involuntary attention, which in turn allows cognitive restoration. The theory proposes that the brain has a limited capacity for sustained focus on specific tasks, which can result in what is known as "directed attention fatigue". ART suggested that exposure to natural environments encourages an effortless brain function, which allows it to recover and replenish the depleted directed attention capacity. For the restorative effect to take effect, the natural environment must possess four crucial properties: extent, being away, soft fascination, and compatibility. This theory is further supported by studies showing that higher tree cover density is associated with lowered stress levels and improved mental health, as evidenced by lower salivary cortisol levels and skin conductance responses. Roger Ulrich's Stress Reduction Theory explained that the recovery brought by natural environments facilitates the promotion of positive emotional responses and the reduction of physiological arousal. The literature review on nature exposure for college-aged students supports his theory that even short periods of being in nature can significantly improve mental health outcomes due to the reduction of stress, anxiety, and depression (Meredith et al., 2020).

METHOD

This section presents the Research Design and Procedure, Participants, and Materials and Instruments of the study.

Design and Procedures

The study has employed a qualitative approach using a phenomenological research design. This approach has allowed an in-depth understanding and insights into the meaning of lived experiences from the individuals (McLeod, 2024). It helped to the eventuality of coming up with conclusions about a phenomenon being studied from the narratives of the audience's thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Dovetail Editorial Team, 2023). This method helped gain insights towards the deep understanding of the thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences of nature hikers.

Ethical and systematic acquisition of data has been followed during the data collection process of this study. (1) Proposal and permission to Conduct Study. The researchers suggested research topics aligning with the university's research agenda and sought approval from the research coordinator and the college dean. After the approval, a formal letter outlining the study's purpose was sent to the research adviser for approval. (2) Dispensing of Informed Consent Form. The researchers provided the participants with an informed consent form and engaged in a comprehensive discussion covering various aspects of the study, including its details, benefits, potential risks, shared responsibilities, confidentiality boundaries, data handling procedures, post-study discussions, and the option to withdraw from participation. Participants of the study have full autonomy to withdraw at any point of the conduction of the study and this decision was respected without question. If the participants decided to withdraw in the middle of conducting the study, the information that they have given to the researchers would no longer be utilized as part of the study. (3) Data Analysis and Interpretation. Documents collected by the researchers from the participants' responses were transcribed and subjected through thematic analysis. This helped the study by identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data which provided a detailed and distinct understanding of the research topic.

After the researchers have gathered the data, it will be then followed by analysis and interpretation. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data gathered. Thematic analysis is a method that analyzes qualitative data and closely examines data to identify common themes, topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly (Caulfield, 2019). Through this process, the researchers were able to analyze, assess, and extract meaning that goes beyond the viewpoints and perspectives in the field of qualitative research. The following represent the steps of thematic analysis by Braune and Clarke (2006) in conducting a qualitative study: (1) Familiarization, thoroughly reading and understanding the gathered data to get the overview of the study; (2) Coding, highlighting sections of text and coming up with codes to describe and extract meaningful codes relevant to the study; (3) Generating themes, combining several codes into a certain theme; (4) Reviewing themes, checking the usefulness and accurate representations of the data; (5) Defining and naming themes, which involved formulating what each theme mean and how it helped understand the data; (6) and lastly, writing up the analysis of the data. To put it simply, the data collection of this study had followed a specific process. First, the researchers gathered data from the participants. The data was then transferred, organized, and subsequently identified and then coded. A comparison of the information was then done to identify recurring patterns which emerged as the themes. These themes represented the findings of this study. This approach provided a structured yet flexible way for data analysis which enables a comprehensive understanding of the symbolic meanings and experiences related to the experiences of the hikers.

Through the adherence to research protocols and standardized criteria for managing both participants and data, the study has followed the strict ethical guidelines. (1) Informed Consent. This is the process by which individuals voluntarily agree to participate in a study, experiment, intervention, or treatment after being fully informed of its purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits. In order to ensure that the consent was valid, the study had required the participants to possess the necessary physical or mental capacity to make the decision about their participation in the study which ensures that no coercion or undue pressure has influenced their participation (Cherry, 2023). (2) Privacy and confidentiality. The researchers were tasked with safeguarding the participants' information by ensuring that it is secure and not stored in any accessible and vulnerable locations or devices such as laptops and smartphones which could expose the data to unauthorized individuals (Psychological Association of the Philippines, 2022). (3) Respect for Persons. The respect for dignity recognizes the inherent worth of all individuals, regardless of differences in social standing, ethnicity, gender, abilities, or other characteristics (Psychological Association of the Philippines, 2022). (4) Beneficence. Researchers are obligated to act in the best interests of participants by adhering to moral principles that are safeguarded and advocated for their rights which included preventing harm, alleviating harmful conditions, aiding individuals with disabilities, and rescuing those in danger (Varkey, 2021). (5) Autonomy. This is known as the recognition of the value of each individual in making rational decisions and exercising their moral choices. Participants of this study were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without fearing any possible negative repercussions or consequences (Varkey, 2021). The study has ensured that the rights of all the participants were prioritized while simultaneously contributing to the progress of the body of scientific knowledge by fostering an ethical research environment.

Participants

The researchers selected at least nine (9) faculty members from one of the higher education institutions in Davao city. To become an eligible participant in this study, an individual must be (a) has hiked for at least 3 times and above, (b) hikes at least once a month, (c) 21 years old and above, and (d) has hiked at least 1 trail/mountain inside Davao Region (Mt. Apo, Viper's Peak, etc.). Participants were required to be willing to undergo an in-depth interview for this study. The study employed a Purposive Sampling method to ensure the selection of individuals who met these specific criteria. Exclusion criteria include (a) faculty members who belong to another educational institution and (b) individuals with serious health complications. Participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any time without facing any consequences. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the research.

Materials and Instruments

The researchers utilized face-to-face interviews in order to gather data. An interview is a formal exchange between individuals in which an interviewer poses several questions to gather information, assess qualifications needed, or determine the suitability of a candidate for purposes such as job admission or placement (Puri, 2024). The study utilized semi-structured interviews in which pre-developed list of questions were asked to all participants. The interview consisted of eighteen (18) open-ended questions designed to allow for a more in-depth data collection. The questions aimed to explore the mental health benefits of engaging with nature, specifically hiking, and the motivations behind individuals that sought activities that allow them to reconnect them with the natural environment. The questions underwent consultation and refinement before being used in the study. For the data documentation, the researchers utilized an audio recording device during the interview process. Once the

interviews were completed, the recorded data was then transcribed and then translated into English in preparation for data analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section includes the presentation and analysis of the findings of the data obtained from nine (9) participants, faculty members from one of the higher education institutions in Davao City. The responses have been categorized into themes based on the participants' narratives and are further analyzed about existing literature.

