

Article

Hiking, Sense of Place, and Place Attachment in the Age of Globalization and Digitization: The Israeli Case

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Abstract: Based on the premise that hiking in Israel is strongly related to constructs of sense of place and place attachment, this study analyzes the motivations and experiences of hikers along the Israel National Trail. To this end, it employs diverse methods, including ethnographic methods such as participant observations and informal interviews, questionnaires, analysis of digital communications, diary analysis, and autoethnography. The findings indicate that the main motivations and experiences of Israeli hikers pertain to “getting to know” the Land of Israel “with their feet,” becoming connected to the land, and feeling a strong sense of Israeli identity. They also indicate that the current relationships among different concepts of “sense of place,” “place identity,” “place dependence,” and “place attachment” in the age of globalization and digitization are blurred and unclear, but that they nonetheless play a significant role in hiking in Israel and Israeli leisure activities in general.

Keywords: Israel National Trail; hiking; Israel; sense of place; place identity; place dependence; place attachment

1. Introduction

The Israel National Trail (INT) was first envisioned in the 1970s by Israeli journalist Avraham Tamir, who was inspired by the Appalachian Trail in the United States. In 1995, after preparatory work by the Society for the Protection of Nature (SPN), the INT was opened to the public for the first time. Today, the trail covers more than 1000 km, from the north of Israel to the country’s southern extreme, and those who hike it are called “shvilistim” (from the Hebrew word shvil—meaning, “trail”). Each year, the INT attracts hundreds of thousands of hikers with diverse motivations, and its popularity continues to grow [1].

The INT is part of a global trend of hiking and “trail tourism”—a unique activity that allows travelers first-hand experience of a country’s physical and cultural surroundings [2,3]. Hikers note a wide range of motivations for engaging in hiking: physical, social, cultural, spiritual, religious, and more [4]. The increase in domestic and international tourism around the world in recent decades makes the development and support of sustainable touristic activities critical for minimizing environmental damage and supporting local communities. Trail tourism is consistent with this ideal, as it enables the traveler to become part of the environment [5].

One assumption of this research is that hiking in Israel is closely related to constructs of sense of place and place attachment. As such, it can be presumed that the main motivations and experiences of Israeli hikers pertain to getting “to know” the Land of Israel “with their feet,” establishing a bond with the land, and developing a strong sense of Israeli identity. This presumption will be confirmed using diverse methods such as ethnographic methods, questionnaires, and the analysis of digital communications and collective hiker diaries. This explorative study is an initial attempt to engage in a detailed examination of the sense of place and place identity that stem from hiking in Israel. It is

implemented in the context of Israeli society, where hiking the country and “being at one with the land” are highly valued and esteemed.

The article begins with a material and methods section that surveys the theoretical background pertaining to leisure activities and hiking experiences, “sense of place” and “place attachment,” and hiking and “sense of place” in the Israeli context, and then explains the study’s methodology. The results and discussion section presents the present study’s findings and engages in discussion on the constructs of “sense of place” and “place attachment” among hikers in Israel. The conclusions section offers more general insights.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Leisure Activities and Hiking Experiences

Research shows that wilderness has a restorative quality, that outdoor physical exercise has positive impact, and that people usually enjoy the challenge of living in the outdoors [6]. It also highlights how social interaction set outdoors differs in quality from other social interactions and is usually productive and helpful. Particularly emphasized is the time of quiet and solitude it affords, as well as the natural beauty of the surroundings.

Experiences are influenced by cultural, socio-demographic, and behavioral factors [7]. A study of hikers in Grampians National Park, Australia [7] distinguishes between two types of feelings among hikers: extrinsic feelings, which are directly influenced by processes stemming from the external environment and direct results of the geographic location; and intrinsic feelings elicited by the psychological experience of the visitor. In practice, these two types of feelings tend to operate simultaneously [7].

Engagement in leisure pursuits tends to be prompted by four primary motives. The first is the intellectual motive, which refers to the extent to which individuals are motivated to engage in leisure pursuits involving mental activities such as learning, exploring, discovering, thinking, or imagining. The second is the social motive, which considers the extent to which individuals engage in leisure activities for social reasons. This component addresses two basic needs: the need for friendship and interpersonal relationships, and the need for the esteem of others. The third is the motive of achieving competence and/or mastery, which encompasses the desires to achieve, master, be challenged, and compete. The fourth and final motive is that of stimulus-avoidance, meaning the desire to escape over-stimulating life situations [8].

