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OzNomads: a case study examining the challenges of COVID-19 for a community of lifestyle travellers

CURRENT ISSUES IN TOURISM

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ABSTRACT

OzNomads are lifestyle travellers who practice extreme mobilities and are independent of specific geographic locations. The COVID-19 pandemic, and subsequent measures imposed by federal and state governments to control it, have had adverse effects on the OzNomad community. In stark contrast to the benefits of the lifestyle prior to the pandemic, this paper outlines five emerging challenges facing OzNomads: displacement, marginalization, social isolation, financial impacts and mental health. Such challenges have serious implications for the wellbeing of a community that contributes substantially to regional and rural Australia as workers, consumers and volunteers.

KEYWORDS

- Lifestyle travellers
- COVID-19 measures
- marginalization
- mobility
- regional Australia
- sedentarization

Highlights

- 1 OzNomads value freedom, adventure and relaxation but COVID-19 has disrupted their lifestyle.
- 2 OzNomads feel unsupported by federal and state governments during COVID-19.
- 3 Specifically, they feel displaced, marginalized, socially isolated, financially and mentally affected.
- 4 Online qualitative survey used as a suitable data collection method during pandemic.
- 5 Specific support mechanisms can reverse the effects of COVID-19 government COVID-19 measures on OzNomads.

Introduction

Within Australia, there exists a community of travellers who have chosen a lifestyle of continuous mobility. These 'lifestyle travellers' (Cohen, 2010, 2011), referred to here as OzNomads, are a subset of the drive-market, who live in a range of recreational vehicles (RV) such as caravans, campervans, motor homes or converted buses (White & White, 2004), supporting their capacity to traverse across Australia. Whilst lifestyle travellers and their life-choices at times conflict with the dominant discourse around working, consuming, accumulating wealth and paying taxes (Cohen, 2011; Kannisto, 2016; White & White, 2004), their contribution to Australia's regional/remote communities as workers (Solnet et al., 2014), consumers (Carson et al., 2019), and volunteers (Hillman, 2013; Weiler & Caldicott, 2020) has been noted. Yet studies have primarily focused on Grey Nomads, who are typically over 55, retired and retain a home base (Hillman, 2013; Prideaux & McClymont, 2006). The OzNomad community is broader, and whilst it incorporates retired lifestyle travellers, it also encompasses an increasing number of younger members, including families (Caldicott et al., 2018), who, by practicing extreme mobilities, aim to be independent of specific geographic locations (Kannisto, 2016, 2018), with no home base to return to.

In this paper, we demonstrate that OzNomads are a distinct community within the tourism system, who are defined not by a geographical location but by their extreme mobility. Therefore, like other travellers, this marginal community – marginal not only in terms of numbers, but also due to engaging in travel which is counter to the norms of sedentary societies (Kannisto, 2016, 2018; Korpela, 2019) – need to be incorporated in discussions on tourism trends and policy (Kannisto, 2016). We take advice from Cohen et al. (2015, p. 167) who suggest that researchers should acknowledge the ...

... changing economic, environmental and techno-social contexts ... and how the fluidity of forms of lifestyle mobility may be disrupted, or become even more entrenched, by economic crises in some Western countries.

As such, the aim of this paper is to examine the effects of Australian federal and state government measures implemented during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic on the OzNomad community. While such measures, including social distancing, restriction of travel for essential purposes only, and directives to stay at home, directly influence the mobility of all (Fong et al., 2020), the discussions here highlight the effects on a community whose mobility is central to their lifestyle and identity. This is particularly important in federal countries, like Australia, in which partially self-governing states and territories have their own constitution, government and laws (Parliament of Australia, n.d.). This causes inconsistencies in formal legislation and informal measures across states and territories, affecting communities, such as OzNomads, who are not resident to a specific state/territory.

The emerging discourse on the effects of the pandemic have primarily included conceptual papers on the positive transformation of tourism post COVID-19 (e.g. Ateljevic, 2020; Brouder, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). However, limited empirical studies have been presented to date. Furthermore, despite the recognition of the economic and operational implications of the pandemic for various tourism sectors, including accommodation, airline, events, restaurants and cruise lines (Gössling et al., 2020), there is a scarcity of empirical studies that examine the implications for travellers, in general.