Following the inclusion criteria set for the sampling the participants of the study are the following:

Participant 1 (P1) is a 26-year-old, Female, has 2 years of experience in hiking, and has hiked at least 1 trail in Davao City, specifically Battlefield, Tagurano, Toril.

Participant 2 (P2) is a 27-year-old, Male, has 3 years of experience in hiking, and has hiked at least 1 trail in Davao City, specifically Battlefield, Tagurano, Toril.

Participant 3 (P3) is a 27-year-old, Female, has 7 years of experience in hiking, and has hiked at least 1 trail in Davao City, specifically Battlefield, Tagurano, Toril.

Participant 4 (P4) is a 27-year-old, Female, has 7 years of experience in hiking, and has hiked at least 1 trail in Davao City, specifically Battlefield, Tagurano, Toril.

Participant 5 (P5) is a 26-year-old, Female, has 2 years of experience in hiking, and has hiked at least 1 trail in Davao City, specifically Battlefield, Tagurano, Toril.

Participant 6 (P6) is a 27-year-old, Male, has hiked for at least 3 times and above, and has hiked at least 1 trail in Davao City, specifically Battlefield, Tagurano, Toril.

Participant 7 (P7) is a 42-year-old, Male, has 15 years of experience in hiking, and has hiked at least 1 trail in Davao City, specifically Battlefield, Tagurano, Toril.

Participant 8 (P8) is a 44-year-old, Male, has 20 years of experience in hiking, and has hiked at least 1 trail in Davao City, specifically Viper's Peak, Toril.

Participant 9 (P9) is a 35-year-old, Male, has 11 years of experience in hiking, and has hiked at least 1 trail in Davao City, specifically Mt. Loay.

Finding Purpose and Growth through the Challenges of Hiking

Four themes are identified and extracted based on the data gathered when the participants were asked about finding their purpose and growth through the challenges of hiking. The themes were Embracing the Challenge that Comes with Hiking, Bringing in a Mix of Emotions into the Experience, Fostering Growth, Self-Discoveries and Purpose, and Discovering a Profound and Lasting Emotional Impact.

Embracing the Challenge That Comes with Hiking. Physical and mental challenges highlight the participants' responses to the challenges they have encountered in hiking. However, there is a stark difference in male and female hikers' challenges. Physical challenges are what males often encounter during hikes, while female hikers often deal with mental and emotional struggles.

“Katung nisaka mi sa Kinabalu wala nako na-anticipate ang kakapoy kay ang huna-huna gyud is kaya lang pero kulang diay akong preparation. So pagbaba na namo pag abot na namo sa end-point didto na nibigay akong bagtak, so kung di nako siya matamak pinaflat jud kay matumba ko kay overused diay akong bagtak.” (When we went up Kinabalu I didn't anticipate the fatigue because I expected that I was ready but, in reality, I lacked preparation. So when we got to the end-point there, my calves went

numb, so if I didn't walk foot flat on the ground I would fall because my calves were overused. - P8)

“Kasi if you would compare, if makaabot ka sa peak na good ang weather conditions di kaayo siya challenging pero kung nagbagyo, naa to one-time na Mt. Apo mi gibagyo mi for 3 day, makaingon ko na mas rewarding siya kay mas kapoy among gi-again. Naay extra challenge, difficult na ang trail on its own kahit walang bagyo.” (Because if you would compare, if you reach the peak when the weather conditions are good, it's not very challenging, but when there's a storm, there was one time when Mt. Apo was stormed for 3 days, I can say that it's more rewarding because the exhaustion was times two. It's like there's an extra challenge, the trail is difficult on its own even without a storm. – P9)

P8 and P9 stated they often face physical challenges such as fatigue, body pain, and bad weather. Men taking long-distance hikes often see the experience as testing their strength and endurance limitations, focusing on how far they can push their bodies and handle harsh conditions. Male hikers have reported viewing the activity as a personal challenge, describing it as a "race with themselves" and a means to assess their adaptability beyond their comfort zone (Mayer & Lukács, 2021).

“Aside sa naluya, naga look forward gihapon ko for another excitement (hike). Grabe jud ka-lisod mag hike! Maka doubt jud ko if ‘Makaya pa ba nako ni sya?’ ‘Lisod naman kaayo oy!’ in-ana.” (Aside from feeling weak all over, I still look forward for another excitement (hike). It is really hard to hike! I even doubt myself if ‘Can I still do this?’ ‘This is too difficult for me!’ - P3)

On the other hand, P3 stated that challenges they often face are most of the time associated with mental struggles, such as doubts about oneself. According to an ANKER study, women exhibited greater psychological and physiological benefits from nature-based therapies, particularly mountain hiking, where they significantly improved personal flourishing, aerobic capacity, and muscle mass. Their blood cell production showed a stronger response, indicating that their bodies adapted better to high altitudes. This emphasizes how nature-based activities could help manage such challenges and improve mental health (Huber et al., 2023). Despite facing fatigue, self-doubt, and perseverance, they continue to push through challenges and surpass their limits, embracing struggle as a meaningful part of the experience. Nature-based activities, such as hiking, are what people choose to push their boundaries and release stresses brought upon living in the city (Demirović, 2019).

“Medyo challenging siya knowing sa akong weight kanang gina-challenge nako akong self kay gisugdan man gud nako siya. So akong ginamotivate nako akong self na ‘kaya jud nimo ni kay nakaya gani sa uban’.” (It was quite challenging, especially considering my weight, but I pushed myself since I had already started. I kept motivating myself, thinking, ‘You can do this because others have done it too.’ - P1)

P1's reflection on overcoming physical challenges aligns with UPSYS Education (2024), which defines push motivation as the drive to tackle demanding tasks in pursuit of a specific goal. In the context of hiking, performance development is a form of self-improvement, where individuals strive to enhance their endurance and capabilities through consistent effort (Teegelbeckers, 2024).

"After? Siguro relief. Nabati nimo nga 'Yes! human na jud' pero gusto nakog balikon to kay nachallenge man gihapon ka. Unya sa time gani, kuntahay sa first nakuha nimog i-hike 7 hours tas sa sunod hike mubaba nasyag' 5 hours. Sa akoa man gud first hike ba, sa Battlefield (Tagurano, Toril). Grabe hangaka diay, pagsaka kay sakit diri, diri (each pointing to a body part). Sa second attempt, nakaabot kog summit." (After? Probably relief. You feel like, 'Yes! I finally finished it!' but at the same time, you want to do it again because it's still a challenge. For example, if the first time took you seven hours, the next time you might do it in five hours. For my first hike, it was at the Battlefield (Tagurano, Toril). The steepness was intense, and my body hurt in different places (pointing to body parts). But on my second attempt, I finally reached the summit. - P6)

Furthermore, Molokáč et al. (2022) assert that people exert physical effort and adventure because their desire drives them. P6's steady development in hiking performance is characterized as a self-improvement activity in which people work to increase their performance and endurance. Such desires could include refining their abilities to take on more challenging trials in the future. Attention Restoration Theory discusses that the brain's capacity to focus on a task is limited, thus leading to "directed attention fatigue". ART suggested that natural environments are capable of restoring one's cognitive resources. Exposure to the natural environment encourages the brain to function, which enables the recovery of one's attention capacity.