Accordingly, in their analysis of a scale of leisure motives, Ryan and Glendon [8] identify the following 14 motives: to achieve mental relaxation, to discover new places and things, to avoid the bustle of daily life, to seek physical relaxation, to be in a calm atmosphere, to increase one’s knowledge, to have a good time with friends, to be with others, to build friendships with others, to use one’s imagination, to enjoy a sense of belonging, to challenge one’s abilities, to use one’s physical abilities/skills in sports, and to develop close friendships.

Similarly, Robertson [9] has found that hikers in a Mountain Park near Zagreb emphasized three main experiences: (1) being in nature and outdoors, (2) mental and physical benefits, and (3) interacting with others and with one’s self. Hikers on the Appalachian Trail (AT) reported enjoying better health, physical challenge, exercise, and relaxation as a result of their hikes [10]. Hikers on The Pacific Crest Trail (2650 miles linking Mexico and Canada via California, Oregon, and Washington) reported outcomes including the development of new perspectives, fun, excitement, and enhanced personal growth leading to a desire to transfer these elements to other parts of their lives, to enhance their enjoyment of life, and to develop warm relationships with others [11]. In a more recent comparative study of the AT and the Pacific Crest Trail, hikers spoke of healthy lifestyles, meeting others with similar interests, environmental awareness, and an appreciation of natural resources [12]. Walking through historical areas can raise peoples’ awareness of their culture and surroundings [13] and of

what Svarstad [14] calls “belonging,” which focuses on how hikers establish linkages to the past and to earlier ways of life.

Motives pertaining to physical and mental well-being are reflected in the prescription of hiking and walking for obesity, heart conditions, and other medical problems [15]. From a mental perspective, walking and hiking are activities that “recharge” our batteries and hiking itself has been described as “pure antidepressant” [14,16–18]. In a recent study [19], women on the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) identified shifts in personal values, lifestyle, and career as outcomes of the thru-hike.

Walking and hiking are currently extremely popular leisure activities [4]. Svarstad [14] identifies three categories of hiking as outdoor recreational activity: (1) hiking as pure recreation; (2) hiking as a critique of modern society; and (3) hiking as a category of belonging, as reflected in the importance of hiking in landscapes reflecting traditional Norwegian ways of life. More recent papers contribute to the scholarship on place attachment, place identity, and leisure subcultures by further examining the social world of hikers [1] and the hiking community as subculture identities [20].

As the world is becoming increasingly technology and communications-based and smartphones have become a common sight in nature, country, and leisure settings [21], more and more people appear to be seeking “real” attachment to their place on earth. Does a firm dichotomy still exist between technology and communications-based life on the one hand, and the quest for outdoor recreation-based place attachment on the other hand? Or do both phenomena occur simultaneously [22], as smartphones, social worlds, and connectivity are part of our lives even when we step into supposedly distant, nature-based experiences [23]. Of the numerous diverse motives and experiences described in the literature, the most prominent are physical and social, and the desire for relaxation. The motivations of place attachment and sense of place are also mentioned and are the foci of this article.

2.2. *Constructs of Sense of Place and Place Attachment*

“Sense of place” refers to both the affective and cognitive components of place, encompassing the interpretations and representations of features such as place dependence, place identity, rootedness, and satisfaction [24,25]. The term highlights four components of place—time, location, community, and landscape [26–28]—and a sense of belonging and authenticity.

Sense of place is used to represent the broad and symbolic relationships between people and sites. It is an all-encompassing term that denotes the host of cognitions and affective sentiments regarding a geographic locality and the meaning one attributes to such places [24,29,30]. According to Williams and Vaske [31], when used broadly, place attachment is the environmental psychologist’s equivalent of the geographer’s sense of place.

However, this term appears to be commonly used in a narrower sense in much of the recreation and tourism research; in this context, the emphasis is on the emotional component, which is presumed to be positive [24,32,33]. In this study, following Farnum, Hall, and Kruger [24], I employed “sense of place” as the most general term referring to both affective and cognitive components of place.

According to Farnum, Hall, and Kruger [24], the classification of attributes of sense of place that makes the most sense pragmatically and logistically is that of Williams and Patterson [34], who propose four main dimensions of place attachment: the scenic/aesthetic, the activity/goal-oriented, the cultural/symbolic, and the individual/expressive.

The scenic/aesthetic dimension refers primarily to the sensory appeal of a place—that is, its visual, auditory, and olfactory aspects (e.g., What types of landscape features are on site?). The activity/goal-oriented dimension refers to the types of recreational, educational, and physical tasks being performed at the site (e.g., the functional aspects of a setting). To understand the cultural/symbolic dimension of place and place meaning, it is necessary to understand the multiplicity of values associated with the site. Finally, the individual/expressive dimension encompasses the phenomenological experience of the individual vis-à-vis the land. This category is especially important, as it is here where other components of place are amalgamated, blended into an individual’s cognitive and affective experience, and portrayed as a part of the self [24].

