



## Research Article

# When the mountains call: Exploring mountaineering motivations through the lens of the calling theory

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## ABSTRACT

Although the motives of hard adventure tourists represent a well-established research object, the theoretical foundations which can explain why experienced mountaineers engage in regular ascents remain under-examined. This study proposes that the concept of calling can help understand mountaineering motivations and explores its role on a sample of highly experienced mountaineers in Kazakhstan ( $n = 17$ ). The findings of interpretative phenomenological analysis demonstrate how mountaineers view climbing as a calling. The findings reveal pursuits of novelty, re-lived climbing experiences and self-actualization as the inner calls shaping the meaning and purpose in life for mountaineering tourists. The study shows that, despite their risks, regular ascents enable experienced mountaineers to reach mindfulness, thus enhancing personal well-being. Theoretically, the study aids in conceptualizing mountaineering as a calling in life. Practically, it suggests that mountaineering can aid in achieving mindfulness and, if practiced regularly, regular ascents can help (re-)build emotional resilience of hard adventure tourists.

**Management implications:** The study demonstrates how experienced mountaineers consider regular ascents as their calling in life. This holds important implications for management and marketing of hard adventure tourism. More specifically, tourism managers and marketers should strive to appeal to experienced mountaineers by highlighting the novelty of climbing itineraries. They should also emphasize how regular ascents can aid mountaineering tourists to re-live their climbing experiences, achieve self-actualization, and reach mindfulness. The study shows that, for experienced hard adventure tourists, the opportunity to re-engage may represent a strong inner call and even determine the main purpose and meaning in their lives.

## 1. Introduction

Adventure tourism represents a major segment of the global tourism market with an estimated value of USD 290 billion and a predicted 10-fold growth by 2030 (Statista, 2023). The growing number of adventure tourists necessitates a better understanding of their motivation, thus aiding in the design of more effective management and marketing campaigns (Giddy & Webb, 2018). To this end, an increasing number of studies examine the factors prompting tourists to embrace an adventure tour (Janowski et al. 2021).

Despite growing research on adventure tourist motivations, critical knowledge gaps persist. One gap is the motivation of specific tourist segments to engage in repeated adventures (Doran et al. 2022). Adventure tourism encompasses 'soft' and 'hard' activities (Clinch & Filimonau, 2017) whereby the former incorporates low(er) risks, requires low(er) skills and can, therefore, be undertaken by many individuals (Rantala, Rokenes, & Valkonen, 2018). Contrarily, the latter necessitates (more) advanced skills and commitment, thus being suitable only for specific tourist categories (Gross & Sand, 2020). Most tourists engage in soft adventures (Rantala, Hallikainen, et al., 2018)

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which has shaped a more established research agenda on their motivations; see, for example, Bichler and Peters (2020) for hiking; Wang and Wang (2018) for kayaking; Schlemmer et al. (2020) for mountain biking. Research on motivations in hard adventure tourism remains limited, partially due to its 'exclusive' nature (Ritpanitchajaval et al. 2023).

This study is concerned with mountaineering as high altitude climbing. Historically, the term 'mountaineering' has referred to the ascent of a mountain peak, thus being considered a hardcore, 'elite' sports activity (Apollo & Wengel, 2021). However, the term has been subsequently redefined and, to an extent, 'softened' in a manner that many tourism activities undertaken in the mountain environments have started to be labelled as 'mountaineering' (Apollo, 2017). This has shifted the conceptualization of mountaineering as an 'elite' sports activity to that of mass tourism (Apollo & Andreychouk, 2020). For example, although some scholars identify mountaineering as a high-effort, high-endurance sports activity of high altitude climbing (Jackman et al. 2023), some associate it with such 'softer' activities as hiking (Mykletun et al. 2021) and trekking (Wengel, 2021). The conceptual boundaries between the notions of mountaineering, sports and tourism have therefore become blurred (Apollo & Wengel, 2021).

Mountaineering therefore incorporates soft and hard adventure tourism. As 'hard' adventure, mountaineering involves activities with high levels of risk and challenge, requiring intense commitment and advanced skills which includes climbing expeditions, rock climbing and strenuous treks (Pomfret, 2006). In this regard, pioneering research on mountaineers has been concerned with various aspects of climbing, including motivation to ascend (Ewert, 1985, 1994). The focus has however been on recreational mountaineering tourists (Pomfret & Bramwell, 2016) with few studies considering the motives of highly experienced, professional mountaineers i.e., the individuals ascending high altitudes on a repeated basis (Mu & Nepal, 2016). The motivations of experienced mountaineers are different from those of recreational mountaineering tourists as repeated ascents are riskier, costlier and more physically demanding (Castanier et al. 2011). More research is therefore needed to understand the motives of experienced mountaineers (Caber & Albayrak, 2016).

Another knowledge gap is the theoretical foundation of the research on mountaineering motives. A review of motivational decisions among recreational mountaineers by Pomfret and Bramwell (2016) concludes that the drivers of mountaineering can be explained by such theories as flow, reversal and edgework. Janowski et al. (2021) argue that the theory of peak experience can provide further insights into the motivation of experienced mountaineers. These seminal theories, albeit being valuable, are predominantly concerned with the actual *experience* of mountaineering tourists. For example, the concept of flow suggests that mountaineers can so deeply engage in climbing that nothing else will matter to them. Likewise, the concept of edgework suggests that, when ascending, mountaineers push themselves through their limits to leave their comfort zone. These theories can therefore be more suitable to understand the mountaineering experience rather than the motive to climb regularly.