"Di mawala ang kakapoy pero pag-abot ana nimo sa peak na, labi na sa taas sa Mt. Apo, feeling jud nimo kusgan ka ug lahi jud siya enjoy ra, enjoy na kapoy. Fulfilling jud siya maski pila nimo balik-balikon ang Mt. Apo di ka magsawa." (The exhaustion never goes away, but once you reach the peak, especially at the top of Mt. Apo, you feel strong, and the experience is different every time. It's that kind of exhaustion that's still enjoyable. It is fulfilling, and no matter how many times you climb Mt. Apo, you won't get tired of it. - P8)

P8's response highlighted the exhilarating feeling once an individual reaches the peak, such as the rush of fulfillment despite the exhausting journey. The sense of accomplishment, despite the exhaustion, aligns with the findings of Pichler et al. (2022), who discovered that engaging in nature-based activities fosters resilience and enhances mental well-being. The physical challenge of conquering difficult trails, such as Mt. Apo, pushes individuals to their limits, instilling a sense of perseverance and determination. Overcoming these challenges and the breathtaking rewards at the summit create a unique emotional high

that reinforces a positive association with nature. This process strengthens mental resilience and promotes self-reflection, allowing individuals to gain a deeper understanding of their capabilities and limitations. Additionally, repeated exposure to such physically demanding yet rewarding experiences cultivates a mindset of growth and persistence, encouraging individuals to seek similar challenges in the future. These findings highlight how nature-based activities, like hiking, go beyond physical benefits by nurturing emotional strength, fostering a sense of purpose, and offering a renewed perspective on personal endurance and achievement.

Bringing in a Mix of Emotions into the Experience. Emotional releases, such as emotions of excitement, joy, and anxiety, are all evoked by hiking. Hiking offers a psychological reset by giving people the chance to detach from stressors inside the city and give themselves a chance to immerse themselves in nature, which, in return, greatly enhances emotional well-being (Pichler et al., 2022). Furthermore, people have an inbuilt emotional reaction to nature, which enables individuals to experience emotional highs and lows.

"Hmmm.... Kana ba kung unsay gibati nako during sa hike? Kanang same lang gihapon... happiness, excitement. Kuan nervousness kung maka-abot ba sa peak, ma-pressure sad ko." (Hmmm... Is it about what I felt during the hike? It's still the same... happiness, excitement. And also, a bit of nervousness about whether I'll reach the peak or not, and I do feel pressured too. - P3)

P3's statement about the feelings of an individual after reaching the peak which may include a lot of emotions such as happiness and excitement aligns with Gaekwad et al.'s (2022) study which suggest that humans are inherently drawn to nature, experiencing emotional highs and lows, with physically demanding activities like hiking evoking a mix of fear and excitement as natural settings trigger instinctive emotional responses.

"During ga-hike mi, naka-hilak mi kay grabe jud kalisud. Especially if naa pud personal problem like ma-emotional ka." (During the hike, we cried because it was so difficult. Especially when you have personal problems, it can get really emotional. - P5)

"After sa first time mo is happy gyud ka 'Yes! nakuha na gyud namo!', despite kanang nay ma happen saimoha nga atong cramps gipadyun gihapon nimo. Maka-feel jud kag 'Uy, thank you Lord' kanang ingana gani. Happy ka, dili gyud malikayan nga naa saimohang mind na 'Mubalik napud ko'." (After your first time, you feel really happy, like 'Yes! We finally did it!' Even if something happens to you, like getting cramps, you still push through. You feel like, 'Wow, thank you, Lord!' It's a happiness that you can't avoid, and you immediately think, 'I want to do this again.' - P7)

P5 and P7 stated several emotional experiences, which span from negative to positive ones, like when they cried and experienced difficulties. At the same time, at other times, they felt pleased and thankful after completing the hike. Pichler et al. (2022) suggested that forest hikes allow individuals to sort out personal struggles and strife by providing an outlet for emotional release. Repeated exposure to nature improves an individual's positive emotions and enables them to deepen their emotional connection to natural spaces (Colleony et al., 2019). The emotional experiences of the participants during hiking revealed a complex interplay of vulnerability, psychological coping, and fulfillment. The collected data indicates that Hiking encompasses physical exertion and significant emotional engagement, highlighting its role as a physical and psychological experience. A study by Mayer and Lukács (2021) found that 33.3% of hikers reported symptoms of loneliness, while 4.5% indicated that emotional distress significantly influenced their excessive engagement in hiking. This suggests that hiking may serve as a coping mechanism for individuals with psychological or emotional challenges.

Fostering Growth, Self-Discovery, and Purpose. Engaging with nature promotes self-confidence, discipline, and personal growth by enhancing cognitive function, building resilience, and fostering a sense of purpose (Weir, 2020). Brief exposure to natural environments also improves self-perception and boosts self-efficacy, reflecting similar experiences reported by participants (Meredith et al., 2020).

"Sa akoo kay maka dungag syang boost sa akong confidence sa imong self and empowerment kay dili baya tanan tao maka-adto like us, so privileged jud kaayo ko." (For me, it really boosts my self-confidence and gives me a sense of empowerment because not everyone gets to do this. I feel truly privileged. - P5)

P5's description of feeling privileged and empowered aligns with the notion that hiking is a transformative experience, instilling self-confidence and a profound sense of achievement. This perspective is supported by Weir (2020), who asserts that spending time in nature enhances cognitive function and strengthens resilience and self-perception. The idea that hiking fosters a sense of empowerment and accomplishment underscores its potential to be a life-changing activity. Moreover, outdoor pursuits like hiking offer a valuable escape from the pressures of urban life, enabling individuals to reconnect with their inner strengths and motivations.