Places are more than geographic settings with definite physical and textual characteristics; they are dynamic, fluid, and changeable contexts of social interaction and memory [26]. Similarly, Kyle et al. [35] asserts that sense of place connotes human attachment to setting, which encompasses the extensive history related to a specific area. Meanings, whether contrived or natural, that individuals ascribe to a specific environment are the product of interactive processes involving the individual, the setting, and the broader social world [36].

Sense of place, then, is a broadly encompassing attitudinal construct that is addressed in different ways by the current literature and consists of multiple concepts whose mutual relationships are not clear. Many scholars of leisure and recreation recognize place attachment as having only two components: place identity and place dependence [24,37–39]. Others identify three dimensions: place attachment, place dependence, and place identity [30]. Some studies show that measures of place identity and place dependence are highly correlated, suggesting a unidimensional construct [24].

Along with the passage of time, the repeated visitation of recreation areas, and increased skill, place identity levels also appear to increase [37]. And finally, a key element of strong place identity levels is repeated visitation [40].

While place dependence and place identity are the most common dimensions of place attachment [22], Kyle, Graefe, and Manning [41] noted the impact of meaningful social relationships and shared experiences in leading to the development and validation of a third dimension: social bonding. Social bonding was positively correlated with learning and teaching initiatives, as well as with the desire for knowledge of natural areas [42]. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that “trail angels,” who offer unsolicited assistance to Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) thru-hikers, do not mention place constructs among their motivations for providing assistance [43].

Place attachment’s ability to predict place-related, pro-environment intentions was found in Halpenny’s study [44], which also identified place attachment’s prediction of pro-environment behavioral intentions related to everyday life. This study found that place identity mediated the effects of place dependence in predicting pro-environment intentions. Another finding was that proximate visitors related to place dependence, family identity, community identity, and place identity more substantially than distant visitors [45].

Place attachment has been extensively researched and defined in a variety of ways. In a 2010 review on the subject by Scannell and Gifford [46], the various definitions of the concept are synthesized into a three-dimensional person-process-place organizing framework. The concept appears to consist of at least two dimensions: place identity and place dependence. Place identity is characterized by a combination of attitudes, values, thoughts, beliefs, meanings, and behavioral tendencies that transcend emotional attachment and “belonging” to places [47]. It often assumes the form of “place belongingness,” which is characterized by strong desire and emotional attachment [47–49]. Place dependence is said to reflect a resource’s importance for providing amenities necessary for desired activities. In this context, a setting’s value to the individual is based on the specificity and functionality of the place and the satisfaction stemming from it and its “goodness” for hiking, fishing, camping, scenic enjoyment, and so forth [24]. Place dependence denotes the extent to which a setting serves goal achievement, given an existing range of activities. This study explores these different constructs and their suitability for understanding hiking on the Israel National Trail.

2.3. Hiking and Sense of Place: The Israeli Case

Hiking as a manifestation of nation-state building, civic culture, and consciousness has been studied by researchers from various backgrounds [50–52]. In the literature, hiking is depicted as a form of bonding between citizens and their motherland and as an element of civic religion [53]. Amato [17] explains that early nineteenth century Romantic voices are indicative of the practice of a kind of “landscape patriotism” enacted through wandering the countryside on foot.

Hiking in Israel has been deeply embedded in the Zionist state building process [54], reflecting the pastime’s role in nurturing a common national identity. In this context, Avishar [55], for example,

notes that the hike should not be considered “a love affair with nature” or a “social activity per se,” but rather a pilgrimage to the motherland. According to Katriel [56], touring the land is an important element of a complex of ritualized cultural practices that were appropriated and cultivated during Israel’s pre-state nation building era and that form the core of Israel’s “civil religion.” This civil religion also consists of a variety of public ceremonies and myth-making practices [56–58].

In Israel, the “hike” has been and remains a popular mode of teaching, learning, and experiencing the “Land of Israel,” with the aim of maintaining and promoting emotional unity and affiliation to the country as “place.” For Israelis, it has been argued that the experience of the hike provides conditions under which the “imagined community” of the nation [59] “may be recovered from the more complex and fragmented experiences of everyday life in a modern plural society” [60] (p. 149).