Therefore, this study responds to calls for rigorous empirical COVID-19 research (Zenker & Kock, 2020) which consider how inequalities and disadvantages to tourism stakeholders may be addressed (Sigala, 2020). It contributes to the literature on lifestyle mobility and lifestyle travellers by identifying the need to recognize the status of this nomadic community who have been re-categorized as 'undesirable' in stark contrast to pre COVID-19. The findings are relevant to Australian federal, state and local government planning and policy.

Literature review

Lifestyle travellers

Lifestyle travellers, such as OzNomads, practice a mobile way of life. Mobility is a kind of displacement and involves the movement between locations. This movement is composed of both space and time, more specifically 'it is the spatialization of time and temporalization of space' (Cresswell, 2006, p. 4). A new mobilities paradigm, which employs the lens of movement to examine social phenomena, was proposed to critique traditional assumptions of fixity and boundaries and employs the lens of

movement to examine social phenomena (Hannam et al., 2006; Salazar, 2017; Sheller, 2014; Sheller & Urry, 2006). Mobility is practiced, experienced, embodied and represented in different ways (Cohen et al., 2015), and while some forms of mobility such as travelling to work or taking holidays are often seen as desirable by sedentary societies, others such as 'wanderers' and 'gypsies' may be considered socially deviant (Cohen, 2010, 2011). As such the new paradigm broadens the concept of mobility to include both large-scale movements across the world and more local processes of movement within everyday life (Hannam, 2009). The paradigm presents a challenge for two traditional approaches in the social sciences; 'sedentary' approaches that assume stability, dwelling, and place as desirable and normal, and 'deterritorialized' approaches that consider fluidity or liquidity as a condition of globalization (Hannam et al., 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006).

Recognizing the intersection between the new mobilities paradigm and lifestyle, Cohen et al. (2015, p. 158) proposed lifestyle mobility as 'ongoing, semi-permanent moves of varying duration'. Corporeal or physical mobility is considered a defining aspect of identity for those undertaking this type of mobile lifestyle. Also relevant is the blurring of work and leisure for them; while work and career may be a focus, the main purpose of movement is lifestyle led rather than economically driven. Further, lifestyle mobilities challenge the divide between 'home' (as a fixed place or space) and 'away' (Cohen et al., 2014), reinforcing Germann Molz's (2008) notion of 'home-on-the-move'. Finally, while lifestyle mobility may be seen as a global and transnational endeavour, it may occur at various other scales (Cohen et al., 2014).

Given the concept of lifestyle mobilities, the term 'lifestyle traveller' is used to refer to individuals who actively pursue travel indefinitely and as a way of life rather than as a temporal break from normality (Cohen, 2010, 2011). Among the many manifestations of lifestyle travellers, several characters have been researched, including backpackers (Allon et al., 2008; Cohen, 2011; Richards, 2015), circus performers (Alzaga, 2007; Kreuzsch, 2018), global nomads (Kannisto, 2016, 2018), digital nomads (Hall et al., 2019; Reichenberger, 2018; Thompson, 2019), and the senior full-time recreational vehicle community (Simpson, 2008). Despite the differences that may exist in the length, pattern and degree of movement between and within the different groups of lifestyle travellers (Drakakis-Smith, 2007), a commitment to travel as opposed to home ties or career is a shared factor among them (Anderson & Erskine, 2014). Furthermore, these lifestyle travellers, regardless of the group within which they belong, enjoy the freedom afforded to them without a fixed abode. Terranova-Webb (2010) summarizes that through the rhythm of mobility circus workers find there is routine but also flexibility and freedom, whilst Reichenberger (2018) found that digital nomads experience a great deal of spatial, professional and personal freedom in their chosen holistic lifestyles.

In spite of the perceived and recognized advantages of living on the road, lifestyle travellers face numerous challenges; their freedom is relative (Kannisto, 2014). Smith and Guarnizo (2009, p. 610) explain that the lack of citizenship can deprive travellers of 'effective sociopolitical inclusion, representation, and participation in the localities where they have moved'. Perceived to be self-sufficient, such travellers often appear at the end of resource queues and considered as an afterthought (Drakakis-Smith, 2007). Seen as unready or unwilling to integrate within the sedentary society which is the norm (Drakakis-Smith, 2007), lifestyle travellers can experience power struggles that have local residents position them as the 'Other' (Kannisto, 2014). In this way they become 'captive' Foucauldian targets dependent on the agents of power (i.e. local residents) (Cheong & Miller, 2000). In addition to these challenges, we demonstrate how OzNomads, the focus of this study, now face a socio-economic health crisis that exacerbates their concerns.

