

# MANAGEMENT OF SOCIO-CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

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## **Tourism as a Tool of Recovery of Ukrainian Communities: Economic and Mental Healing**

**Abstract:** *Introduction.* The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has resulted in devastating damage to infrastructure, the economy, and human capital. Alongside these visible effects, the war has inflicted profound psychological trauma, including heightened anxiety, chronic stress, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which are expected to have long-term consequences for Ukraine's recovery. In this context, tourism is examined as a tool for dual recovery – economic revitalisation and mental health restoration. *Objective and Methods.* The purpose of the paper is to investigate how the tourism sector can contribute to the recovery of Ukrainian communities during and after the war. The methodological foundation is based on Growth Pole Theory and the Tourism-Led Growth Hypothesis (TLGH). The study employs a mixed-methods approach, including analysis of global post-conflict tourism case studies, comparative tourism investment assessments, and content analysis of Ukrainian policies on community recovery. *Results.* The findings demonstrate that tourism development contributes to economic regeneration through infrastructure enhancement, job creation, and support for local entrepreneurship. Simultaneously, tourism plays a vital role in supporting the psychological well-being of war-affected populations by enhancing resilience and reducing PTSD

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symptoms, anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, and aggressive behaviour. Developed *Complex Model of the Impact of Tourism on Community Recovery after Traumatic Events* illustrates the integration of economic and mental health benefits leveraged by tourism and impacting human capital development. The paper presents a comprehensive conceptual model of tourism's impact on community recovery. *Conclusions.* Tourism can serve as a strategic instrument for Ukraine's integrated recovery. Tourism simultaneously fosters economic development and mental resilience and offers immediate and long-term benefits. The paper recommends targeted initiatives to develop therapeutic, nature-based, and memorial tourism programs as part of Ukraine's reconstruction strategy.

**Keywords:** tourism, mental health, economic recovery, resilience, PTSD, Ukraine, veteran tours.

## Introduction

**The problem formulation.** The military conflict in Ukraine, which began in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of hostilities in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, escalated into a full-scale war affecting the entire territory of the country in February 2022. Over a decade of continuous and intensifying conflict has resulted in catastrophic losses to Ukraine's infrastructure, economy, and human capital. According to an official statement from the Prime Minister of Ukraine, the cultural and tourism sectors alone have suffered an estimated \$19.6 billion in damages and lost revenue (Ukrinform, 2024). These material losses, while staggering, are only part of the broader devastation the war has wrought.

Perhaps more insidious is the long-term psychological trauma experienced by the Ukrainian population. Prolonged exposure to war, displacement, and instability has deeply impacted national mental health. Surveys conducted by Gradus Research in 2022, 2023, and 2024 reveal a disturbing trend: the proportion of Ukrainians experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion has increased from 71% in 2022 to 78% in 2024 (Gradus Research Company, 2024). These invisible injuries are expected to have lasting effects on national productivity, social cohesion, and the overall trajectory of post-war recovery.

In light of this multidimensional crisis, it becomes increasingly urgent to identify strategies that can simultaneously support economic revitalisation and psychosocial recovery. The hospitality and tourism industry – often underestimated in post-war planning – may provide a dual benefit. Prior research has shown that tourism can stimulate local economies, generate employment, and preserve

cultural identity (Backer, 2018; Elbrekht, 2017). Additionally, emerging evidence suggests that travel and recreational activities can contribute to individual and communal healing by enhancing psychological well-being, fostering social connections, and promoting a sense of normalcy and hope in post-conflict societies.

**State study of the problem.** The role of tourism in post-conflict recovery and societal well-being has been extensively examined in both economic and psychosocial domains. From an economic perspective, the Tourism-Led Growth Hypothesis (TLGH) has gained empirical validation across diverse contexts. R. Nunkoo et al. (2020) conducted a meta-regression analysis confirming the positive impact of tourism on long-term economic growth. S. Shahzad et al. (2017) corroborated these findings by demonstrating robust tourism-led development effects in top global destinations. Within the hospitality industry, hotel investment has been shown to be a significant driver of job creation and income generation (Dogru et al., 2020), with earnings growth notably higher in regions where the sector occupies a larger share of economic activity (Dogru et al., 2019).