"Actually ang sa akoo is, thrice nako nakasaka ug Mt. Apo, so hantod karun gusto gyud ko mubalik. Dati is 3 days and 2 nights... amo to iyang ingon na maghinilas napud ta. Sa karun, 1 day napud puhon." (Actually, I've climbed Mt. Apo three times now, and I still want to go back. Before, it took us three days and two nights... we even joked about being 'overconfident' for doing it. Now, I'm aiming to do it in just one day. - P7)

P7's drive for endurance training and self-improvement mirrors Ma et al.'s (2024) study, which states that natural environments enhance mood, resilience, and mental well-being. The hiker's excitement to push beyond their limits of completing the hike within just a day mirrors the role of nature in fostering an individual's positive emotion and sense of achievement. Demirović's (2019) push-pull motivation explained that hikers constantly push themselves to challenge their limitations and the feeling of success

in addition to relaxation. It is a prevalent motif in nature-based mental benefits; individuals who experience moving from multi-day treks to single-day hikes show dedication to developing resilience and self-improvement.

"Sa imohang sarili palang, self-discipline para pag abot didto di ka maka-sagabal sa kauban nimo. Mao pud akong gina-aim na lead pack jud ko pirme. Sa kadugay napud nako napansin ko na kung naa ko irecommend na 'climb ta ani' daghan musabay. Mao nang ma ano nako na daghan mutuo sa akoa ba." (It all comes down to self-discipline, so that when you're out there, you won't become a burden to your companions. That's why I always aim to be the lead pack. After a while, I noticed that when I recommend 'Let's climb this' many people go along. It seems that so many people believe in me. - P8)

The statement of P8, a faculty hiker with 20 years of experience, emphasized that hiking fosters self-discipline, leadership, and teamwork while also serving as a coping mechanism for stress, reinforcing that preparation and engagement in outdoor activities enhance resilience and personal growth. Meredith et al. (2020) suggested that activities involving nature allow individuals to develop their own self-efficacy, discipline, and time management skills. Focusing on physical preparation, which includes hydration and jogging, highlights how hiking encourages an individual to develop discipline, accountability, and a sense of teamwork.

"Until now, naga last ang feeling sa imong paghike. Kanang ma-happy ka ana, refreshing. Ang akong family, dili sila nag expect na na-conquer nimo ang Mt. Apo tapos proud sila sa akoa." (Until now, I still feel happy about it (hiking)—it's refreshing. That feeling lasts, and it is truly unforgettable. My family didn't expect me to conquer Mt. Apo, so they're really proud of me. - P3)

P3's experience highlights how hiking fosters lasting happiness, mindfulness, and self-reflection. Ma et al. (2024) state that a nature-based activity helps them maintain their mood and mindfulness that even extends to the reduction of anxiety and contemplation. Nature-based experiences can lead to a lasting benefit on an individual's social and personal factors, which in turn foster a sense of pride, accomplishment, recognition within communities and families.

"Bisag sa pagtulog, makahuna huna ka na 'Nakaya diay nako to?'" (Even when I sleep, I still think to myself, 'Wow, I really did that?'. - P6)

"Until now, those feelings stayed within me. Especially pag everytime mag hike mi kay ang topics man gud na ginaistoryahan namo is ginacompare man gud namo. It lasts as long as maremember nako." (Until now those feelings stayed within me. Especially every time we go on a hike, we

always talk about it and compare our experiences. The memories last as long as I can remember. - P9)

P6 and P9's reflections highlight the lasting emotional and psychological impact of hiking, reinforcing its role in promoting mental well-being and strengthening social connections. The lasting impact of hiking experiences supports the claim that nature-based activities provide long-term mental health benefits and should be integrated into public health plans (Pichler et al., 2022). Recalling and comparing past hikes during conversations highlights how these experiences strengthen social bonds and promote personal growth. Additionally, it has been pointed out that hiking is often associated with the pull and push forces, which are seeking a connection with other people and nature (pull force) and overcoming stressors coming from their life in the city (push force), which explains the frequent comparison between participants with their prior hiking experiences.

Hiking supports Stress Reduction Theory (SRT) and Attention Restoration Theory (ART) by fostering emotional resilience, cognitive restoration, and personal growth. SRT suggests that immersion in natural environments reduces physiological stress, a claim supported by hikers' reflections on overcoming physical exhaustion and mental strain, as seen in P5's emotional response to hiking difficulties and P7's happiness upon completing a strenuous trek. Hiking serves as a coping mechanism for stress and cultivates positive emotions, reinforcing the idea that nature provides psychological relief. Similarly, ART posits that nature restores cognitive function by alleviating attention fatigue and enhancing mental clarity, which is evident in how hikers continuously push their limits, reflect on their achievements, and recall moments of self-discovery, such as P3's lasting feelings of fulfillment and P6's reflection on discipline and perseverance. The comparison of past hikes, as described by P9, demonstrates nature's ability to strengthen cognitive engagement and reinforce personal resilience. The recurring desire among hikers to return to challenging trails despite prior hardships illustrates the rejuvenating effect of nature and its role in fostering endurance and self-improvement. Ultimately, the interplay of SRT and ART underscores how hiking not only alleviates stress and enhances cognitive function but also nurtures a sense of purpose, self-reflection, and long-term emotional well-being, making it an enriching and restorative activity.

The Coping Strategies of Hikers to Alleviate the Detrimental Impacts of Urban Living

Based on the data gathered, two themes are identified around the coping strategies of hikers to alleviate the detrimental impacts of urban living. The themes were Maximizing Rest and the Opportunity to Reset, and Optimizing Hiking as a Tool for Self-Reflection and Discipline.

Maximizing Rest and the Opportunity to Reset. From the data gathered, hikers' primary coping strategies are maximizing rest and utilizing hiking as an opportunity to reset. Many participants highlighted that hiking allows them to take a break from the constant stressors of urban life, providing a much-needed mental and physical break. Integrating small yet impactful practices, such as deep breathing, listening to music, or simply enjoying the peacefulness of the surroundings, further enhances relaxation (Weir, 2020). Some hikers also expressed that resting during and after hikes is essential for maintaining a balanced lifestyle. They noted that returning to work or their daily routines after a hike often feels refreshing. Hiking offers an escape from urban environments' fast-paced and often overwhelming nature.

"Kapoy jud pero magpahuway lang ug magkaon. Pagbalik sa trabaho, ma-excite nako kay nindot man jud makapahuway gamay." (It's really

tiring, but I just rest and eat. When I go back to work, I feel excited because it's nice to take a short break. - P4)

This demonstrates how the social aspects of hiking and the moments of rest contribute to overall well-being and work motivation. This aligns with the ART, which suggests that natural environments help restore depleted cognitive resources and improve overall mental well-being. The theory emphasizes that nature facilitates mental recovery through "soft fascination," allowing individuals to regain focus and reduce mental fatigue. Soft fascination occurs when individuals engage with stimuli that capture their attention subtly, non-demandingly, such as observing the rustling of leaves, feeling the breeze, or taking in the scenic beauty of the surroundings. These experiences allow the mind to rest and recover from cognitive fatigue. The act of pausing, eating, and momentarily stepping away from the physical demands of the hike allows the participant to shift their focus to pleasant and restorative stimuli. This brief period of rest, surrounded by the calming elements of nature, reduces mental fatigue and enhances one's readiness and motivation to resume the activity (Kaplan, 1995).