Israeli hikers can be understood as playing two distinct roles vis-à-vis land in Israel: a ritualistic role of actualization, by which they serve to “mark territory” and declare ownership of the land, and a second role by which they become part of nature and strive to conserve the environment. In this way, hikes can be conceptualized as symbolic acts that are representative of two categories: “nature and society” [61]. The present study focuses on the constructs of sense of place and place attachment of Israeli hikers on the INT.

2.4. Research Design

2.4.1. Research Methods and Data Collection

This study was based on a mixed methodology of diverse complementary methods that together assist in assessing the constructs of sense of place and place attachment among INT hikers. The first method employed two sets of questionnaires consisting of open-ended and closed-ended questions. The first set was conducted in 2013 and the second in 2015. The second method involved ethnographic work in the form of participant observations and semi-structured in-person interviews, which were conducted on the trail itself for 5 years (2015 through 2019, inclusive, for a total of 40 days of hiking). The third method employed an analysis of blogs, on-line newspapers, and Facebook media pertaining to the constructs from the years 2015 through 2019. The fourth method was an analysis of 26 volumes (notebooks) of a collective diary written by hikers and maintained by a trail angel (explained in more detailed below). Below is a short explanation of each method:

- **Questionnaires:** Two sets of online questionnaires were conducted (see Figure 1: Personal and social-demographic characteristics of the hikers). The first included 210 hikers and was conducted in 2013, and the second included 276 hikers and was conducted in 2015. The questions were grouped into three sections: one that elicited information on demography and socio-economic characteristics; another that explored aspects of preparations and planning for the hike; and a third pertaining to the hike itself, hiking specifics, motivations and consequences, levels of satisfaction, sense of achievement, perceived important elements of the hike, and important aspects of the INT. Some of the questions allowed for multiple responses. As the questions were both open-ended and closed-ended, they were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The first sample included 210 questionnaires and was 57.14% male and 42.86% female. Its members fell into two primary age groups: 20–29-year olds (41.43%) and 50–59-year olds (20.95%) (for more information on this sample, see [1,54,62]). The second sample, included 276 questionnaires and was 57% male and 43% female. Its members fell into two primary age groups: 20–49-year olds (76%) and 50 and older (24%). In both cases, most respondents were Jewish and born in Israel, and all were citizens of Israel.
- **Ethnographic fieldwork:** This study is based in part on intensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the author on the trail between 2015 and 2019. Over a five-year period, the author hiked a total of 40 days (eight days per year, between October and May) along 40 different sections of the trail. The fieldwork consisted of participant observations and in-depth informal interviews. Theoretically, the project’s methodology was phenomenological in character, as it examined

the essence of an experience through interviews, stories, meetings, and observations of people undergoing the experience in question. Data collection for this study concentrated primarily on understanding the personal meaning, significance, and experiences as lived by the hikers. The three ethnographic modes of data collection are addressed in brief below:

Characteristic		Questionnaire 1	Questionnaire 2
Year		2013	2015
Total No.		210	276
Gender Structure	Men	57	57
	Women	43	43
Age Structure			
	20-29	44	34
	30-39	12	29
	40-49	11	6
	50-59	21	14
	60-69	11	11
	70-79	1	6
Income Level	Significantly above average	12	Was not asked
	Above average	25	
	Average	12	
	Significantly below average	31	
	Below average	20	
Religiosity	Jewish	1.4 (3 hikers)	100
	Non-Jewish	98.6	0
Residence	City residents	60	54
	Non-city residents	40	46
Approach to Hiking the Trail	In sections	66	57
	In one trip	33	43
Education	High School	10	36
	B.A.	43	37
	M.A.	35	19
	Ph.D.	11	5
	Other	1	3
Motivations for Hiking (more than one answer possible)	Spending time with friends	100	70
	Love of nature	91	97
	Love of the country	76	78
	Physical and athletic	68	60
	Leisure activity	56	70
	Spiritual, religious, and cultural	44	64

Figure 1. Personal and social-demographic characteristics of the hikers.

Participant observation: Data collection involved full researcher involvement in hiking activities. To this end, I spent substantial time talking to the hikers before and after hiking the trail and on the trail itself. In order to document my observations, I wrote field notes, took photographs, and shot short video clips of different places and diverse activities.

Informal interviews: To better understand the hikers' experiences, I conducted face-to-face informal interviews by engaging in conversation with the hikers on the trail at the time. A total of 80 people were interviewed for an average of two interviews per day, and all the interviews were summarized. Conversations lasted between 10 min and 1 h. According to this mode of interviewing, the researcher strikes up conversations that deliberately deal with issues in which the researcher is interested. I was especially interested in hikers' backgrounds and motivations—that is, why they were on the trail, the activities in which they were engaging, and the manner in which the hike was affecting them. Interviewees were also asked about their thoughts and experiences, and especially about their connection to the "Land of Israel" and the INT, their place identity, their place attachment, and their sense of place.