COVID-19 and tourism

Unlike other types of disasters, such as fires and floods that mainly leave material damage, the impacts of pandemics are longer lasting and more wide-ranging, and include job loss, economic crisis, and psychological instability (Bae & Chang, 2021). Declared as a pandemic by the World Health Organization in March 2020, COVID-19 has caused significant political, economic, socio-cultural upheaval around the world, although an estimation of the long-term consequences is yet to be known (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020).

Since the virus outbreak, measures have been introduced globally by governments to combat its spread, including social distancing, community lockdown, border closures and curtailment of travel. While tourism has arguably demonstrated resilience towards previous pandemics, the geographical and social mobility restrictions applied to control COVID-19, are predicted to have unprecedented consequences on an industry so reliant on human mobility (Baum & Hai, 2020; Gössling et al., 2020). Indeed, emerging studies have observed the immediate negative effects of the measures on different sectors of the industry, including hospitality (Dube et al., 2020; Gursoy & Chi, 2020), airlines (Gallego & Font, 2020), events (Seraphin, 2020), accommodation (Jiang & Wen, 2020), cruising (Gössling et al., 2020; Renaud, 2020) and a combination of these (e.g. Sharma & Nicolau, 2020). The impact on work and employment opportunities in tourism has also been noted (Baum & Hai, 2020).

While studies have focused on the travel behaviours of sedentary residents during the pandemic, there is a scarce body of knowledge on COVID-19 impacts on consumers/tourists as a key stakeholder group. Exceptions include research investigating tourists' risk perceptions and behaviours associated with travel during the pandemic (Bae & Chang, 2021; Kock et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020; Neuburger & Egger, 2021). For example, focusing on Korean travellers, Bae and Chang (2021) found that untact

tourism, i.e. service encounters with minimal face-to-face contact, as a new normal tourism behaviour satisfies the desire to travel during the pandemic while minimizing risk perceptions from the disease. In an attempt to understand tourists' psyche in the COVID-19 era, Kock et al. (2020) employed the principles of evolutionary psychology to conclude that ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and crowdedness perceptions amongst travellers relate to their perceived COVID-19 infectability. Additionally, they found that group travel preference, travel insurance, and destination loyalty provide travellers with a feeling of security, thus lowering their travel-related risk perceptions. Consequently, these studies have identified a willingness to continue to travel during the COVID-19 pandemic with the identification of measures which could be applied to minimize perceived risks.

Additionally, studies have focused on tourism behaviour in a post COVID-19 era. Li et al. (2020) examined the planned changes to travel behaviours after the pandemic among Chinese residents. Results revealed a decline in intentions to use public transport as opposed to private car with generally shorter holidays planned, and unlike other studies (e.g. Bae & Chang, 2021), respondents indicated postponing travel intentions until the pandemic was brought under control. Similarly, and with the aim of examining the relationship between perceptions of COVID-19, travel risk perception and travel behaviour, Neuburger and Egger (2021) identified a shift in travel intentions by some travellers. They classified travellers within the DACH region in Europe (Germany, Austria and Switzerland). Their findings highlighted the influence of travel experience on perceived risk with 'the Nervous' group, who were younger and had less travel experience, having the highest travel risk perceptions. At the other end of the spectrum, 'the Relaxed' group had more travel experience and the lowest risk perceptions to COVID-19 – and travel in general – and were less likely to change or avoid travel behaviour. While recognizing the negative impacts, many tourism studies have viewed the pandemic as a transformative opportunity by challenging the industry's growth trajectory (Gössling et al., 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020). However, noting the desire by scholars to research tourism and COVID-19, Zenker and Kock (2020) advise against anecdotal and descriptive data, urging for more deliberateness and rigor in research that yields theoretical advancements and/or novel managerial implications. Indeed, as impacts resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic may not be uniform across different stakeholder groups and actors, Sigala (2020, p. 320) recommends that research not only discloses such differentiated impacts, but also focuses on

... the roots of such disparities with the scope to envision and/or test any suggestions on how to address any inequalities and disadvantages that they may cause to various groups of tourism stakeholders.