Optimizing Hiking as a Tool for Self-Reflection and Discipline. Another significant theme identified is the role of hiking in fostering self-reflection and discipline. Hiking is a powerful tool for fostering self-reflection and discipline by providing individuals with the solitude and tranquility necessary for introspection. Similarly, many hikers perceive their time in nature as an opportunity to reflect on their emotions and decision-making processes, allowing them to reassess their goals and recognize that life extends beyond work-related stress and daily obligations. The psychological distance and effort required in such walks create the mental space for profound self-reflection, ultimately leading to a greater sense of discipline and perspective (Mau et al., 2023). Several participants shared that hiking allows them to gain new perspectives, leading to a realization that there is more to life beyond work-related stress and daily obligations.

"Makatabang ang hiking kay maka-refresh siya. Ang decision-making ug paghandle sa emotions sa hiking makatabang sa stress kay mas ma-aware ka kung giunsa nimo pag-handle ang imong kaugalingon ug uban tao." (Hiking helps because it refreshes the mind. The decision-making and emotional management during hiking help with stress, as it makes you more aware of how you handle yourself and others. - P3)

"Ang hiking nag-widen sa akong perspective, naka-realize ko na 'there is more to life' ug dapat nimo i-enjoy samtang bata pa ka." (Hiking has widened my perspective. I realized that 'there is more to life,' and you should enjoy it while you're still young. - P5)

Moreover, self-discipline emerges as a crucial component in hiking, particularly when dealing with physical exhaustion and mental challenges. Some hikers employ structured techniques, such as pacing themselves through the hike, setting personal goals, and maintaining a positive mindset to overcome fatigue. Jackman et al. (2020) state that when making such decisions or faced with crises that reduced perceptions of control, the importance of exerting and regaining a sense of agency was articulated. Goal-setting and mental visualization play a significant role in maintaining focus and motivation during physically exhausting activities. These processes help hikers break down the journey into manageable segments, making the overall task less daunting. Engaging in extensive planning before mountaineering

was crucial for increasing the likelihood of expedition success and improving safety. Additionally, regulatory processes like pacing and maintaining a positive mindset are essential for conserving energy and sustaining mental resilience. Participant P8 described a specific method used to maintain his pacing.

"Naa mi technique sa pagsaka, 10 steps pasaka unya pahulay, ginhawa ka ug 20 ka ginhawa. Dili ka pwede magpahulay ug dugay kay maguba ang momentum. Kung paspas ko, ako nalang usa, pero dapat padayon lang. If naa kay bisyo, kinahanglan disiplinahon jud ang sarili, kinahanglan nimo mag-exercise ug ma-maintain ang imong health para paghike—ready na ka, dili ka kanang... burden sa imong kauban." (We have a technique when climbing, 10 steps up, then rest and take 20 deep breaths. You can't rest for too long because it will ruin your momentum. If I go fast, I end up going ahead alone, but the key is to just keep going. If you have vices, you really need to discipline yourself. You need to exercise and maintain your health so that when you go hiking, you're ready and won't be a burden to your group. - P8)

This structured approach to hiking reflects the role of discipline in overcoming physical and mental barriers. Nature has been shown to promote positive emotional responses and reduce physiological arousal, contributing to greater resilience and self-regulation among hikers (Ulrich, 1983). Exposure to natural environments triggers automatic emotional responses, helping to alleviate anxiety and enhance overall well-being. This explains why hikers often feel mentally refreshed after a hike and why they turn to nature as a tool for personal growth and emotional balance.

"Naga buddy-buddy system mi inig mag hike para walay mabilin sa amo. Naa man gud uban, labi na ug expert na ba, na mas mauna sila. So if mag buddy-buddy system mi, maghinulatay nalang jud para walay mawala sa amo na group. Ug makatabang pud siya kay murag moral support na pud ba. Unya, makatabang ang hiking kay maka-refresh siya, maka-balance sa trabaho ug relaxation. Ang decision-making ug paghandle sa emotions sa hiking makatabang sa urban stress kay mas ma-aware ka kung giunsa nimo pag-handle ang imong kaugalingon ug uban tao." (We have a buddy-buddy system when we hike so that no one is left behind. There are others, especially experts, who are more likely to be ahead during the hike. So if we have a buddy-buddy system, we will have to wait (our buddy) so that no one is left behind in our group. And it can also help us in some way because they can be our moral support. Then, hiking can help because it refreshes the mind and balances work and relaxation. The decision-making and emotional management during hiking help with everyday stress, as it makes you more aware of how you handle yourself and others. - P3)

P3's account highlights how the buddy-buddy system in hiking fosters discipline, social interaction, and emotional support. The buddy-buddy system was mentioned as a strategy to build discipline and social

interaction. The camaraderie developed during hikes further strengthens one's ability to cope with stress, reinforcing that hiking is not just a recreational activity but a meaningful practice that integrates physical endurance with emotional and psychological well-being. A study by Cole & Thomsen (2020) delves into how social interactions among hikers foster a sense of community and support during physically and mentally demanding hikes. These connections often act as a psychological buffer, enhancing individuals' resilience and ability to manage stress. The sense of community formed among hikers acts as a psychological support system, helping individuals navigate the physical and emotional challenges of long-distance hiking.

Hiking serves as a powerful means of reducing stress and restoring cognitive function, supporting both SRT and ART. SRT, as proposed by Ulrich (1983), explains that immersion in nature lowers physiological stress and enhances emotional well-being, which is reflected in hikers' experiences of feeling rejuvenated after spending time outdoors. For instance, P4 emphasized how taking brief rests and meals during hikes helped restore motivation upon returning to work. Meanwhile, ART, as Kaplan (1995) discussed, suggests that exposure to nature replenishes cognitive resources through "soft fascination," where individuals engage with calming stimuli like the rustling leaves and scenic landscapes. This aligns with P3's reflection on how hiking improves decision-making and emotional awareness, making individuals more conscious of handling stress and interacting with others. Additionally, the structured approaches hikers use, such as the pacing technique highlighted by P8, where controlled steps and breathing maintain momentum, illustrate how discipline plays a crucial role in overcoming physical and mental barriers. As described by P3, the buddy-buddy system reinforces the importance of social support in maintaining emotional balance, ensuring no one is left behind, and fostering camaraderie throughout the journey. These experiences demonstrate how hiking integrates physical endurance with mental clarity, reinforcing both SRT and ART as frameworks for stress relief, cognitive restoration, and emotional resilience.