This study offers a new theoretical perspective on the motivations of hard adventure tourists by adopting the calling theory. A calling is defined as 'a meaningful beckoning toward activities that are morally, socially, and personally significant' (Wrzesniewski & Tosti, 2005, p.115). The concept of calling can provide an interesting perspective into why experienced mountaineers engage in climbing regularly despite its heavy psychological, physical and financial burdens. To evaluate if a calling can be a relevant motive for hard adventure tourism, this exploratory study collects data from highly experienced mountaineers in Kazakhstan, a country with numerous mountain ranges and long-standing traditions of mountaineering as a tourist activity.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Mountaineering motivations

Research has long established the complexity of motivations among mountaineering tourists, especially those who climb regularly (Johnston & Edwards, 1994). Research has also demonstrated how these motivations evolve with time depending on the socio-demographic characteristics of mountaineers alongside their physical and mental abilities (Bratton et al. 1979). For example, Boyes (2013) shows that older hard adventure tourists are driven by the opportunities to stay physically fit and socialise while younger hard adventure tourists are more attracted by the feeling of excitement and thrill.

Mountaineering is motivated by external and internal factors (Pomfret, 2006). The external, or 'pull', motivations are represented, for instance, by the natural attractiveness of the mountain environments or the relative ease of organising a mountaineering expedition (Carr, 2001). The role of external motives is especially important when exploring new climbing itineraries and attempting at new mountain ranges as their novelty can prompt mountaineers to engage in new climbing experiences (Pomfret & Bramwell, 2016).

The internal, or 'push', motivations are more complex; these are exemplified by the need for accomplishment, catharsis, and escapism (Houge Mackenzie & Kerr, 2012). The internal motivations are also represented by the perceived need for improvement (Janowski et al. 2021). Mountaineering is a skill-based activity, and regular ascents can aid mountaineers in improving their physique, refining climbing techniques and building endurance (Allen-Collinson et al. 2018). The need to challenge oneself, physically and emotionally, during the ascents represents another motive (Beedie & Hudson, 2003). Further, experienced mountaineers may see climbing as a continual pursuit of mastery; thus, by engaging in ascents regularly, mountaineering tourists seek new challenges for physical self-improvement and personal growth (Sanz-Junoy et al. 2023).

Contrarily, enjoyment may pose another important internal motive (Pomfret, 2006). Climbing can be enjoyable, and, hence, regular mountaineering provides the opportunity for individuals to re-live or re-connect with past climbing experience (Smith & Weed, 2007). (Re-) connection with nature may represent a related motive (Crockett et al. 2022). Climbing can take place in picturesque and remote locations, thereby enabling mountaineers to appreciate the natural beauty, re-connect with nature and experience a sense of awe (Burke et al. 2010).

Next, the need for exploration may drive experienced mountaineers, especially if they climb different mountains and find new climbing routes (Pomfret & Bramwell, 2016). Regular mountaineering provides the opportunity to explore a particular mountain area in more detail or discover alternative climbing itineraries in pursuit of physical and mental mastery, as per above. Further, social connection can drive mountaineering (Beedie & Hudson, 2003). Climbing can be a social activity, and mountaineers may enjoy the feeling of camaraderie that occurs during ascents with a group of like-minded individuals. Mountaineering can also provide opportunities to meet new people and build new friendships (Ertas, 2022). Lastly, group ascents can motivate mountaineers to benchmark their own physical performance against that of fellow climbers (Krishnagopal, 2022). Regular mountaineering can thus aid in tracking individual physical progress and comparing the one's ability to that of others.

Emotions may represent an important factor in explaining why mountaineering tourists engage in ascents regularly (Pomfret, 2012). Such emotions as fear, thrill and joy have been established as the motives for repeated participation in mountaineering (Faullant et al. 2011). More specifically, anticipation of fear is recognised as a driver for hard adventure tourism given its connection to the release of adrenaline when an individual faces a risky situation (Cater, 2006). However, experienced mountaineers do not necessarily seek risks purposefully, but are

attracted by the challenge of diminishing these risks' occurrence (Pomfret, 2006). Risk management in mountaineering tourism is considerably more difficult compared to other types of hard adventures (Crust et al. 2016). Mountaineers may therefore be driven by their unconscious desire to minimize risks as a means of reducing the feeling of fear, thus building emotional resilience to the challenge of regular ascents (Faullant et al. 2011). Improved emotional resilience can contribute to the perception of subjective well-being, thus generating a positive spill-over effect from the realm of mountaineering to day-to-day life (Pomfret et al. 2023).

Motivations of experienced mountaineers have been examined through various theoretical lens, including self-determination theory (Crockett et al. 2022), social practice theory (Telford & Beames, 2015) and theories of flow, reversal, peak experience and edgework (see Pomfret & Bramwell, 2016 for a review). The literature however acknowledges the yet limited scope of empirical research on the theoretical foundations behind the motives of hard adventure tourists (Pomfret, 2019). More specifically, there are calls to explore other theoretical approaches that can aid scholars in understanding motivations of experienced mountaineers (Lee et al. 2020). It is argued that the theory of calling can provide a novel perspective, thus extending theoretical knowledge on the motivations to climb.