Methods

Consistent with the aim of the study, an interpretive approach was employed. The research team consisted of three members. One of the researchers has identified as an OzNomad since 2018, when she left a full-time academic role. She has since maintained her affiliation with a higher education institute but sees herself primarily as an OzNomad. Given her 'insider' status where she had personally experienced some impacts of the government measures and had heard further stories from other OzNomads, she approached the other two researchers to discuss the potential for conducting the research. While these two researchers position themselves as 'outsiders', they do vary in the degree of distance or detachment from the community (Chavez, 2008). Specifically, through her close interactions and frequent discussions with the 'insider', one of the two researchers has been exposed to inside knowledge about the community's stories, experiences and lifestyle, while the other has viewed the phenomenon vicariously. Such different degrees of positionality with various levels of closeness to the community helped in addressing the relevant biases recognized in relation to insider and outsider roles. Relevant biases include the difficulty in recognizing patterns in the data due to the insider's familiarity with the community/phenomenon and the imposition of the outsider's values, belief and perception on the lives of participants (Chavez, 2008; Merriam et al., 2001).

At the commencement of the study, the 'insider' gave a comprehensive anecdotal account of her experience providing an insight into the context of the study. As OzNomads are a geographically dispersed community, it was important to develop a data collection method which would 'create a space' to have the voices of community members heard (Ivanova et al., 2021). Despite the diversity of qualitative methods available, a reliance on the traditional methods of interview and participant observation are evident within tourism studies (Wilson et al., 2020). Yet, with the introduction of physical distancing measures due to COVID-19, and restrictions on travel, many of these approaches were considered impractical and risky (Ivanova et al., 2021), and were therefore inappropriate for this study.

Although surveys are commonly associated with positivist quantitative research (Jansen, 2010), the use of qualitative surveys in tourism studies have emerged as an appropriate data collection method (Wilson et al., 2020). Dissimilar to quantitative surveys which aim to establish parameters such as frequencies or means through the collection of data using preselected responses, open questions used in qualitative surveys offer respondents the opportunity to 'describe the world as they see it' (Fink, 2003, p. 17). The qualitative survey is an appropriate data collection method for under-explored areas where the intricacies of a phenomena is unknown (Braun et al., 2020; Fink, 2003), as it enables researchers to explore individual experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and diversity within populations (Jansen, 2010). In addition, as online qualitative surveys are useful for examining geographically

dispersed populations (Braun et al., 2020), it was considered an effective data collection tool. These considerations received university ethics approval.

The qualitative survey was constructed and distributed via Qualtrics, which allows for extended text responses. The survey comprised of (1) demographic questions, (2) lifestyle questions, (3) government measures questions and (4) social media questions. The second and third sets of questions are reported on in this paper. Addressing the need for more innovative approaches in tourism studies (Wilson et al., 2020), respondents were invited to share a photograph and explain how the image was representative of their lifestyle. Photographs are used to record extraordinary events and are an important tool for analysing the social construction of travel experiences (Cederholm, 2004). Respondents had the opportunity to describe these photos in written format. They also were asked about their motivation to travel. To understand the impact of COVID-19 measures on OZNomads, respondents were then asked to describe their lifestyle before COVID-19 and during the first few months of the pandemic using three words. They were also asked to consider how their lifestyle may change post COVID-19. Finally, respondents were asked how recent COVID-19 government measures had affected them and to suggest how governments could have better supported the OzNomad community. The survey was reviewed for suitability by two members of the OzNomad community.

Purposive sampling was employed, with the 'insider' researcher gaining permission from the administrators of five OzNomad Facebook groups, where she was a member, to post the survey link. The membership of these Facebook groups reflected specific segments of the community: working families, retirees, working on the road, and two general membership groups for full-time travellers. The survey garnered 93 useable responses, which is considered an adequate sample size for qualitative surveys where purposive sampling has been employed (Tran et al., 2016).

Data was separately analysed by the second and third researchers, one using NVivo software and the other coding manually. This ensured data triangulation and enhanced credibility of analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). Furthermore, the 'insider' was not involved in the initial data analysis to remove any potential bias due to selective reporting or inability to identify patterns in the data (Chavez, 2008). The research team then met to generate consensus regarding the coded data and findings. During this meeting, the 'insider' was able to add her experiences and knowledge of the OzNomad community, assisting in the interpretation of the data (Chavez, 2008).