Enhancing Well-being and Motivation through Nature's Physical Activity, Solitude, and Scenery

Based on the data gathered, four themes are identified which centers around the well-being and motivation of hikers through nature's physical activity, solitude, and scenery which were Creating Spaces of Calmness and Peace, Improving Health, Stamina, and Energy, Motivating to Progress and Finish the Journey, and Giving Chances of Self-Fulfillment, Joy, and Memories.

Creating Spaces of Calmness and Peace. Seeking peace and solitude in nature is one of the primary ways hikers utilize to cope with stressors from city life. The calmness and quiet atmosphere of the mountains provides them mental clarity and relaxation which allows individuals to disconnect from distraction brought upon the modernization of urban life and focus on themselves.

"Kung mag-hike ko, makawala jud siyag stress. Dili lang tungod sa pag-exercise pero tungod pud kay murag nindot lang sa feeling nga wala sa siyudad, dili saba, makarela ko." (When I go hiking, it really relieves stress. Not just because of the exercise, but also because it just feels nice to be away from the city, where it's not noisy, and I can relax. - P2)

"Maka-refresh siya sa mind. Nindot ang surroundings, makawala sa stress. Makapa-relax kay wala kay madungog nga saba, puro ra mga

natural sounds sa environment." (It refreshes the mind. The surroundings are beautiful, and it relieves stress. It's relaxing because you don't hear any noise, just the natural sounds of the environment. - P5)

P2 and P5's experiences highlight how hiking provides a refreshing escape from urban stress, promoting relaxation and mental clarity. Urban environments, in contrast, are associated with higher stress levels and mental fatigue due to the constant sensory overload. Weir (2020) asserts that spending time in quiet, natural spaces helps individuals regulate their emotions and enhance their well-being. Aside from the silence and tranquility, some hikers find relief in the soothing sounds of nature, such as rustling leaves, birdsong, and flowing water. These sounds are a natural form of therapy, promoting mental relaxation and cognitive clarity. The findings of Pichler et al. (2022) emphasize that natural soundscapes contribute to relaxation and mental restoration. In contrast, urban noise pollution—such as traffic, construction, and crowded areas—has been linked to higher stress levels, sleep disturbances, and reduced cognitive function. This explains why hikers actively seek out quiet natural environments to regain a sense of inner calm.

Improving Health, Stamina, and Energy. Beyond relaxation, hiking also serves as a motivational tool that encourages individuals to push through challenges and build resilience. The combination of physical exertion, mental determination, and anticipation of reaching the summit helps hikers develop a sense of perseverance and personal growth.

"Kung stress ko, maghuna-huna ko na mubalik napud ko sa bukid. Ang stressful nga part sa trabaho dili magdugay, kay kabalo ko nga naa koy buhaton nga makapalipay sa akoo." (When I feel stressed, I think about going back to the mountains. The stressful part of work doesn't last long because I know I have something to look forward to that makes me happy. - P9)

P9's reflection illustrates how hiking serves as both an immediate stress reliever and a proactive coping mechanism which aligns with Demirović's (2019) study which explains that hiking not only provides immediate relief but also serves as a forward-thinking emotional regulation tool, allowing individuals to balance their mental well-being by planning future outdoor activities. This aligns with the concept of proactive coping, where people prepare for stress by engaging in rewarding activities that maintain emotional stability. Colléony et al. (2019) further found that those who regularly engage in nature-based activities build stronger emotional resilience, reinforcing P9's reliance on hiking as a psychological anchor during stressful times.

"Actually, naa man koy asthma, I'd say na nahelp niya improve akong pagiging asthmatic in a way na di na siya ingon ato kalala compared dati." (Actually, I have asthma, I'd say that hiking helped me improve being asthmatic in a way that it is no longer as bad compared to before. - P2)

“It made my health a lot better, yung condition ko. I don’t have acid reflux anymore, I don’t feel hypertensive anymore and I think my blood sugar is lower, though di siya at an alarming level but I think I’m a lot healthier na gi-pursue nako kana na activity.” (It made my health a lot better, my condition. I don't have acid reflux anymore, I don't feel hypertensive anymore and I think my blood sugar is lower, although it's not at an alarming level but I think I'm a lot healthier now that I'm pursuing that activity. - P9)

P2 and P9's experiences illustrate how hiking enhances overall health, improving lung capacity, cardiovascular function, and endurance. This demonstrates how regular hiking improves lung capacity and endurance, making chronic conditions like asthma more manageable. Studies indicate that physical activity, particularly in natural environments with cleaner air, can enhance respiratory function and cardiovascular health (Furjes-Crawshaw et al., 2025). According to a study by Pichler et al. (2022), hiking improves cardio-respiratory fitness by strengthening the heart, lungs, and muscles through sustained physical effort, which increases oxygen intake and improves overall endurance. Regular hiking also helps reduce inflammation in the airways, boosts lung health, and makes breathing easier. Moreover, hiking as a sustainable form of exercise fosters resilience, pushing individuals to test their physical limits while benefiting from nature's restorative properties. Combining movement, fresh air, and scenic surroundings creates a holistic approach to health improvement, making hiking an effective strategy for long-term physical and mental well-being.

Motivating to Progress and Finish the Journey. In hiking, being motivated and staying motivated to progress and finish is essential. Setting achievable goals and staying focused on your path helps push through any obstacle along the way while hiking. Celebrating small wins, such as reaching a specific checkpoint can keep your spirit high, build momentum, and make completing the hike feel incredibly rewarding.

“Sa akong pag makita nako akong kasabay or laing tao na naabot gani nila to mas mamotivate ko. Ay kaya gani nila nganong dili nako makaya.” (For me, if I see my companions or others achieve something, I feel more motivated. If they were able to do it, why can't I? - P1)

P1's statement reflects the push motivation concept, where external influences, such as witnessing others succeed, inspire personal determination and effort. The push and pull theory of motivation of Demirović (2019) supports the statement above that external factors, such as seeing others achieve something inspires us to do the same thing. This mirrors the concept of the push motivation where external influences drive one's efforts towards progress.

“The earlier that you reach that destination the better. Maka-relax naka, hulaton nalang nimo ang imong friends na naa sa likod pa and you can enjoy the place. Wala man ka kabalo na basin naay hammock na nagahulat saimo or maski mag-latag lang at least makahigda ka or maybe magpakulo kag tubig and enjoy a cup of coffee.” (The earlier you reach

the destination, the better. It allows you to relax while waiting for your friends who are still behind and you can enjoy the place. You do not know what awaits you at the end of the trail, perhaps a hammock; or, you can simply lie down and rest or maybe you could boil some water and enjoy yourself a nice cup of coffee. - P9)

P9's reflection exemplifies pull motivation, where individuals are naturally drawn to activities that offer rewarding experiences. In the context of pull motivation, which suggests that individuals are naturally drawn to activities driven by internal factors, such as the pursuit of positive outcomes, the participant's desire to reach the destination early appeals that it is driven by internal factors such as being able to relax and be welcomed with pleasant surprises (e.g., hammock or a cup of coffee). These positive outcomes show that the participant is naturally drawn towards achieving their goal, which is to finish the trail.