Autoethnography: Researching hiking also requires reflective methods such as analytical autoethnography, which is employed by the present study. Autoethnography is a thick data approach of qualitative inquiry that allows for the emergence of experiential and self-reflective processes engendered by forms of travel. It is rarely employed in the study of tourism, despite its capacity to shed light on psychosocial dimensions of human existence. Rooted in the interpretive paradigm, autoethnographic inquiry—also referred to as auto-anthropology or autobiographical ethnography—has found increasing use in the social scientific research [63]. According to this approach, the researcher should be: (1) a full member of the research setting; (2) visible as such; and (3) committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena [47]. The autoethnographic narrative in this study is based on my own hiking experiences over the past five years. The narrative is transcended through linkages to broader social phenomena, and in this way the legacy of theoretical development that is characteristic of interpretive inquiry is sustained.

- **Media analysis:** Between January and March 2020, a random analysis of blogs, on-line newspapers, and Facebook media pertaining to the constructs from the period 2015–2019 was conducted. A Google internet search for the phrase "Israel hiking trail" retrieved 2,800,000 results in Hebrew and 62,900,000 in English. A random sample was compiled and only direct quotes of hikers pertaining to sense of place and place attachment constructs were recorded and analyzed.
- **Analysis of collective hikers' diary:** Twenty-six volumes (notebooks consisting of approximately 30 pages each) containing short entries written by different hikers between 2004 and 2020 were analyzed by the author. This collective diary, found at one of the stopover sites along the INT, was the brainchild of a local shop owner. The hikers were asked to write one page each, or one page per group of hikers, resulting in thousands of pages of thoughts, feelings, poems, words of encouragement, complaints, expressions of sentiment regarding the trail, and personal thoughts regarding Israeli society and culture. Each diary was read in consecutive order in an effort to identify constructs of sense of place and place attachment.

2.4.2. Data Analysis

After summarizing all the data collected using the different methods, I inductively mapped out a chart of the tentative summary of the narratives I encountered through all the methods. Having spent days completely immersed in the activities of the hikers, and after talking to and watching many of them, reading their diaries and blogs, and listening to their stories, thoughts, and feelings, this framework was not difficult to construct.

To further refine these narratives, I then read and reread the interview transcripts, the answers to the open-ended and closed-ended questions, and the diaries, the blogs, and the field notes. On this basis, I constructed a series of categories that corresponded to the various theoretical categories discussed in

the literature. I then read through the transcripts again and further adjusted these categories to ensure a better fit between the theoretical categories and the data.

The ethnographic methodology provided me with deep insight into and an insider's perspective on the phenomenon under study. The interviews gave me answers to the questions that dealt with perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and thoughts, and enabled me to explore the more phenomenological aspects of hiking—those that can be best understood through experience and actual presence in the social world of the pastime. My adherence to this approach enabled me to identify deep feelings and emotions regarding place attachment and sense of place.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. *The Construct of Sense of Place*

I found the construct of “sense of place” to offer the broadest and most all-encompassing conception of the symbolic relationship between people and sites. After hiking on the trail once a month for a period of five years, I observed that, for Israeli hikers, place and sense of place are deeply rooted in Israeli nation building and the socialization of Israel's citizenry. As noted, touring the country has been found to be one of the most important cultural practices of Israel's “civil religion,” which can also be depicted as nurturing the politics of place.

The findings of this study are now presented according to Williams and Patterson's [34] main dimensions of place attachment:

3.1.1. The Scenic/Aesthetic Dimension

This dimension of “sense of place” refers to the types of landscape features along the trail. It is reflected in the “nature, landscape, and geography” response as a motivation for hiking, which was selected by 13.1% of the respondents, accompanied by reflections such as “how beautiful the land is,” “the trail environment is dirty,” and simply “nature.” “Magnificent landscape” was among the most important INT features specified by hikers (18%), who expressed their feelings about walking the trail in diaries, blogs, and conversations. They tended to reference sentiments transcending scenic-aesthetic appreciation, as reflected in comments such as: “What a beautiful land we have and how lucky I am to live here”; “I enjoyed connecting to the land and to nature”; and “We have such a beautiful country: people should hike in Israel before hiking around the world.”