The largest group in the sample was respondents aged 45–59 (44%), with over half of the sample employed or seeking employment. Although the majority were travelling with partners, 12% of respondents were with families and 8% travelled alone. Long-term travel was an important element of the community, with the majority aiming to travel for a year or more, while over half of the respondents had no travel timeframe (Table 1).

Table 1. Respondents' socio-demographic profile.

Variable	%
Gender Female	73.1
Male	26.9
Age 18–24	1.1
30–34	4.3
35–44	9.7
45–59	44.1
60–64	20.4
65–74	20.4
Education Master's degree	4.3
Bachelor's degree (including honours)	20.4
Year 12 or equivalent	21.5
Vocational qualification	33.3
Less than Year 12 or equivalent	20.4

Length of travel (years) <1	26.9
1–3	35.5
4–6	23.7
7–9	7.5
10–14	4.3
15–19	1.1
20+	1
Intended length of travel (years) <1	3.2
1–3	14
4–6	4.3
7–9	6.5
10–14	9.7
15–19	3.2
20+ No timeframe	4.3
	54.8
Travel party Alone	8
Children	1
Friend(s)	2
Spouse/partner	78
Spouse/partner & children	11
Employment status Employed (full-time, part-time, casual)	24.8
Employed (Seasonal/contract)	12.9
Self-employed	3.2
Retired	34.4
Unemployed	10.7
Volunteer	1.1
Not specified	12.9

Findings and discussion

Whilst lifestyle travellers enjoy unique leisure experiences, the findings from this study highlight a shift in their lifestyle as well as the vulnerability of these travellers during unexpected events. Specifically, the study demonstrates how the OzNomad community felt ignored during the COVID-19 pandemic by government decision makers who prioritize residents with sedentary lifestyles, leading to the re-categorization of OzNomads as 'undesirable' by local communities.

Covid-19 shifts the OzNomad lifestyle

Consistent with earlier studies capturing the experiences of lifestyle travellers such as backpackers, circus performers and, more recently, digital nomads (Cohen, 2011; Reichenberger, 2018; Richards, 2015; Terranova-Webb, 2010), the OzNomad lifestyle pre-COVID19 was described as simple and stress-free, with freedom of choice, opportunities for exploration and adventure. There was also a focus on strong social relationships through either travelling companions or those met along the road. Many of these positive sentiments were captured in further open-ended questioning, as well as through the visual representation of photographs. For example, Figure 1 and the respective description depicts and narrates the happiness, unity, freedom and adventure felt by the respondent.

Figure 1. Photograph and description submitted by female 30–34. "This overnight stay on the Nullabor was a night I'll never forget we felt so free and lucky and the view was incredible. We felt like we were on the edge of the world. It was amazing".



However, in stark contrast, respondents explained that their lifestyle faced uncertainty in the midst of the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly due to government measures imposed during this time. They expressed negative feelings of isolation, being restricted and trapped. This was summarized by a female respondent (60–64) when questioned about how her lifestyle would change post COVID-19: *'areas of travel will be restricted and we might have to spend more or less time in some areas. Also uncertainty about how we will be treated in smaller regional areas'*. These sentiments are expanded on in the following section.