## 2.2. The calling theory

The calling theory originates from vocational psychology and explains the purpose and meaning in work (Dik & Duffy, 2012). A calling is defined as an inner drive, a transcendent summons, prompting individuals to approach a particular (life or job) role in such a manner that it makes them feel that this role is meaningful and has a major purpose (Duffy & Dik, 2013). A sense of calling stimulates individuals to develop a perceived value in what they do as part of their role so that it becomes their primary source of motivation to repeatedly engage in this role in the future (Duffy et al. 2018).

The concept of calling has two main elements i.e., a transcendent summons, or a caller, and the purpose and meaning (McKenna et al. 2015). Different (f)actors can represent a caller, including religious, societal and family values. For example, religious beliefs and family upbringing can prompt individuals to engage in specific activities holding pro-social or pro-environmental significance, such as in the case of food waste prevention at home (Filimonau et al. 2022). Likewise, people may dedicate themselves to particular occupations, such as medical doctors or educators, having witnessed how these roles can aid in reducing human sufferings and making the world a better place to live (Hunter et al. 2010). A caller may change or evolve as individuals mature being influenced by various external, such as media, and internal, such as the need for self-actualization, (f)actors (Hall & Chandler, 2005). It is important to determine a caller and understand how/if it evolves with time to establish what motivates people's engagement in specific activities at different life and work stages (Xie et al. 2016). If correctly determined, a caller can be influenced to facilitate its occurrence. For instance, if religious beliefs have been identified as a caller in someone's life, then it is important to emphasize to that individual the importance of following a God's will in all their actions (Dik et al. 2012).

Driven by a caller, individuals develop a sense of purpose and meaning in their work and also in personal life (Duffy et al. 2018). For instance, a teacher may become proud having seen how their pupils have pursued successful careers after graduation (Bullough & Hall-Kenyon, 2012). This pride may prompt a teacher to excel at work hoping to see more student successes. Likewise, a chef may gain satisfaction from watching how restaurant customers enjoy the food they have prepared. This satisfaction may encourage a chef to seek refinement in their cooking skills and abilities in pursuit of positive emotions and feedback (Cain et al. 2018). People who develop a sense of purpose and meaning in what they do become more passionate about their actions which makes them consider their work and life as being more

fulfilling and meaningful (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2010).

The concept of calling has been extensively examined in the fields of education and career development (Galles & Lenz, 2013), volunteering and charitable acts (Yim & Fock, 2013), and military duties (DiRenzo et al. 2022). It remains however understudied in tourism and hospitality contexts where it has primarily been explored from the perspective of staff work commitment and student career aspirations. By using a survey method, Cain et al. (2018) have investigated the relationships between a sense of calling, employee engagement, work-life balance, and life satisfaction for executive chefs. This study has revealed the significant effect of a calling on chefs' work engagement with a subsequent strong influence on their personal life satisfaction. Importantly, Cain et al. (2018) have acknowledged the limited attention paid to the concept of calling in tourism and hospitality literature and recommended its detailed exploration. Likewise, by surveying hotel employees, Karatepe et al. (2021) have studied the interrelationships between a calling, emotional exhaustion, intention to remain with the organisation, and pro-environmental behaviour in the workplace. This study has demonstrated that a calling can mitigate emotional burnout, foster staff retention, and encourage 'green' acts. Lastly, Cain et al. (2021) and Lee et al. (2022) have examined the impact of a calling on academic and life satisfaction of tourism and hospitality students. They have established that customisation of educational courses can inspire students to pursue tourism and hospitality careers and retain in tourism and hospitality employment.

Indirectly, calling has been discussed in the context of mountaineering by Duits (2020) who argues that some individuals take the risks of climbing because they consider it their meaning of life. Duits (2020) does not however conceptualise a calling as a motivation to engage in repeated ascents but rather as a factor explaining risk-taking by alpinists. Likewise, Loewenstein (1999) posits that mountaineering can sometimes provide meaning to an individual's existence. Loewenstein (1999) does not however consider mountaineering from the viewpoint of its calling in life. To our knowledge, no further research has been undertaken on the relationship between a calling and individual motivation to engage in tourism activities, such as in the context of hard adventure tourism.

In summary, literature has identified various factors that can motivate mountaineering tourists to climb regularly. Literature has however overlooked the potential influence of a sense of calling on the motives of experienced mountaineers. For this category of hard adventure tourists, repeated ascents may represent the major meaning and purpose in life and the anticipation of climbing may provide a strong inner caller for mountaineers to experience ascents again and again. The current study will contribute to literature with an exploratory analysis of a sense of calling as an internal motive for highly experienced mountaineers.

## 3. Materials and methods

### 3.1. Study area

The Republic of Kazakhstan has many 4000–6000 m mountains suitable for mountaineering, rock climbing and hard adventure tourism. These are parts of the Western, Northern, and Central Tien Shan as well as Dzungaria. Mountaineering in these mountain areas requires extensive preparation, great technical skills and excellent physical and emotional abilities as the ascents may take up to several days and even weeks. Mountaineering in these areas is subjected to such natural risks as avalanches and rockfalls, snowstorms and shower rains as well as oxygen starvation. Groups of 4–6 to 15 mountaineers are usually equipped for an ascent depending on the difficulty category of a climbing route.