Giving Chances of Self-Fulfillment, Joy, and Memories. While many hikers seek nature as a space for relaxation and reflection, others find that hiking is also a source of excitement and adventure. For some participants, the thrill of discovery and the challenge of hiking unfamiliar trails serve as a powerful motivator. The physical demands of hiking, combined with the unpredictability of nature, create a sense of exhilaration and fulfillment. This aligns with Demirović (2019), who found that individuals engage in nature-based activities not only for relaxation (pull factors) but also for excitement and novelty (push factors).

“Wala ko nag expect na makakita ko ug baboy-ramo... ug kanang unggoy na puti. Ang unggoy na puti nagtatak siya sako kay kanang wala nako siya gi expect na makita siya in-person... syempre wildlife gud. Kato na time murag kanang exhausted na kaayo ka ba... ang bundok taas jud kaayo siya... wala mi nag-expect na – ang nadunggan man gud namo kay ang sound niya (referring to the wildlife) maka-amaze jud siya! Dili didto sa peak nako nakita, didto jud mismo sa trail naa lang siya sa kilid.” (I didn't expect to see a wild boar... and a white monkey. The white monkey impressed me because I didn't expect to see him in person... of course its wildlife. At that moment, where you're really exhausted... the mountain is so high... we didn't expect anything - what we heard was its sound (referring to the wildlife) its amazing! I didn't see it at the peak, it was right there on the trail, just on the side. - P4)

“Naa pud ubang sites na dili gina allow ang campfire so mag antos jud kag overnight. Magovernight man jud ka no, so naa mi sa tent nya dili namo ablihan ang tent kay grabe jud ka tugnaw! Best experience pud namo ana... maligo jud dapat mo pagkabuntag maskin nag ice-ice ang tubig... para mawala ang kakapoy. Ma experience pud nimo ang ‘Hala nakaligo ko sa Mt. Apo!’ murag ana gud na isturya. Nice siya na experience.” (There are also other sites that do not allow campfires, so we have to be patient and spend the night. So we're in a tent, and we don't

open the tent because it's so cold! It was our best experience... also, you should take a bath in the morning even if the water is ice-cold... to get rid of the tiredness. The, you get to say 'I took a bath in Mt. Apo!'. It was a very nice experience. - P3)

"Ako ma-appreciate nako ang spring ang water kay refreshing and very natural. And ma-appreciate jud nimo kuntahay nahutdan kag water and uhaw na kaayo ka ba-muadto jud ka dayon didtoa kay need jud baya nimo na mapakadayon ka kay you need water man sa imong body so very refreshing siya ang very gikan jud siya sa nature jud. Dili siya processed, all natural!" I can appreciate the spring, the water is refreshing and very natural. And you can appreciate that even if you run out of water and are thirsty, you can go to the place where you need it because you need water in your body, so it is very refreshing because it comes from nature. It is not processed, all natural! - P5)

The experiences shared by P4, P3, and P5 illustrate how hiking is a blend of adventure, escape, and excitement. P4's unexpected wildlife encounters highlight the thrill of discovery, while P3's endurance through extreme conditions showcases the resilience and personal achievement gained through outdoor challenges. P5's appreciation for natural water sources reinforces the deep connection hikers develop with their environment. Hikers are often motivated by a combination of escape and excitement (Demirović, 2019). The participant's enjoyment stems not just from the beauty of nature but from the fact that each hiking experience feels unique, reinforcing the idea that hiking is both a physical and psychological adventure. The participants' accounts of joy and excitement during hiking experiences reflect the mental rejuvenation that occurs through exposure to natural environments (Kaplan, 1995).

"Maka-feel kog, kumbaga, ang ginadream nimo dati na-achieve nagyud nimo. Kanang maka-ingon gyud kag 'Wow, lami kaayo sa feeling'. Makadupa jud ka saimong sarili na 'This is it' kay since bata pa ko makita nako tong mga bundok, maka isip ko 'Kasaka kaha ko anang bukid?'." (I can feel as if what you used to dream about before, you have achieved it now. That's when you can really say 'Wow, this feeling is so good'. You can say to yourself 'This is it' because since I was a child when I see those tall mountains, I think to myself 'Could I climb that mountain someday?' - P7)

P7's reflection captures the profound sense of accomplishment that comes with achieving a long-held dream, reinforcing how hiking fosters personal growth and self-discovery. Molokáč et al. (2022) explain that people who seek adventure through hiking are often drawn to new and challenging trails, viewing the experience as an opportunity for self-discovery and personal growth. This perspective shifts hiking from being a simple physical activity to an emotionally engaging and dynamic experience that enhances well-being. These experiences create lasting memories by deepening an individual's connection with the environment and fostering a positive emotional attachment. As participants engage in different

encounters each time, they build a repertoire of cherished memories that enhance their overall sense of purpose and satisfaction (Colléony et al., 2019).

Hiking aligns with SRT and ART by promoting relaxation, resilience, and cognitive rejuvenation. SRT proposes that exposure to natural environments reduces stress levels, which is evident in hikers' testimonies about how the tranquility of nature alleviates mental strain and fosters emotional relief. P2 and P5 emphasize the refreshing and calming effect of nature, highlighting how hiking provides an escape from urban noise and stress, reinforcing the SRT principle that nature serves as a therapeutic space. Similarly, ART suggests that nature restores attention and cognitive function by reducing mental fatigue, a concept reflected in hikers' experiences of perseverance and motivation. P9 describes how hiking serves as both a stress reliever and a proactive coping mechanism, aligning with ART's emphasis on nature as a tool for mental renewal. Moreover, the anticipation and excitement of reaching a hiking destination, as illustrated by P1's motivation and P9's enjoyment of relaxation upon completion, demonstrate how nature fosters sustained engagement and personal growth. The recurring desire among hikers to return to trails for new adventures and self-discovery further supports the ART framework, underscoring nature's role in reinforcing mental clarity, endurance, and emotional fulfillment. Ultimately, hiking is more than just physical activity—it is an experience deeply rooted in psychological restoration, fostering a profound connection between individuals and the natural world.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This section discusses the conclusions the researchers made based on the themes interpreted from the results and the discussion, while incorporating the Attention Restoration Theory (ART) and Stress Reduction Theory (SRT) as the framework for interpreting the findings.