The challenges of government measures for OzNomads

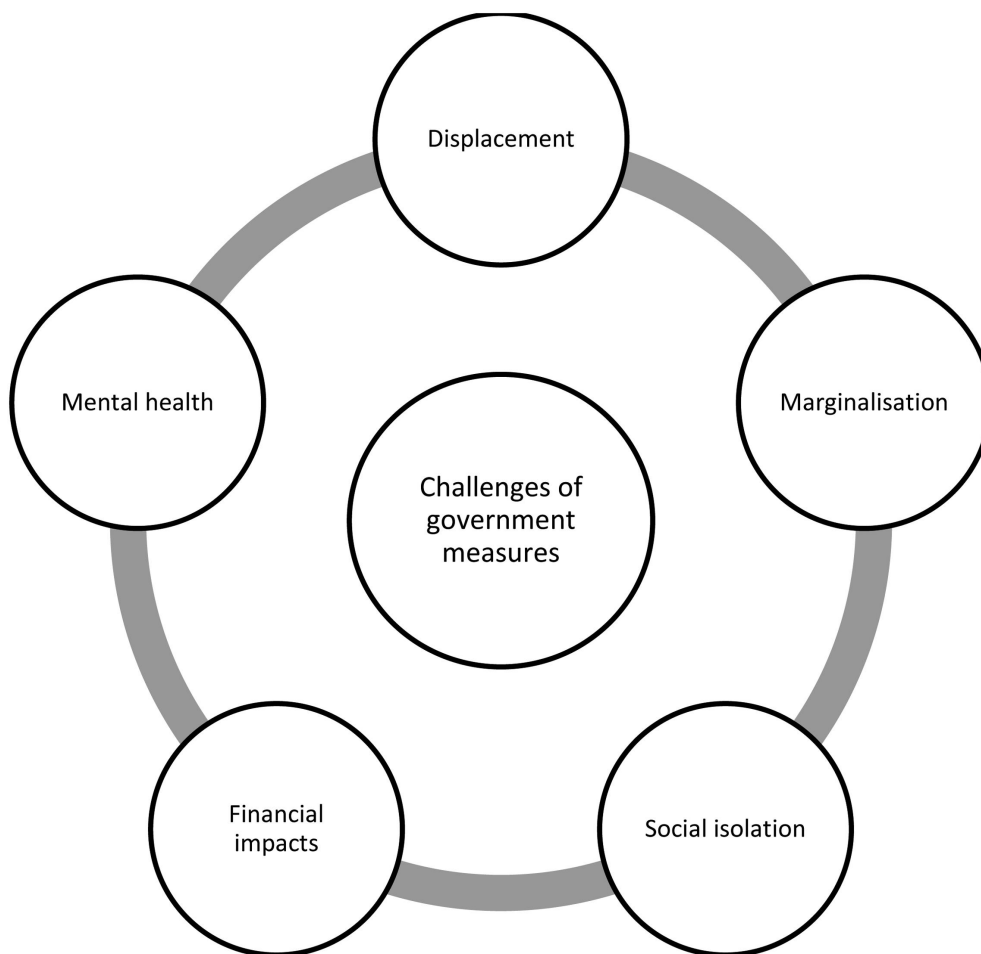
In the wake of the pandemic, the Australian federal and state governments made significant socio-economic decisions that would restrict social life but also support and stimulate the economy. These included changes to travel and employment, as well as other measures directly affecting OzNomads (Table 2).

Table 2. Australian Federal and State Government Measures to control COVID-19 which directly affected OzNomads (March–May, 2020).

Government level (Federal or State)	Measure
Federal	State governments have the choice to close caravan parks and free camping grounds
Federal	Social distancing of 1.5m including between caravan sites
Federal/State	Closure of shower/toilet blocks due to COVID-19 cleaning procedures resulting in only self-contained RVs allowed in commercial campsites
Federal/State	Economic stimulus packages to support health, employment, households and businesses
State	Caravan parks and free camping grounds closed
State	Decision amended to allow caravan parks to provide sites for <i>essential travellers</i> , defined as workers within specified categories, e.g. health, agriculture or those who resided full time within their RVs and have no permanent home to return to
State	State border closures with permits required for entry. Permits issued to strict guidelines connected to essential employment roles and movement of goods.
State	Closure of some remote towns to OzNomads

Respondents were asked about the resultant effects of such measures. The majority of responses to this question were negative, with five clear themes emerging from the data: displacement, marginalization, social isolation, financial impacts, and mental health (Figure 2). Among the few respondents who indicated a positive outcome, the sentiment was mainly centred on slow living: e.g. 'Allowed me time to really stop and enjoy my space' (Male, 45-59).

Figure 2. Challenges of government COVID-19 measures for OzNomad community.



The first theme, **displacement**, highlighted the necessity of government decision makers to consider alternative lifestyles. In March 2020, the Australian Prime Minister posited that state governments had the choice to close caravan parks and free camping grounds, leading to an overnight closure of camping areas across several states and territories (Caravan Industry Association of Australia, 2020) and leaving OzNomads without a place to stay. Although state governments' initial decisions around camping grounds were quickly amended to provide sites for *essential travellers*, allowing OzNomads in possession of fully self-contained RVs and no permanent home to reside at commercial campsites, the directive to close free or low-cost camp areas remained. This directive, enforced by local police and rangers, made for complex planning on the part of OzNomads who had to move from free or low-cost camping grounds at short notice:

We were visited at our campsite at 6pm and told we needed to be gone by midnight although we were camped far away from our neighbours and fully self-contained. I only found 2 parks to take us, 13.5 hrs drive away and 18 hrs away. (Female, 45-59)

Issues surrounding locating a safe place to stay were evident, and with no government support, it was left to commercial organizations and private landowners to provide assistance (The Grey Nomads, 2020). Thus, although intended as a measure to restrict movements and to reinforce the 'stay at home' message, these state government decisions led to the displacement of OzNomads.