### 3.2. Method

To capture the motivations of experienced mountaineers and explore

the role of a calling, the study relied upon the emic approach (Morey & Luthans, 1984) and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Eatough & Smith, 2017, pp. 193–209). The emic approach was deemed appropriate as it advocates an insider's perspective which examines the beliefs, values, and practices of a particular community of people from the perspective of this community's members (Dundes, 1962). Unlike the etic approach which adopts an outsider's perspective, the emic approach enables a careful exploration of the meaning and significance of a specific behaviour as understood by the people who practice this behaviour (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In tourism, the emic approach can be applied to facilitate comprehension of distinct structures and meanings prevailed within a specific cultural context or within a particular community of people (Buzinde et al. 2014). The emic approach enables researchers to gain insights into the subjective experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of individuals within that specific cultural or community setting (Cohen, 2011).

Aligned with the emic approach, one of the members of the research team was an experienced mountaineer and a member of the community of highly experienced mountaineers in the Republic of Kazakhstan. To ensure an insider's perspective of the subject matter, their insights were utilised to conceptualise the study and co-design the strategy of primary data collection. This member of the research team also administered the fieldwork by interviewing study participants and contributed to data analysis.

Phenomenology was deemed appropriate to reach the goal of the current study given its focus on lived experiences of individuals and its ability to reveal how these individuals themselves make sense of their experiences (Finlay, 2014). To this end, IPA is concerned with disclosing the meanings which those experiences hold for the study participants (Engward & Goldspink, 2020). Although the disadvantage of phenomenology is its reliance upon a limited number of datapoints, it analyses the small samples of data in great detail (Smith, 2011). Further, given this current study was concerned with highly experienced mountaineers, small sample size was justified because of the limited study population and the associated recruitment challenges. IPA has been extensively used in empirical investigations of the lived experienced of mountaineers (see, for example, Allen-Collinson et al. 2019; Crockett et al. 2022; Crust et al. 2016), thus demonstrating its methodological fitness and analytical rigour.

### 3.3. Data collection

Data were obtained from personal accounts of highly experienced Kazakh mountaineers collected by the method of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. In the context of this study, 'highly experienced mountaineers' were understood as the professional mountaineers with at least 10 years of experience in the mountains regardless of their age. This classification by the years of climbing experience, as opposed to the classification by age, was used because, these days, younger mountaineers may have a more pronounced technical experience and a better physique in climbing compared to their older counterparts.

An initial 18-question interview protocol was designed based on the literature review (Supplementary material, Appendix 1). The protocol covered the key aspects of mountaineering motivations and experiences, including the motives to climb regularly (and how/if these evolve with time); climbing experience; perceived challenges and risks of climbing alongside measures employed to manage their occurrence. The interview protocol was designed in English and back translated in Russian and Kazakh. Three academics majoring in hard adventure tourism and sports psychology pre-tested the protocol for content and face validity. The protocol was also trialled with three volunteers represented by experienced mountaineering tourists.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit interview participants. They were represented by highly experienced mountaineers who, within their climbing careers, had engaged in at least 10 ascents to the peaks exceeding 4000 m above sea level. Another key criterion for recruitment

was regular participation in mountaineering i.e., at least twice a year. These recruitment criteria were proposed by the member of the research team who was an experienced mountaineer themselves. This was to ensure that the study would interview those mountaineers who had extensive experience of repeated ascents and who had engaged in such ascents on a repeated basis. Recruitment was led by the same member of the research team who co-designed the study.

Although a sample size for phenomenological research can be as low as 10 datapoints (Smith et al. 2009), this current study recruited 17 willing participants. The decision was made to retain this sample size to warrant a richer dataset and reduce the risk of subsequent withdrawals. Table 1 lists interview participants. It is worth noting that the sample is male dominated which is aligned with the argument of Doran et al. (2020) highlighting a significant gender disbalance in mountaineering participation. Further, as the Republic of Kazakhstan has traditionally been a masculine society, the low participation of females in professional mountaineering and, as a result, in the studied sample, may have been attributed to the dominance of masculinity in the Kazakh society (Filimonau et al. 2023).

Interviewing was conducted in January–April 2023. Study participants were interviewed in quiet locations to avoid disturbance and interruptions, such as their homes. Study participants were given freedom to choose the language of an interview i.e., Russian or Kazakh. Interviews lasted, on average, 1 h; they were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were professionally translated in English.

### 3.4. Data analysis

IPA employs a double hermeneutic approach which advocates that the role of a researcher is to make sense of the participant's sense making (Smith et al. 2009). To this end, a researcher should focus on the particular details provided by study participants and apply an in-depth analysis to describe the examined phenomenon from various angles and within individual contexts (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). A researcher should position themselves as close to the lived experience of study participants as possible while acknowledging potential subjectivity and recognizing possible biases in data interpretation (Pringle et al. 2011).

IPA is undertaken in six steps (Jeong & Othman, 2016) involving (1) reading and re-reading interview transcriptions; (2) initial noting and coding; (3) developing emergent themes; (4) searching for connections across themes; (5) analysing the next study participant's case by repeating steps 1–4; (6) looking for patterns across the cases examined. As recommended by Crockett et al. (2022), for trustworthiness, the analysis involved complete immersion in data alongside critical, reflexive consideration of the study material. Again, for trustworthiness, interview transcriptions were analysed independently by two members of the research team (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). One of the members was the experienced mountaineer who co-designed the study and administered the interviews. The second member was a former experienced mountaineer, currently retired. The reason why the members of the research team with mountaineering experience were involved in data analysis was to ensure the effective application of an emic perspective and a double hermeneutic approach as these required close positioning of the researchers to the lived experiences under scrutiny.