Beyond macroeconomic gains, tourism also plays a critical role in supporting populations' mental health and resilience. Nature-based tourism and recreational therapy are increasingly recognised as mechanisms for psychological recovery. N. Lackey et al. (2021) highlighted substantial improvements in emotional well-being, cognitive function, and reductions in depression and anxiety symptoms through engagement with outdoor recreation. Complementing this, C. Picton et al. (2020) demonstrated the efficacy of nature-based therapeutic recreation programs in enhancing self-esteem and reducing mental illness symptoms. A. Littman et al. (2021) found that urban and nature hiking interventions both improved psychological outcomes among U.S. military veterans with PTSD, with nature-based programs yielding powerful effects. M. Wheeler et al. (2020) similarly confirmed that structured outdoor recreational activities significantly decreased stress, anxiety, and PTSD symptoms among veterans. C. Moore and K. Van Vliet (2022), along with K. Jensen and S. Rostovsky (2021), provided qualitative evidence supporting equine-assisted therapy and outdoor interventions as powerful tools for healing trauma among sexual assault survivors.

In a broader urban sustainability context, N. Fagerholm et al. (2022) illustrated how green infrastructure and recreational spaces enhanced community resilience in post-pandemic Nordic cities. These insights support the integration of tourism into public health and urban planning frameworks.

Community-based tourism also contributes to both cultural preservation and rural economic development. In Vietnam, P. Linh et al. (2023) showed that tourism revitalised traditional rice paper production, sustaining cultural identity and creating local employment. Marine tourism in South Asia has shown similar synergies between environmental conservation and financial growth (Li et al., 2022). At a policy level, H. Bhammar et al. (2021) proposed a sustainable recovery framework for tourism in protected areas, emphasising local engagement, biodiversity protection, and economic resilience.

Finally, the positive effects of recreational therapy are supported in educational settings as well. E. O Bray et al. (2024) documented that rock climbing programs significantly improved resilience and self-efficacy among college students, highlighting the potential transferability of these interventions to post-war youth populations.

This body of research underscores tourism's dual potential to generate economic recovery and foster mental healing, making it a promising avenue for rebuilding post-war Ukraine.

**Unresolved issues.** Despite increased attention to Ukraine's recovery and mental health crisis, several critical gaps in research and practice remain:

1. *Integrated Recovery Models:* Economic and infrastructural recovery are often treated independently from mental and psychosocial rehabilitation. This separation complicates the search for interventions that simultaneously address both dimensions.

2. *Underexplored Therapeutic Potential of Tourism:* While tourism is widely recognised as a driver of economic growth, its potential to facilitate trauma recovery for individuals and communities remains under-researched, particularly in contexts of prolonged armed conflict.

3. *Lack of Precedents in Large-Scale War Contexts:* The ongoing war in Ukraine is among the most destructive conflicts of the 21st century. Consequently, there is a scarcity of contemporary, relevant scholarship on how tourism can aid in the restoration of regions and populations experiencing such unprecedented levels of devastation and psychological trauma.

## 2. Purpose and methods

**The purpose and research tasks.** The purpose of the paper is to determine how the development of the tourism industry can contribute to the economic, social and mental recovery of Ukrainian communities during and after the full-scale war.

*Research tasks:*

- study the world experience in the use of travel and tourism activities to restore destinations and traumatised individuals and to heal communities, in accordance with the units of the third section of the article;
- analyse modern Ukrainian trends in the use of tourism and travel as an element of economic and mental well-being recovery, by the units of the third section of the article;
- provide recommendations to Ukrainian communities on applying the tourism and hospitality industry for social, economic and mental recovery, by the units of the third section of the article.

**Methodology and methods.** Methodological basis of the study – the research is grounded in Growth Pole Theory and the Tourism-Led Growth Hypothesis (TLGH), providing a dual theoretical framework that examines tourism's potential for economic revitalisation and psychosocial recovery in post-war contexts.