Due to the non-attachment of nomadic lifestyle to space, land and place (Drakakis-Smith, 2007), the notion of displacement appears contradictory to such lifestyle. However, many respondents highlighted the complexity of complying with these requests to return home: 'You can't tell people to go home when the home is the one they are driving in' (Female, 30-34). While societies are often built on assumptions that everyone has a home (Germann Molz, 2008; Kannisto, 2016), the related literature attests that lifestyle travellers question the sedentary notions of home by virtue of being location-independent and having their routes as their residence (Anderson & Erskine, 2014). Indeed, Lashley (2015) uses the analogy of a snail that carries its 'home' with it to

further emphasize the blurring of the home/away binary for these travellers. Drakakis-Smith(2007) asserts that while these travellers may have their home with them, they may not legally have a place to put it, and as government decision making assumes a sedentary approach to life, communities such as OzNomads were left displaced at the start of the pandemic.

As the focus of state and local decisions during the pandemic were based on protecting sedentary communities, and due to the lack of understanding of the OzNomad lifestyle, the perception of OzNomads by local councils and local residents were that these travellers were undesirable, '*[we] were seen as spreaders or bad people*' (Female, 30–34). Vehicle registration plates were used as identifiers, with verbal abuse levied at those with interstate plates telling them to '*return home*' (Female, 30–34), leaving them with '*confusion and uncertainty on how towns will react to travellers*' (Female, 45–59). These feelings of **marginalization** were in direct contrast to experiences pre COVID-19, as one respondent noted '*just weeks before ... [we] were welcomed and seen as an economic blessing to the region*' (Female, 35–44).

Previous studies examining mobility have highlighted inequalities between locals and travellers (Bianchi et al., 2020), with lifestyle travellers defined as suspicious based on socio-demographic profiling (Hickman & Ryan, 2020). Whilst such studies have commonly focused on inbound tourists, in this study we found that many local residents in Australia began to practice social exclusion. This finding aligns with Baum and Hai's (2020) study which identified that residents of rural communities in Norway reacted negatively to the arrival of second home owners or campervaners during the pandemic due to fears of overloading of medical and retail services by visitors. However, as OzNomads have no primary home to return to, it is evident that government measures developed for sedentary populations led Australians to become defined not by citizenship but by residency within a state, with those with no residency considered 'outsiders'.

While the first two themes, displacement and marginalization, emerged from interactions between OzNomads and local residents, the next three themes of social isolation, financial impacts and mental health issues were more broadly experienced by many people around the world. Nevertheless, differences in these effects between OzNomads and sedentary populations are apparent.

Narratives highlighted the effects of **social isolation** with travel restrictions preventing a return to family or congregating with fellow like-minded people, directly impacting mental health: '*We ... need sense of community for our mental wellbeing so we want to travel north to tropics to join our friendship groups for winter months*' (Female, 65–74). Further, for some OzNomads who were transiting to a new place, the immediate lock-down resulted in them staying in a place where they had no familiarity with and lacked awareness of its local facilities. Whilst this is a common experience for a nomadic lifestyle, the feelings of social isolation were exacerbated by the actions of some local residents, which left OzNomads hesitant to engage with the local community. Furthermore, the impact of social isolation on children was noted, with comments highlighting that they missed seeing other children who are home-schooled and visiting places, such as museums, to supplement learning.

In contrast to OzNomads, the Australian sedentary population benefited from government schemes such as The Community Activation and Social Isolation initiative to reduce their sense of loneliness or social disconnection. In this scheme, Australian Red Cross volunteers provide emotional support and connect local communities through activities such as online book clubs, video chats or fitness groups (Donnellan, 2020). Such schemes highlight the divergence of initiatives available for communities within Australia, and further reinforce the position of OzNomads' Otherness when it comes to policies and resource allocations (Drakakis-Smith, 2007; Kannisto, 2014).