The results of the analysis undertaken by two researchers were then compared, and discussions were held on the identified disagreements in data interpretation. Following these discussions, a clear set of patterns emerged from data that facilitated the development of an overall structure of themes. NVIVO 12, qualitative data analysis computer software, was employed to help visualise the main codes, establish their significance, and identify their inter-linkages. In the final step of data analysis, as recommended by Burnard (1991), two study participants were re-contacted with a request to review the results of data analysis and reconfirm their meaningfulness.

**Table 1**  
Study participants (n = 17).

Code	Age, years	Gender	Mountaineering experience, years	Age, at when they started mountaineering	Number of 4000 m + ascents made with the career	Average regularity of ascents, per year
M1	58	Male	43	16	32	2
M2	62	Male	15	30	30	2
M3	42	Male	22	22	25	2
M4	31	Male	12	19	27	3
M5	36	Male	26	11	30	4
M6	26	Male	14	12	20	2
M7	44	Female	20	24	28	2
M8	58	Male	43	25	29	2
M9	52	Male	20	30	36	3
M10	40	Male	15	25	15	2
M11	43	Male	20	23	24	2
M12	32	Male	15	17	40	2
M13	42	Male	20	22	38	4
M14	39	Male	20	19	46	6
M15	38	Male	20	18	49	6
M16	34	Male	18	16	28	2
M17	67	Male	49	18	40	5

#### 4. Findings

Four themes emerged in the result of IPA: (1) mountaineering as a calling; (2) the motives for repeated climbing; (3) the risks associated with regular ascents; and (4) the determinants of successful and safe climbing experienced (Fig. 1).

##### 4.1. Mountaineering as calling

The study participants explicitly differentiated between the motives to climb regularly and mountaineering as a general sense of calling. Calling was referred to as something inner, superior and subconscious; it was described as a strong temptation feeling that exceeded the mere motivation to climb. Contrarily, the motives to ascend were depicted as something more basic and utilitarian, something related to various internal and external factors.

All study participants considered mountaineering as their main purpose in life with many claiming to live in sole anticipation of the next climbing expeditions and ascents. Although the high moral, physical and financial costs of regular mountaineering were acknowledged, the study participants always looked forward to future ascents and subsequently engaged in regular mountaineering, subject to adequate physique and resource availability. The study participants described mountaineering as a calling using the following expressions: [regular mountaineering is like] ‘the way of living a meaningful life’ (M4); ‘a [bad] habit, like smoking or drinking, which urges you to climb again and again’ (M6); ‘an illness which you have no cure for’ (M8); ‘a magnet which attracts you every time you think or dream of it’ (M11); ‘a strong pull, possibly coming from God, a pull to something further, eternal and unknown, which you want to experience while you live’ (M16).

Interesting is an analogy of a (bad) habit that some study participants used when describing mountaineering. When probed on it, it turned out that some mountaineers recognised the bad influence of regular ascents on their family life and personal finance given that preparation for expeditions and the expeditions themselves were costly and implied long periods of staying away from the loved ones. This notwithstanding, the study participants could not suppress this (bad) habit referring to the power of calling as being so strong that it would be impossible to resist:

*‘I agree it can be seen as a bad habit. However, I feel that mountains attract people at a special, energetic or even exoteric, level if you wish. I just feel that enormous exchange of energy every time when I think about my next climb. I do think that it’s similar to smoking – one cannot stop thinking about it until they have accessed a cigarette. Same applies to mountaineering – I cannot stop thinking about the next expedition until I am out there ...’* (M17)

Similarly, an analogy of mountaineering as an illness was used. When probed, the study participants explained that, for some, climbing had become such a strong inner trigger that it was considered the primary driver of their living. Such individuals considered mountaineering as their purpose in life or, at least, as ‘a breath of fresh air in the otherwise dull and boring life routine’ (M3):

*‘Many experienced mountaineers are adrenaline-dependent people if I can call them like this. They’ve spent so much time in the mountains that they consider these mountains their home ... Although they have real home and most of them have families, they feel out of place if they don’t climb ...’* (M9)

Lastly, some study participants, especially those of older age, described their attempts to stop climbing as unsuccessful. They claimed that, until they felt physically fit, they would continue regular ascents. Some feared that their inability to climb regularly could lead to their premature death referring to their calling as being so strong:

*‘When you become old like me, and when you feel bad when climbing because of poor fitness, you may think ‘it’s enough, I’ll never go to the mountains again’. However, next time, you get a call from your buddy asking you to join. So, you do. And then you set up a camp, sit at the fire, listen to what your mates say, laugh. And here you go. You forget about everything. You’re in a different Universe and the time has stopped for you. There is no place for phone calls or other problems. This is your meaning in life ...’* (M8)

##### 4.2. The motives to climb

The motives to climb discussed by the study participants could be categorised as internal and external. Among the external, or pull, motives were the desire for novelty ‘of trying new itineraries, mountain ranges, and peaks’ (M13); the desire to immerse in nature i.e., ‘the beauty of rivers, mountains, peaks, and glaciers magnetises you and prompts you to climb again and again’ (M15); the need to socialise i.e., ‘another ascent is another great opportunity to meet and speak with the crazy people like yourself [laughter]’ (M1); and, with this factor being especially pronounced for the most experienced mountaineers, the need to compete and achieve self-respect i.e., ‘at a certain point, you’re simply attracted by the desire to conquer new heights but also to show to others that you’re still worthy and can climb as they do’ (M2).