3.1.2. The Activity/Goal-Oriented Dimension

This dimension of “sense of place” refers to the type of recreational, educational, or physical tasks that are performed at a site [24,34]. Our research examined this dimension by considering respondents' agreement or disagreement with the following statement: “More than anything else, walking the INT was a physical, health-related, and bodily achievement.” Of 196 respondents, 75% described their agreement with the statement as “strong” or “very strong.” Seventy-six percent of 199 respondents expressed “strong” and “very strong” agreement with the statement: “Walking the INT is very challenging and enables me to contend with myself and with difficulties along the way.” Place dependence was also expressed by hikers in the conversations, blogs, and diaries regarding the sense of achievement stemming from physical and athletic activity, personal mental and physical accomplishment, satisfaction, happiness, pleasure, a sense of completion, and enjoyment of the hike. Examples of relevant quotes include: “It is a great adventure that teaches you about yourself and your capabilities,” and “It is a family experience with added value regarding educational, personal, national, and experiential values.”

The self-learning process also revealed other elements of sense of place, such as “devotion to a purpose,” “perseverance and will,” “love of hiking,” and “walking with friends.”

3.1.3. The Cultural/Symbolic Dimension

Hikers' motives for and purposes of hiking the INT reveal elements of place dependence and place identity (characterized by values, attitudes, beliefs, meanings, and thoughts). Thus, in a question designed to ascertain the elements of the INT that respondents perceived as most important, place identity was reflected in responses expressing an affinity and love for the land (17.6%). Elements of place identity were also specified in responses regarding what many of the hikers viewed as achievements of the hike, such as learning the land; getting to know places and landscapes; and thoughts and reflections on "love of the Land of Israel" contemplated by hikers while hiking. These findings are consistent with Israel's use of hiking to promote emotional affinity for and affiliation with the country [55–57]. The strongest indication of place identity was manifested in hikers' agreement (on a Likert scale) with several statements. In response to the statement "hiking the INT enables me to identify with and express my love for the Land of Israel," 75% of 200 respondents expressed "strong" and "very strong" agreement. Likewise, 51% of 200 respondents expressed "strong" and "very strong" agreement with the statement "hiking the INT allows me to express my ownership of and affinity for the Land." Finally, 66% of respondents expressed "strong" agreement with the statement "more than anything else, hiking the INT means experiencing and knowing the entire Land of Israel." Perceived achievements of the hike also included elements of place identity such as "learning the land," "getting to know places and landscapes," and "love for the land of Israel." Place identity is constituted by a combination of attitudes, values, thoughts, beliefs, meanings, and behavioral tendencies that transcend emotional attachment and belonging to places [35,36,47].

The hikers wrote and spoke extensively about the trail being "a reflection of and a lens through which to view Israeli society" and a "human meeting point with the mosaic of Israeli society and culture." These findings support the uniqueness of the Israeli motivations, as 78% of the participants in this study reported that they were motivated to hike the INT by "Zionist ideology and a love of the Land of Israel." Eighty-eight percent of the participants reported that, for them, hiking the INT was an Israeli experience with local Israeli elements derived from the encounters with people along the trail, the landscape, and the geographical history of the Land.

3.1.4. The Individual/Expressive Dimension

This dimension, which stems from the phenomenological experience with the land, was deeply embedded in hikers' responses and attitudes, as reflected in quotes expressing involvement and commitment such as: "You leave the trail a better person," "the best experience of my life," "a life changing experience," "this trip is a must," and "each person should do it in a way that feels right for them."

In diaries, hikers expressed the sentiments that "hiking the INT is an Israeli phenomenon that everyone should do at least once in their life," that "it is something that should be done like visiting the Western Wall in Jerusalem," and that "the country of Israel is so beautiful, and I have experienced an empowering process and journey through it."

In the media, hikers express their deepest feelings regarding the hiking before, during, and after the outing. I noticed that hikers used their cellphones quite often during the hike to express themselves in words and in photos of specific sites, people, and events. In many cases, I saw hikers operating their smartphones as they walked in such a way that the two actions could no longer be separated. In these contexts, hikers were primarily texting, phoning friends or trail angels, navigating, texting, or uploading photos to Facebook or Instagram in a manner that reminds us that smartphones and connectivity are an inseparable part of our lives even when we step into these supposedly distant nature-based experiences.

3.2. The Construct of Place Attachment

The construct of place attachment that was found to be dominant among the Israeli hikers can be understood using the concepts of place dependence and place identity and was found to be a central element and prominent structure of hiking in Israel.