– *Growth Pole Theory (GPT)*, which posits that targeted investment in strategic industries can stimulate regional and national development via localised economic acceleration.

– *Tourism-Led Growth Hypothesis (TLGH)*, which argues that tourism generates long-term economic benefits through multiplier effects, job creation, and sectoral spillovers.

*Methods:* A mixed-methods approach was employed, including:

- qualitative analysis of global post-conflict tourism case studies;
- comparative analysis of regional tourism investment data;
- *expert interviews* on the implementation of mental health tourism programs in Ukraine.

**Information base.** The empirical and theoretical foundation of this research includes reports from:

- international institutions (UNWTO, UNESCO) (UNESCO, 2024);
- national tourism and cultural policy documents;
- academic studies;
- datasets from Gradus Research;
- Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) data on the intensity of hostilities by regions of Ukraine;
- the State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management data;
- the State Agency on Tourism Development of Ukraine data;
- study on the mental health impact of travel and tourism activities on the mental health of Ukrainian military veterans (March–April, 2025)

### **3. Results and discussion**

The hospitality and tourism industry can benefit individuals, companies, and communities. The nation and people of Ukraine may enjoy these benefits immediately and, in the future, once peace is achieved.

#### **3.1. Explore world experience in the use of travel and tourism activities to heal communities**

This study is unique in that it covers not only one component of the recovery of Ukrainian communities through the development of tourism, but considers the impact of the travel and hospitality industry as a multifactorial model that affects both the material areas of development of a particular destination (e.g., economy, infrastructure, transport) and the development of human capital, in terms of supporting the well-being of local communities that have suffered (or are suffering) traumatised during the war.

Therefore, let us consider the significant impact of tourism development on two main areas of the destination's functioning – material (economy, infrastructure, transport, etc.) and human capital development in the context of recovering and maintaining the mental health of the population affected by armed conflicts.

#### ***Positive impact of travel and tourism on mental health***

One such benefit is the ability of certain touristic activities to increase resiliency in people and communities, as stated by Lackey et al. (2021), ...positive association between nature-based recreation and mental health, including improvements in affect, cognition, restoration, and well-being, and decreases in anxiety and depression symptoms.

Therefore, something as simple as creating opportunities for engagement in outdoor recreation can help people become more resilient. The effect seems markedly stable throughout various activities, with evidence that rock-climbing programs for US college students increased resilience scores and self-efficacy (Obray et al., 2024).

Urban Nordic communities with access to green recreational spaces had more resilient outcomes post-pandemic lockdowns (Fagerholm et al., 2022). Finally, people with mental illnesses reported greater self-esteem and enhanced identity after therapeutic outdoor recreation interventions (Picton et al., 2020).

Beyond improving resiliency, *outdoor recreation* can also assist in recovery, like with war veterans who are experiencing PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). Two weeks after group-based outdoor recreation activities, American soldiers diagnosed with PTSD saw reductions in PTSD symptoms, depression, anxiety, and general stress and reported an increase in social functioning (Wheeler et al., 2020).

In another study with United States veterans, one group was given a 12-week urban hiking program and another a 12-week nature-based hiking program. Both groups reported a reduction in their median PTSD symptoms 12 weeks after the program was concluded, but the group that was assigned to the nature-based program enjoyed greater benefits. Recent evidence suggests that outdoor recreation can help recovery from other acute traumas as well, like helping survivors of sexual assault (Littman et al., 2021).

A narrative analysis of Canadian sexual assault survivors showed that outdoor recreation led to themes discussing increases in spiritual connections, emotional regulation, and acceptance, while also decreasing feelings of rumination and dissociation (Moore & Van Vliet, 2022). Equine therapy has also been shown to be successful at reducing trauma-related symptoms of women who are sexual assault survivors (Jensen & Rostovsky, 2021).