As for the internal, or push, motives, these were represented by the desire to re-live the memories of previous ascents; self-actualise; and experience mindfulness. When discussing memories, the study participants, especially the older ones, spoke about their desire to re-experience the emotions related to climbing, including an anticipation

Determinants of success
Physical preparedness
Mental / emotional preparedness
Technical preparedness
Contingency planning
Critical assessment of capabilities
The critical role of a team leader / instructor
Teamwork

  

Risks
Unpreparedness
Over-confidence
Emotional breakdown
Groupthink effect
Extreme weather
Disastrous events
Health issues
Panic

  

Motives
To observe (natural) beauty
To feel novelty
To re-live memories
To achieve self-actualization
To experience mindfulness
To socialise
To compete

  

Calling
The main meaning in life
The cornerstone of living
Habitual
Major attraction
A major pulling power

Fig. 1. An overall structure of themes emerged from IPA.

of the challenges ahead of an ascent, but also the thrill and excitement. Additionally, they discussed the energy obtained during regular ascents alongside the feeling of completion and satisfaction gained when a climb was finished (for instance, *‘to sense awe and delight when looking down the mountain when you’re at the peak’*, as per M13). These memories and emotions were considered important for personal well-being with a lasting effect felt after the climb. To an extent, the study participants repeatedly spoke about a liminality of their mountaineering experience which they wanted to re-live during regular ascents describing this experience as something completely different from a day-to-day life:

*‘When you climb, you’re getting a dose of cheerfulness. You’re sucking in this unexplainable energy of mountains, energy of nature, flavours of the mountain air filled with a smell of grass, glaciers, stones and ozone. These*

*emotions are difficult to explain if you’ve never climbed; you need to experience them once to understand what I mean when I say I’d like to re-live them again. They make you feel that you live or that you’re still alive ... ’ (M11)*

The study participants, especially the younger ones, discussed the need to self-actualise from the perspective of the feeling of pride developed after having climbed the top or most difficult peaks. Self-actualization was also explained as a sense of fulfilment gained after the ascent was completed. Lastly, self-actualization was considered in the context of the need to challenge oneself, physically and emotionally, by proving that one was capable of facing the difficulties and, most importantly, developing coping strategies that could aid in building self-resilience towards these difficulties:

*‘You become completely different [when you climb]. You start understanding what important things are and how you should manage them. You start looking at your life at a different angle. You prioritise, you grow. The unimportant things just fly away ... There is a saying ‘The mountains call only those people who are tall enough for them or whose soul is at the same height as the soul of the mountain’. In other words, mountains are where you feel who you real are ... ’ (M1)*

Lastly, many study participants spoke about regular ascents in the context of achieving mindfulness. Examples of the quotes identified for this sub-theme in the interview transcripts included: [you climb] *‘to find yourself i.e., to realise your fears and weaknesses and how these can be overcome, but also to recognise your strengths and how these can be capitalised on in a day-to-day life’ (M6); ‘to better understand or better ‘feel’ yourself so that you can re-assess your physical capabilities and put your thoughts and feelings in one place. To re-order and re-gain yourself [especially after a long break between the climbs]’ (M9); ‘to stay one-to-one with the mountains and wilderness so that you become aware of the present moment and appreciate the surroundings’ (M10); ‘to feel unity with the Universe’ (M14)*. These quotes suggest the contribution of, or at least a close connection of mountaineering to, mindfulness, thus showcasing its therapeutic potential which experienced mountaineers can benefit from to become emotionally stronger and more resilient during the climbs, but also in day-to-day life.

#### 4.3. The risks of climbing

The risks of climbing could be categorised as non-controllable and controllable. Disasters, such as landslides, avalanches and glacier fractures, and extreme weather events, such as heavy snow or showers, were referred to as the examples of non-controllable or difficult-to-predict risks. The lack of preparatory work, overconfidence in one’s skills bordering on negligence, emotional issues (for example, climbing after a major tragedy, such as a death of a family member), unreported health issues and panic were discussed as risks whose occurrence could largely be controlled and their severity could therefore be effectively minimized. The groupthink effect was mentioned as a potential controllable risk applicable to the established parties of experienced mountaineers who had long expedited together. Most study participants agreed that, regardless of their nature, mountaineering risks would be minimal if well anticipated and properly prepared for. Interestingly, the role of age and climbing experience was detected in risk perception: at a young age and with less experience, risks were perceived as manageable because of the lack of understanding of their severity; contrarily, at an older age and with more experience, risks were also perceived as manageable but due to better preparedness:

*‘When you’re young, you don’t know how significant a risk can be as you’ve never experienced one. Mostly, you just rely on your group lead who knows everything. As you mature, you start appreciating risks more. You start leading groups yourself, so your feeling of responsibility grows. Therefore, you prepare more, you prepare better, so that all risks are minimized’ (M10)*

When probed on the feeling of fear as a potential risk, there was a split in opinions on its role in mountaineering. Some study participants did not consider fear as a risk, such as *'There is no fear. There is excitement, there is adrenaline. But no fear. If there is fear, you shouldn't climb as you'll die'* (M17). However, some study participants viewed fear as an indispensable element of climbing and acknowledged its important role in ascents, such as *'Yes, there is fear but there's no point in suppressing it. Fear is a key to your safety. If you don't fear, you won't be able to evaluate adequately what is going on around you. What you need to do is to reduce fear to a manageable level. This is to make sure it doesn't grow into panic as panic equals death'* (M12).