Place identity, which refers to how one views oneself in relation to the environment, was found to be the dominant narrative. In the Israeli context, love of the country and affinity for the Land of Israel was a core notion and a major aspect of self-identity. The intensity of this connection is reflected in the following quote from a conversation during a joint hike: “Israelis love to hike and many show their love with their legs, following the tradition started many years ago, before the establishment of the state of Israel in our generation, and as in the case of our forefather Abraham, who was the first hiker.”

As identified by the different methods employed, this strong sentiment was articulated in different forms: as a motivation to hike, as love of country, as ideological motivation, and as commemoration. In response to questions that explored the most important elements of hiking the INT, “affinity” for and “love” and “ownership” of the land were mentioned often. According to one respondent, “walking the Israel National Trail allows me to express my ownership of and affinity for the Land.” Another said that “walking the INT enables me to identify with the Land of Israel and express my love for it,” and yet another stated that “walking the INT was, more than anything, an experience of getting to know the whole Land of Israel.”

The sentiment that “the Israel National Trail reflects Israel” is expressed frequently along the trail, as reflected in the diaries, in which the emphasis is on the Zionist bond to the Land and its people. This is seen on the personal level, as a motivation; on the collective level, in “communitas”; and most strikingly on the national level, where it stands out as a source of national pride reflecting Israel’s sense of mission.

Place dependence, showing that places can also serve instrumental purposes, was also found to be a dominant narrative. This construct is a dominant signifier of place attachment that was and continues to be reflected in the attraction of hiking the INT in the past and present as reported by hikers (“I’ve dreamed of hike since I was a young child”); in the strong adherence to walking in general (“I hike every day in the field near my house”); and in respondents’ belief that they will “hike the INT again.” In the “Israel Trail Forum,” which is dedicated to hikers’ feelings and thoughts about their hike, one hiker wrote: “The Israel of the Israel National Trail is a separate country. It is a beautiful and quiet country that is connected to its land and to its views. It has lots of solidarity, as its citizens are kind and happy to help.” Another hiker characterized it as an extremely optimistic experience, through which one crosses the country and meets only “good people.”

In the questionnaires and the open interviews, people were asked whether they thought that hiking the INT was an Israeli experience. Eighty-eight percent of the respondents said that it is, as reflected in the words of one hiker, who said that “a crucial part of the journey is to meet Israel and its views, its people, and its settlements.” Others described it as the best way to “get to know” the country—“with the legs”—and said that “there is no better way of getting to know the country’s landscapes and people than to hike it.” Only 12% said that hiking the INT is not a unique Israeli experience. “It is an experience of nature and a human experience,” one hiker explained. It “is not specific to a certain geographic area—to Israel, for example.” Others said that “hiking has to do with nature, not with the country.” However, all of the findings elicited using the different methods suggest that the experience is primarily Israeli.

Media interviews with hikers also indicated the centrality of place attachment. In response to a media interviewer’s observation that “usually when you finish the army you go travel abroad, and you did the opposite—you chose to stay here,” Hila, a hiker, said: “First, it was important for me to see and to get to know my country, my land, before I go seek out new places.” Another hiker said that they were walking in memory of a family’s son who died as a soldier 19 years earlier: “Every morning we start by standing in a circle and recalling soldiers who have died. We have tears in our eyes, but we

put on our packs, start singing, and begin hiking. There isn't a better way to commemorate Israel, as Israel is made of both agony and joy."

A few entrepreneurs have also opened up businesses that promote ideas of place attachment. One is "A Walk about Love," which strives "to bring people from all over the world together to experience a journey of togetherness, love, and tolerance in the land of endless conflicts" (<https://walkaboutlove.org.il/about/>). The journey connects people from all over the world to hiking the INT and deals with all the possible aspects of place attachment. For example, the entrepreneur wrote that "I began to envision backpackers instead of soldiers, musical instruments instead of weapons of war, and an abundance of brotherhood and love instead of hate and destruction, displacing the depths of grief and despair with joy and hope," and that "it gives a chance to travel deeper into a location's history and culture." The hikers responded by describing connections between people and between people and the land: "Without a doubt, I am leaving the trail with a deeper connection to the land of Israel."

4. Conclusions

This article dealt with the constructs of sense of place and place attachment of hiking in Israel, reflecting these constructs in the current age of globalization and digitization. It also advanced the idea that these constructs can only be identified using diverse methods of many different origins, as demonstrated here.

Second, it found that "sense of place" is not a binary phenomenon that either does or does not exist but rather a complex and multifaceted phenomenon with many different aspects, each bearing significance that can be best understood on a scale ranging from "full attachment" to "minimum attachment," or from "major motivation" to "marginal motivation." A typology of different manifestations of sense of place, ranging from total devotion to ignorance, should thus be considered on a conceptual scale, from high to low.