### ***Economic benefits of travel and tourism to communities***

Beyond positive mental health outcomes for individuals, the hospitality and tourism industry can benefit communities economically. The Tourism Led Growth Hypothesis (TLGH) was recently supported in a meta-analysis, which reported a ‘large’ effect size for tourism’s impact on general economic growth (Nunkoo et al., 2020). The reported effects stemming from TLGH are that short-term effects are weaker than long-term effects, meaning the economic benefits of the industry compound over time rather than immediately present themselves. The TLGH also seems to explain larger effects when tourism industries are in their nascent stage of development or when the industry plays an outsized role in an economy (Shahzad et al., 2017), suggesting a U-shaped effect of small but quickly growing and large robust tourism sectors deliver the most pronounced economic outcomes.

More specifically, different types of investment and development of the tourism industry led to different economic results, for example, regarding job creation (Dogru et al., 2020), which was found to be highest for upscale hotels, over luxury, mid-scale, and economy properties. Wage growth was highest when the hospitality industry played a larger economic role (Dogru et al., 2019).

Hospitality and tourism can also provide economic incentives to help preserve special elements of culture and nature. In two community-based examples a village in Vietnam was able to create markets for a culturally significant rice paper that otherwise would have not been economic viable without tourism (Linh et al., 2023) this model was also highlighted in the documentary *The Last Tourist* (2021) in an Andean community in Peru to teach and preserve traditional textiles and dying techniques.

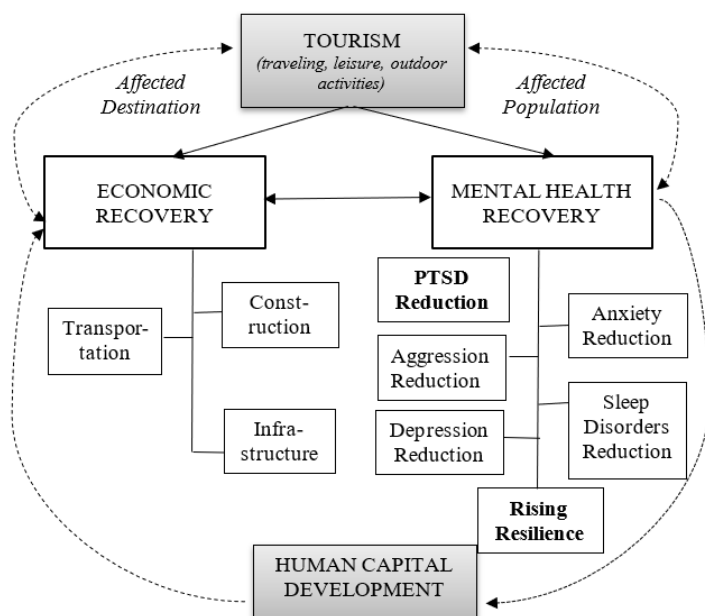


These two examples of community-based hospitality-focused entrepreneurship were used to learn and pass down a culturally rich practice from one generation to the next while improving a community's economic outcomes based on tourist spend.

Also, economic activity and the importance of hospitality businesses have helped protect natural areas. Marine tourism provides economic benefits for South Asian countries and helps to provide resources to protect the marine ecosystem (Li et al., 2022). Furthermore, tourism can help areas recover economically by supporting biodiversity, conservation and socio-economic development, preserving an asset that helps draw more tourist income into the area (Bhammar et al., 2021).

Furthermore, a growing trend in the United States is to convert ruins and abandoned places into parkland, that become not only community cornerstones for recreation but also draw the attention of tourist (New York City's famed Highline Park; Minneapolis' Mill Ruins Park; Houston's Buffalo Bayou Park; Minuteman Missile in South Dakota, etc.).

All these studies and positive examples allow us to build a comprehensive model of the impact of the tourism industry on community recovery after traumatic events (*Figure 1*).



**Figure 1.** Complex Model of the Impact of Tourism  
on Community Recovery after Traumatic Events  
Source: own development



### 3.2. Modern Ukrainian trends in the use of tourism and travel as an element of mental and economic recovery

Given the challenges that Ukraine has experienced in recent decades, the tourism industry has also been forced to develop and adapt to crisis conditions of uncertainty, turbulence and adverse events, such as the Chernobyl disaster, which created a negative tourist image of the Ukrainian destination, banditry and violence of the 90s of the 20th century, revolutions and protests, the annexation of Crimea (2014), the beginning of the military conflict in Donbas (2014), and finally a full-scale war in 2022.