#### 4.4. The determinants of success

The final set of sub-themes dealt with the factors contributing to successful and safe repeated ascents. These factors could be divided into technical i.e., access to the right tools to facilitate a climb or good knowledge of a climbing itinerary and personal i.e., physical and emotional, readiness to ascend alongside the ability to critically assess one's capabilities and undertake forward and contingency planning. Besides, the social factor was discussed exemplified by the critical role of a group leader who should be experienced and respected by all mountaineers alongside the importance of teamwork. These factors were considered by the study participants paramount to reduce risk occurrence during repeated ascents, thus enabling safe returns:

*'For me personally, it's three things. First, contingency planning. You need to have the main plan, the additional plan and the supplementary plan. Second, it's your ability to assess adequately if you can handle that altitude. For example, if you feel weak, you need to be able to turn around, even if you have very little climbing left. Many people die on descends, just because they overestimate their abilities. You must consider your strengths and weaknesses carefully. Finally, it's people who you climb with. You should be confident you can rely on them, and they can rely on you'* (M1)

## 5. Discussion

The relevance of the calling theory as one of the potential explanations as to why highly experienced mountaineers climb on a regular basis was supported by the study's findings. First, an anticipation of a future ascent represented a strong caller which urged the study participants to engage in repeated climbs. Second, mountaineering was considered by highly experienced mountaineers as the main reason and the key purpose in life which demonstrated their dedication to this type of hard adventure tourism regardless of its drawbacks, such as high financial, physical and emotional costs. In other words, the opportunity to ascend provided a strong trigger, thus highlighting the caller element of the calling theory, prompting highly experienced mountaineers to prioritise climbing over other activities. Further, when engaging in repeated ascents, mountaineering tourists could challenge themselves to make a (better) meaning of their life, or even giving it a new purpose, according to their inner calls. This corresponds to the purpose and meaning element of the calling theory. The findings of the current study are therefore well aligned with the main argument of the calling theory which explains how a specific activity, in this case climbing, can provide a meaningful experience to some individuals and shape their positive attitudes toward their living, thus becoming their *raison d'être* (Duffy et al. 2018). This study is the first to extend the application of the calling theory from the domains of education, work (dis)engagement and subjective career success to the leisure and hard adventure tourism context.

The study revealed a range of external and internal motives for highly experienced mountaineers to ascend regularly, including the desire to re-engage with the mountains' nature, the need to re-live memories of the past climbs, and the opportunity to pursue self-actualization. These findings are largely aligned with the results of

other studies on the motivations among hard adventure tourists that have established the importance of these motives among mountaineers outside the Republic of Kazakhstan (Houge Mackenzie & Kerr, 2012; Janowski et al. 2021; Pomfret & Bramwell, 2016). The current study also shown how the influence of these motives may have evolved with time i.e., the need to re-live past memories was more pronounced for older mountaineers, potentially because they could better recognise the soon end of their mountaineering career. Contrarily, the pursuit of self-actualization was considered more important by younger mountaineers, potentially due to what the study participants referred to as the *'youthful maximalism'* (M12). Youthful maximalism, being a popular expression in the post-Soviet space, describes how some people, usually at a younger age but also those who have *'a young soul'* (M12), are trying to find their place in society (Petrovska, 2021). The phenomenon may at least partially explain why younger mountaineers are stronger motivated by the need to self-actualise. Again, these findings are largely aligned with literature which has recognised the evolution of mountaineer motives to climb as they mature and grow professionally (Pomfret, 2006).

The study highlighted perceived risks of repeated ascents, including controllable and uncontrollable, alongside the determinants of safe climbs. These findings confirm the results of previous investigations concerned with the motivations of recreational and highly experienced mountaineers (Castanier et al. 2011; Janowski et al. 2021; Pomfret & Bramwell, 2016) alongside their evaluation of climbing risks (Pomfret, 2019). The novelty of the current study was in showcasing how some highly experienced mountaineers viewed regular ascents as a liminal experience that they wanted to re-live, thus recognizing it as a strong motive to climb. The liminal nature of mountaineering has only recently been recognised by tourism scholars (Miller & Mair, 2020), and this current study adds empirical evidence to demonstrate that a search for liminality may represent an important reason for some mountaineers to engage in repeated ascents.

Lastly, the current study established that highly experienced mountaineers may have engaged in regular ascents in pursuit of mindfulness. The relevance of mindfulness, defined as awareness arising through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally (Kabat-Zinn, 2015), has only recently been recognised in the context of hard adventure tourism. Wheatley (2023) has experimentally demonstrated that engagement with rock-climbing can increase mindfulness in young adults. This study, while offering a valuable perspective on the interplay between mindful practices and hard adventures, focuses on mindfulness as an outcome of participation in hard adventure activities. Contrarily, Ritpanitchajchaval et al. (2023) have provided evidence that mountain-based adventure tourists recognise the value of mindfulness when hiking and climbing. Despite its focus on mindfulness as a potential motive to climb, the finding by Ritpanitchajchaval et al. (2023) is anecdotal as it is based on the personal account of a single study participant.