Concluding Remarks

Hiking is more than physical exertion; it fosters personal growth and resilience by pushing individuals beyond their perceived limits, mirroring life's challenges and reinforcing perseverance through discomfort. Participants highlighted how confronting mental and physical obstacles on the trail helped them reassess their priorities and discover a renewed sense of purpose, emphasizing the psychological benefits of immersion in nature. Stress Reduction Theory (SRT) explains how natural environments alleviate physiological stress, aligning with hikers' experiences of emotional release and renewed strength after enduring demanding treks. Similarly, attention restoration theory (ART) suggests that nature replenishes cognitive resources by reducing mental fatigue, evident in participants who found clarity and motivation through hiking. The journey of conquering mountains parallels overcoming personal struggles, where the solitude of nature provides opportunities for introspection, self-discovery, and emotional resilience. Whether driven by physical endurance or mental well-being, hikers repeatedly expressed how the sense of accomplishment upon reaching a summit solidified their motivation to continue, demonstrating how nature-based activities cultivate discipline, perseverance, and lasting personal transformation.

Hiking also serves as a powerful mechanism for alleviating the detrimental effects of urban living, offering hikers an avenue for rest, reflection, and personal growth. As cities bombard individuals with constant stimuli, stressors, and responsibilities, many participants in the study found solace in nature, where they could reset their minds and bodies. The act of hiking fosters a deep sense of mindfulness, allowing hikers to immerse themselves in the tranquility of their surroundings and detach from the pressures of urban environments. Hikers enhance their emotional regulation and mental resilience by

engaging in deep breathing, listening to calming sounds, and pausing to appreciate scenic beauty. Additionally, hiking provides a structured space for self-reflection, where individuals can reassess their emotions, decision-making processes, and life priorities, reinforcing the importance of discipline in managing stress and maintaining balance. The solitude and introspection inherent in hiking enable participants to gain fresh perspectives, recognizing that there is more to life beyond work-related obligations and urban struggles. Furthermore, the physical challenges of hiking instill perseverance and self-discipline, as hikers employ strategies such as goal-setting, pacing, and mental visualization to overcome fatigue and sustain motivation. Social support also plays a role in promoting well-being, as systems like the buddy-buddy approach ensure that no one is left behind, reinforcing a sense of camaraderie and emotional stability. By incorporating individual reflection and collective resilience, hiking emerges as a vital coping strategy that integrates physical endurance, cognitive restoration, and emotional balance, equipping hikers with the tools to navigate the complexities of urban life with renewed energy and clarity.

Hiking serves as a powerful conduit for enhancing well-being and motivation by integrating physical activity, solitude, and the scenery of nature. The physical demands of hiking contribute to improved cardiovascular health, stamina, and overall fitness, helping individuals build endurance and resilience against physical and mental challenges. Psychologically, the exposure to nature fosters emotional rejuvenation, where the tranquility of the environment facilitates relaxation, clarity, and stress relief, contrasting sharply with the overstimulation and mental fatigue induced by urban life. The solitude experienced during hikes allows participants to disconnect from societal pressures and engage in deep introspection, reinforcing a sense of self awareness, inner peace, and emotional stability. Moreover, the motivation to explore and progress through scenic trails cultivates a commitment to personal growth, as hikers draw inspiration from nature's beauty and the rewarding sense of achievement that accompanies reaching new heights, both literally and figuratively. The holistic experience of hiking, enriched by the interplay between movement, aesthetic appreciation, and reflective solitude, promotes physical health and strengthens mental resilience and emotional fulfillment, making it an effective tool for overall well-being.

Implications

Hiking has emerged as a valuable approach to enhancing mental health and overall well-being. As urban living increasingly contributes to rising stress levels, promoting outdoor activities can provide psychological restoration, emotional regulation, and cognitive relaxation. Limited exposure to natural environments has been linked to a greater susceptibility to mental health challenges, highlighting the importance of integrating nature-based experiences into daily life. Spending time in nature offers many benefits, including cognitive, emotional, and social health improvements, reduced mental fatigue, and enhanced interpersonal cooperation. Recognizing these advantages, educational institutions can incorporate nature retreats or hiking events to help students achieve academic balance while fostering social connections. Similarly, organized hiking activities can be integrated into wellness programs by universities, businesses, and community organizations to support mental health. Companies can introduce nature therapy sessions or outdoor outings in the corporate sector to mitigate employee burnout and improve productivity. In urban development, prioritizing accessible green spaces and outdoor areas can encourage physical activity and mental well-being by reducing barriers to nature's benefits. Thoughtfully designed landscapes can enhance meaningful interactions with nature, ensuring that outdoor environments provide restorative experiences. Additionally, outdoor activities offer

valuable opportunities for stress relief and personal growth, prompting mental health practitioners to integrate nature based approaches into therapeutic practices. These interventions effectively alleviate stress, anxiety, and negative moods and can be further enhanced when combined with formal psychological treatments. Beyond individual benefits, such initiatives promote sustainable tourism and contribute to holistic urban planning that strengthens community well-being. The deeper one's connection to nature, the more likely they are to engage in outdoor activities such as hiking, walking, or jogging, reinforcing mental and physical health.

Hiking offers social and psychological benefits by fostering community connections and emphasizing shared experiences, contributing to mental well-being. It has been shown that a strong sense of community and social relationships plays a crucial role in helping hikers navigate challenges, reinforcing the importance of peer support and collective achievements in outdoor activities. Hiking is a powerful mental and physical growth tool that enhances emotional resilience, self-confidence, and overall well-being. It also effectively combats urban stress and mental fatigue by encouraging deeper engagement with nature. Government agencies and health organizations can support outdoor therapy sessions, community hiking initiatives, and wellness treks to promote participation in nature-based mental health activities.

While existing research highlights the advantages of hiking for mental health, further studies are needed to understand its long-term psychological and physiological effects fully. Future research could explore how hiking influences stress hormone levels, cognitive function, and emotional stability. Distinct effects from natural settings like forests, beaches, or mountains on an individual's mental health can be examined using comparative research. In order to ascertain which environment can be utilized for the most optimized psychological advantage, studies can also examine the effects of guided vs. solitary hiking activities. Social connections play a significant factor in the Filipino hiking experience; further research can investigate how different cultures affect nature-based mental health interventions. Digital detox during hiking is an interesting topic to be focused on as it examines how to remove an individual from technology when outdoor activities improve stress management, emotional control, and mindfulness.

Ultimately, hiking offers profound benefits for both individual and community well-being. Insights from outdoor experiences highlight the potential of nature as a tool for personal healing, growth, and stress management. Promoting outdoor activities in our daily life can promote a more robust, psychologically healthy, and overall better society. Since hiking is widely available, it has a great potential in improving individual and community well-being through adopting strategic policies, mental health programs, and environmental conservation initiatives.

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