One of the successful examples of the economic recovery of territories through inbound tourism is the emergence and development of the Chernobyl tourism phenomenon.

#### *Case Study of Chornobyl Tourism*

Ukraine already has a successful example of how an area that survived a disaster in the past can first be turned into a geographical ‘pole’ and attraction for foreign tourists, and then leverage the increased tourist demand for the economic development of the destination and restore the mental health of local communities. Chornobyl tourism – travel to the exclusion zone, which was formed after the disaster at the Chornobyl nuclear power plant in 1986, the largest man-made disaster of the 20th century. In the last five years before the COVID-19 pandemic and then the full-scale invasion, in 2015-2019, thanks to the creation of safe conditions for tourists, targeted travel packages and promotion to targeted foreign consumer audiences, the number of tourists from all over the world increased in the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone (ChZ) on 663%, reaching 125,000 tourists in 2019 (*Figure 2*).



**Figure 2.** Dynamics of visiting the Chernobyl Zone (2011-2019)

Source: Calculated by the author using data presented by the State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management (n.d.)

According to a study conducted by Anna Romanova in 2019, after interviewing 1,000 visitors to ChZ, a significant 81% of foreign visitors to Ukraine were first-time travellers, with the majority (55%) citing a visit to ChZ as their primary reason for coming (Romanova, 2020).

Accordingly, the exclusivity and innovation of tours to the zone of conflict and disaster, which mainly attract millennials ("Millennials", 2017), as the primary consumers of the 'experience economy', can become a kind of 'magnet' for the first visit to a country/region, and with the appropriate strategy, they can be turned into potential visitors to other destinations within the country/region and/or consumers of other authentic tourism products other than initial tourism products attracted visitors.

The phenomenon of Chornobyl tourism confirms the theory of GPT, because ChZ has caused not only the economic recovery of the surrounding communities, the growth of employment and the filling of the budget with taxes from tourists, but also the improvement of the mental health of residents. As noted in its article by the owner of the largest tour operator 'Chernobyl Tour', which actually launched tours to ChZ, Yaroslav Yemeliyanenko: Tourism, oddly enough, is a tool for overcoming information and psychological trauma. When people began to travel to the exclusion zone, their attitude to Chernobyl began to change rapidly. In addition, the firefighters of the accident and the residents who conducted these excursions overcame their mental trauma due to communication with tourists. From the psychology of the victim to the psychology of the winner. (Kuznietsova, 2021).

One of the other modern Ukrainian trends in the use of tourist activities for the economic and psychological recovery of communities is the emergence of the so-called '*veteran tours*', namely, trips to other destinations and/or outdoor activities for rehabilitation purposes.

While veteran tours in Ukraine have not yet become a mass phenomenon, since the war is still ongoing at the time of preparing this paper, it is obvious that in the future, the tourism industry should be prepared for the mass holding of this type of activity in order to rebuild communities.

Another activity actively gaining popularity in Ukraine is memorial tourism, which involves trips to places of tragic events. Now, the target audience of this type of tourism is mainly representatives of the Ukrainian authorities and foreign diplomatic missions. The development of this type of tourism can also help Ukraine maintain a loyal attitude on the part of international partners.

### 3.3. Recommendations to Ukrainian communities on the application of the tourism and hospitality industry for social, economic and mental recovery

Developing the hospitality and tourism industry to benefit Ukraine maximally can be an important component of how the country recovers after peace. As mental health services are provided to the population, community centres that use art therapy to develop civilian skills to benefit the economy can also create tourist markets.

In this study, we have attempted to involve successful practices and theoretical basis for tourism development, described in the previous sections, for possible use in Ukraine (*Table 1*).