This current study shown, empirically and on a larger sample, that mindfulness could represent an important motive to engage in repeated ascents, especially among older mountaineers. For them, climbing is not only the way to feel mindful, but also the opportunity, after a climb, to become more invigorated and develop resilience towards the stress of a day-to-day life. Further, many mountaineers associate mindfulness with a feeling of awe. They become more conscious and awake as a result of encountering something bigger than themselves during a climb i.e., the inner meaning of the Universe. This encounter, facilitated and reinforced by regular ascents, reminds mountaineering tourists about the (true) value of their life, thus potentially reducing the influence of egocentric prejudgements when they return to their day-to-day lives. Although literature has recognised a sense of awe as an important element of mountaineering experience (Pomfret, 2012), its link to the feeling of perceived mindfulness has not been established.

This finding adds to the growing body of knowledge on the considerable contribution of mountaineering to the subjective well-being of

experienced mountaineers and possible, positive spill-over effect of the climbing experience in the context of a private life (Pomfret et al. 2023). The current study also highlights the need for a dedicated research agenda on the complex relationships between the motives to climb, mountaineering experience, the outcomes of repeated ascents and mindfulness.

## 6. Conclusion

This study shed light on the role of a sense of calling as a potential trigger for hard adventure tourism. It also demonstrated the complexity of motives that could influence highly experienced mountaineers in the Republic of Kazakhstan and beyond to engage in repeated ascents. Lastly, the study established the important role of climbing in achieving mindfulness among mountaineering tourists.

### 6.1. Theoretical implications

From the theoretical viewpoint, the study demonstrates the relevance of a sense of calling when recognizing why tourists engage in hard adventures on a regular basis. This novel theoretical outlook provides the opportunity to (re-)visit and (re-)examine hard adventure tourism from the perspective of its perceived purpose and meaning in life, especially among experienced tourists. The study thus complements existing theoretical perspectives on the motives behind hard adventures, such as flow, reversal, edgework and peak experience.

The study also highlights the importance of reaching mindfulness as a motive for experienced mountaineers to engage in repeated ascents. The role of climbing experiences in improving mindfulness of hard adventure tourists has been recognised in literature. The theoretical contribution of the current study is in proving empirically that a desire to achieve mindfulness when climbing may represent an actual motive for mountaineering in addition to its outcome.

### 6.2. Practical implications

From the practical perspective, the study outlines some avenues for marketing and management of hard adventures. First, given that experienced mountaineers consider climbing as their calling in life, marketing activities should aim at gently reminding tourists about the key benefits of repeated ascents, including the opportunity to obtain novel and re-live past mountaineering experiences alongside the opportunity to self-actualise. In other words, marketing of hard adventures does not need to be aggressive; instead, it should softly and subtly push, in this case experienced mountaineers, towards the re-engagement in climbing by appealing to their inner trigger i.e., mountaineering as their life's calling.

Second, given that some mountaineers consider repeated ascents as the opportunity to reach mindfulness and, ultimately, (re-)build emotional resilience and improve subjective wellbeing, marketing of hard adventures should emphasize the therapeutic value of mountaineering. For example, marketing campaigns can strive to showcase that such therapeutic benefits as reduced stress and depression can be achieved by climbing regularly. Further, marketing can focus on underlining the therapeutic value of climbing with others given that many mountaineers, especially at an older age, consider regular ascents as the opportunity to meet old and make new friends.

### 6.3. Limitations and future research

Due to the exploratory nature of the current study, its findings should be re-tested and validated on larger samples of experienced mountaineers. These samples can be collected and analysed by other methods, such as a survey, to obtain generalisability and improve representativeness. Further, it would be useful to replicate this research in the geographies outside the Republic of Kazakhstan. This is because

professional Kazakh mountaineers have always belonged to an elite group of climbers. The findings of the current study may therefore not be directly applicable to professional mountaineers in other geographies where climbing is not considered an 'elite' sport or an 'elite' leisure activity. Next, the current study is only concerned with mountaineers. Future research should aim at exploring the relevance of the concept of calling for other categories of hard adventure tourists. A comparative study on the role of a sense of calling among different tourist segments can also be arranged. Future research should also compare if the concept of calling plays an equal role among male and female professional mountaineers. This is because females may have more societal obligations and expectations compared to males, especially in masculine societies such as the Republic of Kazakhstan, which can affect their ability and willingness to engage in regular ascents. Lastly, there was only one female participant in the current study. Future investigations should focus on understanding mountaineering as a life's calling among female climbers. This is because the day-to-day lives of female mountaineers may be more constrained compared to males, thus diminishing or even completely eliminating the potential effect of a calling. However, concurrently, because of the many daily chores and demands which they want to escape, female climbers may have a stronger inner trigger to re-engage in mountaineering compared to males. The gender perspective on mountaineering as a calling therefore warrants an in-depth investigation.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Yermek Galiakbarov:** Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Ordenbek Mazbayev:** Writing – review & editing, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Lyailya Mutaliyeva:** Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Viachaslau Filimonau:** Writing – original draft, Supervision, Conceptualization. **Hakan Sezerel:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jort.2024.100743>.

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