Third, of the literature's four basic interpretations of place—place as a lens through which to interpret experiences of the world, place as a material attribute of the world, place as a manner of attachment or connection to the world and to others, and place as a socio-economic construct [26]—the first and the third were found to be particularly relevant to Israeli notions of place. Place is a focal point of meaning and a core field that forms the basis of human interaction [64,65] and a vessel of experiences [66].

Fourth, this article highlighted the importance of elements of sense of place and place attachment, in addition to the findings of previous research on leisure activities that consider the diverse motives for leisure pursuits (e.g., 7–13). Currently, very few studies mention place attachment or sense of place as the main aim or a main benefit, making this addition an important one. Although Svarstad [14] has identified "belonging" as a motive, he focuses on how hikers establish linkages to the past and to earlier ways of life, whereas this study focused on linkages to current culture, society, and state. In this way, this article makes a contribution to leisure research by adding place constructs to the relevant factors.

Fifth, with regard to Chhetri et al.'s [7] distinction between two dimensions of feelings among hikers—extrinsic feelings versus intrinsic feelings—this study concluded that such a differentiation could not be made in the case of the INT, as feelings that are directly influenced by the external environment are linked to the psychological experience and therefore always operate in tandem.

Sixth, the findings concur with Williams and Vaske [31], who argue that place attachment, applied broadly, is the environmental psychologist's equivalent of the geographer's sense of place. Currently, both terms appear to be commonly used in a narrower manner in much of the recreation and tourism research, with an emphasis on the emotional component [24,32,33]. In this study, following Farnum, Hall and Kruger [24], I employed "sense of place" as the most general term for referring to both affective and cognitive components of place, in its reference to the interpretations and representations of these attributes, as well as to the social dynamics of landscape.

Seventh, as claimed by other researchers [32], I found that, like other “places,” the “trail” is more than just a geographic setting with definite physical and textual characteristics; it is, rather, a fluid, changeable, and dynamic context of social interaction and memory. The INT also connotes human attachment to a setting encompassing “meanings” which the hikers ascribe to it and which are the product of interactive processes involving the individual, the setting, and the broader social world [36] (p. 440).

Eighth, in the case of Israel, the pastime of hiking appears to be closely related to what Yi-Fu Tuan [27] calls “geopiety,” which refers to the emotional connection between human beings and nature, including attachment to a homeland and caring for the Earth and specific places, with an emphasis on attachment to native land, patriotism, and rootedness to places where ancestral blood was shed in historic battles. It is also undoubtedly linked to the “politics of place”—works that highlight the struggle to approve specific meanings for certain groups” [24]. The INT was found to serve as an important element of national socialization, as Israeli traditions of hiking are reflective of high levels of involvement and commitment and a strong sense of place reinforced by socialization and education. The dimensions of sense of place appear to be particularly relevant not only to the INT but to the Israeli mode of hiking in general, and future studies should be undertaken to confirm and possibly reinforce this holistic assumption.

Ninth, this study demonstrates that Israeli hikers differ from hikers elsewhere, as, for the former, walking the INT is a means of expressing identification with the Land of Israel and a connection to the country’s people and landscape. The act of hiking becomes a means of expressing the hikers’ Israeli identity on both a personal and a national level.

The study’s tenth and final conclusion is that the current relationship between the different concepts in the literature appears to be blurred and unclear. A firm dichotomy between technology and communications-based life on one hand, and the quest for outdoor recreation-based place attachment on the other hand no longer exists. This conclusion is also consistent with previous research such as Amerson et al. [22] or Dustin et al. [21], who claim that technology, smartphones, and connectivity are part of our lives even when we are involved in many nature-based experiences [23].

This article argues that sense of place is a broad and encompassing attitudinal construct consisting of three dimensions—place attachment, place dependence, and place identity—as suggested by Jorgensen and Steadman in 2001 [30]. This study adopts this conceptualization as the best and most encompassing description of the constitutive relationship. This understanding differs from the position advanced by most researchers of leisure and recreation, who recognize place attachment as having only two components: place identity and place dependence [24,37–39].

In conclusion, we can say that sense of place theory offers an evidence-based framework through which leisure research as a whole, and the study of hiking in particular, can be explored. These theoretical linkages will become increasingly important as society continues to be preoccupied with notions of meaning and belonging and the quest for social and local bonds, especially in the post-COVID-19 era.

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