*Rural and agrarian communities* may also be aided by hospitality and tourism. Given these areas' bucolic nature, they may be well suited for outdoor recreation, making them prime locations to develop and preserve national assets that can enhance the quality of life for Ukrainians and draw international tourists. Nature-based trails for activities like hiking, kayaking, horseback riding, and biking can be created, and the use of augmented reality applications can enhance the experience for people. Augmented reality can link back to mental health services for recovery purposes.

As assets develop in rural areas that bring people to those communities, the hospitality value chain can become vertically integrated in those communities to maximise the benefits. An example of this would include local food production that seeks to produce local produce unique to the area. This model already exists in Ukraine, with the creation of products using the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone or minefields to create a finished agricultural product to sell to tourists (Atomik Vodka, Minefields Honey).

**Table 1.** Possible Implications of Positive Tourism Impacts in Ukraine

Success Example of Positive Tourism Impact	Possible Ukrainian Implications	Ukrainian Target Audience	Ukrainian Destinations
Nature-based recreation improves mental health and reduces anxiety and depression (Lackey et al., 2021)	Create national outdoor recreation programs for military veterans, traumatised civilians and displaced persons	Military veterans, traumatised civilians, displaced persons	Carpathian Mountains, Central Ukraine forests and Lake shores (Shatsky Lakes)

Rock climbing programs improved resilience in US college students (Obrey et al., 2024)	Establish climbing programs near mountainous or hilly terrain	Youth, university, college and high school students	Western Ukraine (e.g., Ivano-Frankivsk, Zakarpattia)
Urban green spaces increased post-pandemic resilience in Nordic cities (Fagerholm et al., 2022)	Revitalise urban parks and green infrastructure to aid community cohesion	Urban populations that suffer from night air attacks	Kyiv, Kharkiv, Dnipro, Zaporizhya
Therapeutic recreation programs improved self-esteem in people with mental illness (Picton et al., 2020)	Launch community-based therapeutic outdoor activities (walking clubs, nature therapy)	People with PTSD or other mental issues	All regions, especially war-affected towns
Outdoor recreation reduced PTSD symptoms in US veterans (Wheeler et al., 2020)	Develop veteran-focused group hiking, kayaking, and outdoor sports programs	Military veterans	Carpathian Mountains, Polissya, Podillya
Nature-based hiking is more effective for trauma recovery than urban hiking	Prioritise natural setting programs for healing and mental recovery	Military veterans, trauma survivors	Rural nature preserves across Ukraine
Outdoor recreation helped Canadian sexual assault survivors with emotional regulation (Moore & Van Vliet, 2022)	Design gender-sensitive outdoor trauma recovery camps	Sexual trauma survivors	Destinations with trauma centres (resorts) or shelters
Equine therapy supported trauma healing for sexual assault survivors (Jensen & Rostosky, 2021)	Create equine therapy centres for veterans and survivors of gender-based violence	Sexual trauma survivors	Rural areas with equestrian infrastructure (e.g., Vinnytsia, Poltava)

*Source: own development*

## **The Impact of Travel and Tourism Activities on the Mental Health of Ukrainian Veterans**

In order to better understand the needs for tourist activity of Ukrainian veterans who had returned from the front and have participated in travel and tour-

ism outdoor activities, the authors conducted a study among veterans with the information support of the Association of the Hospitality Industry of Ukraine and the VIKAR-Travel company.

The survey was conducted among 56 Ukrainian military veterans between April and May 2025. A mixed-method design was used, combining structured questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Participants included combatants from the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) and full-scale invasion periods. The survey captured quantitative self-assessments of psychological indicators (anxiety, aggression, sleep quality) before and after travel and qualitative reflections on the personal meaning of travel experiences.

This study explored how travel and tourism activities affect the mental well-being of Ukrainian military veterans. Combining quantitative survey responses with qualitative interviews, the findings underscore a positive correlation between participation in touristic experiences and improvements in psychological health.

#### *Key Descriptive Insight*

*Demographics:* Most respondents were male (94,6%), aged 36 – 45 (46,4%), and had various combat experiences. Around 20% self-identified as having a disability.

*Trip Destinations:* Popular domestic destinations included the Carpathians and Podillia; international trips ranged from Italy and Spain to Egypt and Germany.

*Duration:* Most trips lasted from 7 to 14 days.

*Activities:* Veterans engaged in hiking, nature walks, excursions, swimming, sound therapy, and spa treatments. The most valued features were unstructured time in nature, autonomy, and physical wellness treatments.

#### *Reduction in Anxiety and Stress*

Veterans reported noticeable reductions in anxiety levels after travelling. Prior to the trip, the average anxiety rating was **2.8 out of 5 (where 5 is the highest scale)**, with numerous respondents indicating moderate to high levels of stress. Post-travel responses showed a significant decline, with most ratings dropping to **1 or 0**, reflecting a state of relaxation and emotional relief. This pattern supports the hypothesis that travel is a temporary buffer against chronic psychological tension.

#### *Improvement in Sleep Quality*

Among those reporting pre-trip sleep disturbances (insomnia, nightmares, or hypersomnia), 85% indicated improvements post-trip. The sleep quality index notably improved from a **baseline average of 3.2 (pre-trip) to 1.1 (post-trip)**. Participants particularly highlighted the calming influence of nature-based settings and spa-like treatments (e.g., saunas, sound therapy) in promoting restorative sleep.

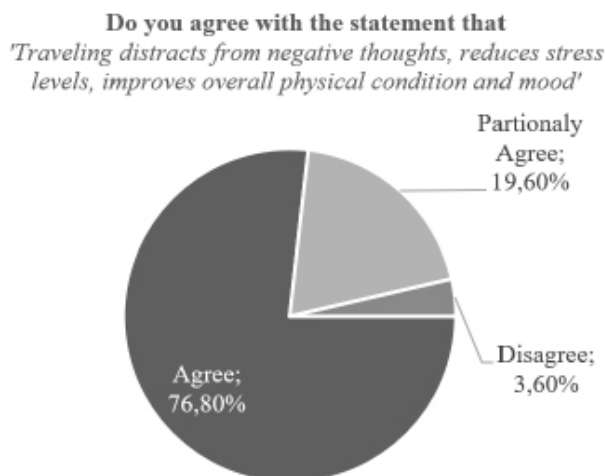
### ***Decreased Aggression***

Levels of aggressive behaviour, a common expression of unresolved trauma, showed substantial improvement. Respondents who initially rated their aggression levels between 3 and 5 (on a 5-point scale) largely reported 0 – 1 post-travel levels.

While the study did not involve a formal PTSD diagnosis, veterans who participated in therapeutic and nature-based travel activities (such as hiking, excursions, and equine-assisted relaxation) reported feeling ‘more in control’ and ‘less reactive’ after returning.

### ***Enhancement of Resilience and Mood***

**76.8% of respondents agreed with the statement that ‘Travelling distracts from negative thoughts, reduces stress levels, improves overall physical condition and mood’ (Figure 3).**



**Figure 3.** The impact of tourism and travel on the mental health of military veterans

Source: own development

Narratives collected through open-ended interview questions revealed a strong emotional response to the autonomy, movement, and sensory stimulation offered by travel. Veterans emphasised feelings of ‘freedom,’ ‘escape from routine,’ and ‘restoration of inner peace.’ Activities like hiking, swimming, sightseeing, and cultural interactions were particularly valued. The desire to continue travelling and explore new locations – within Ukraine (e.g., Carpathians, Podillia) and abroad (e.g., Italy, Germany) – was frequently expressed, signalling emotional engagement and psychological openness.

### ***Preferred Travel Features and Recommendations:***

Most veterans preferred **unstructured, nature-based environments** over formal itineraries. Desired features included opportunities for spontaneous exploration, social interaction, and gentle physical activities. Several participants noted a need for **gender-sensitive programming, mental health-linked recreational options, and opportunities for veterans to connect with each other and local communities**. Commonly cited therapeutic elements included: thermal baths, walking tours, sound healing, and moderate physical exercise.

*Preferred Additions:* Respondents requested more peer interaction, cultural immersion, and personalised therapeutic components (e.g., guided reflection, trauma-informed facilitators).

### ***Qualitative Themes from Veterans' Comments:***

- 'Freedom to move and feel alive again'
- 'I reconnected with my body and my breath'
- 'I want other veterans to feel this relief and lightness'
- 'Sleeping well again was the biggest gift of the trip'

In conclusion, the study confirms that properly designed travel experiences can offer tangible mental health benefits to veterans. The effects include **reduced anxiety and aggression, improved sleep quality, enhanced resilience, and a shift toward more positive psychological states**. These findings support policy recommendations advocating for therapeutic tourism as a component of veterans' rehabilitation programs in post-war Ukraine.

The tourism industry can thus be an integral part of Ukraine now and in the future. The industry offers multiple unique benefits to residents and international guests. The industry has the potential to help with mental health outcomes, physical health outcomes, economic development, preservation of cultural sites, and the conservation of nature.

## **4. Conclusions**

The full-scale war in Ukraine has had far-reaching impacts not only on infrastructure and the economy but also on the psychological well-being of its people. In this context, the tourism industry, often overlooked in conventional recovery strategies, emerges as a unique dual-purpose instrument—capable of simultaneously promoting economic revitalisation and contributing to the mental health recovery of communities. This paper has explored this dual impact through international case studies and empirical data gathered from Ukrainian veterans who participated in therapeutic travel activities.



Tourism development can significantly contribute to rebuilding post-war Ukraine in both material and psychosocial dimensions. Tourism acts as a growth pole on the economic front, stimulating employment, investment, infrastructure, and local entrepreneurship (Dogru et al., 2020; Dogru et al., 2019; Shahzad et al., 2017). In parallel, nature-based and therapeutic tourism activities enhance mental well-being by reducing symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, aggression, and sleep disorders, and by building personal resilience (Lackey et al., 2021; Picton et al., 2020; Wheeler et al., 2020). Ukrainian-specific examples—such as Chernobyl tourism and emerging veteran tours—illustrate how tourism can be strategically harnessed to aid individual healing and community recovery (Romanova, 2020; State Agency of Ukraine on Exclusion Zone Management, n.d.).

The survey of 56 Ukrainian military veterans demonstrated that structured travel experiences improved psychological indicators post-trip, including anxiety reduction, improved sleep quality, and enhanced mood and resilience. These outcomes underscore tourism's capacity to function as a non-clinical, yet effective mental health intervention (Lackey et al., 2021; Picton et al., 2020; Littman et al., 2021).

From the policy perspective, the findings advocate for the formal integration of tourism into Ukraine's national recovery framework. National and regional planning documents should prioritise community-based tourism programs, therapeutic recreation, and memorial and veteran tours. These efforts should be inclusive, trauma-informed, and gender-sensitive to serve diverse populations impacted by the war.

**The scientific novelty.** This study is one of the first to conceptually and empirically link tourism development to economic and mental recovery in the context of the Ukrainian conflict. It advances a comprehensive model – the Complex Model of the Impact of Tourism on Community Recovery after Traumatic Events – that illustrates how tourism can catalyse human capital development through parallel contributions to infrastructure and psychosocial healing.

**The significance of the study.** Theoretically, this research integrates Growth Pole Theory and the Tourism-Led Growth Hypothesis with trauma recovery literature, creating a new interdisciplinary lens for post-war rehabilitation. Practically, it provides evidence-based recommendations for Ukrainian policymakers, local communities, and tourism stakeholders on leveraging tourism as a strategic sector for recovery.

**Prospects for further research.** Future studies should expand the empirical base by involving a broader and more diverse set of participants across different regions of Ukraine, including internally displaced persons, civilians from heav-

ily bombed areas, and female survivors of violence. Longitudinal studies are also needed to measure therapeutic tourism's sustained psychological and economic impacts. Additionally, further investigation is warranted into how digital technologies (e.g., augmented reality in nature trails) can enhance tourism's rehabilitative effects in post-conflict settings.

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