A number of **financial impacts** were also described by the study participants. OzNomads who had planned to live in free or low-cost camp accommodations were required to pay high site fees in commercial campsites:

No consideration was given to the plight or welfare of those that live on the road full time with limited financial resources. The closure of free camping resources was unjust and unnecessary and has led to financial hardship. (Male, 45–59)

The narratives highlighted the impact of these increased costs intensified as OzNomads were affected by loss of jobs, with confusion over travel restrictions limiting their capacity to source new positions. Whilst fiscal government measures during the pandemic were available for OzNomads, self-funded retirees highlighted there was no 'safety net' available with savings and investments impacted. For many respondents, the complexity of having 'no-fixed address' when dealing with agencies such as Centrelink (social security) was also highlighted. As relevant social security systems are unable to differentiate between the OzNomad community and homeless people, they were required to use addresses of family, friends or caravan parks when submitting claims for receiving benefits. This lack of recognition of the status of OzNomads further accentuates the marginal identity of these long-term travellers (Kannisto, 2018).

Based on the above discussed impacts, it is not surprising that **mental health** issues, related to both adults and children, were apparent in many of the narratives. Stories highlighted increasing stress and anxiety connected to becoming displaced and marginalized. Ongoing uncertainty coupled with confusion over government rules and financial impacts further heightened

mental health concerns. Evidence of the impact on individual self-esteem was also found: '... until this point in our nomadic lifestyle we had prided ourselves on our work ethic and being self-sufficient in monetary terms' (Female, 45-59). Emerging studies have found the pandemic to indirectly cause adverse mental health effects including negativity, stress, anxiety, and depression (Banerjee & Rai, 2020; Rajkumar, 2020; Serafini et al., 2020). These have been linked to sleep deprivation, poorer cognitive performance, increased alcohol consumption, and lack of routine suffered during the pandemic (e.g. Banerjee & Rai, 2020; Chodkiewicz et al., 2020; Douglas et al., 2020; Leone et al., 2020). Given the different effects of the government restrictions on OzNomads compared to the sedentary population, further research is required to examine the impacts of COVID-19 and crises, in general, on these travellers' mental health.

To summarize, government measures undertaken at the outset of COVID-19 in Australia have caused uncertainty amongst a population whose geographically independent lifestyle is contrary to the sedentary society (Kannisto, 2016, 2018; Korpela, 2019; MacKay et al., 2009). Although a small number of respondents indicated that they were in favour of such measures as they would lead to a curtailment in the spread of the virus, generally respondents were critical. The following quote best encapsulates the five emergent themes in this study (Figure 2):

Our job was taken away. Savings getting eaten into with no hope for future employment as we are stuck in a intrastate borders section of WA. We were on our way to next contract but stranded before we arrived at destination. Social distancing means no interaction with other people, miss this. Plus being shunned as outsiders in a different state to our licence plates. More alcohol consumption, bad habits forming due to no set routines. Life feels like ground hog day... (Female, 45-59)

Concluding comments and recommendations

Within Australia, COVID-19 has introduced the vulnerability of a nomadic community with no permanent home. Although measures to control the pandemic has affected communities globally, the parochial nature of Australian state governments, local councils and sedentary residents has resulted in inequalities between citizens. The study aimed to uncover the effects of government measures during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic on the OzNomad community. The findings provide theoretical and practical contributions.

By identifying a new community of travellers who are a subset of the drive-market community, the study contributes to the literature on lifestyle travellers. Extending earlier studies that have focused on the use of RVs to support mobility, the findings highlight the broad membership of the OzNomad community, with members including previously identified Grey Nomads (Simpson, 2008), as well as families and couples. This study has identified how, similar to other lifestyle travellers, OzNomads valued the simplicity of their lifestyle pre-COVID19, with reduced stress and increased freedom and adventure. However, it has also recognized how the measures imposed by governments during the pandemic have caused displacement, marginalization, social isolation, financial impacts and mental health concerns for the community.

The study extends research which has examined mobility between traveller groups, specifically in relation to travellers considered 'desirable' or 'undesirable' (Bianchi et al., 2020) based on socio-demographics (Hickman & Ryan, 2020). Interestingly, it has shown how during the pandemic, OzNomads have been re-categorized as 'undesirable' in stark contrast to pre COVID-19 when they were seen as 'desirable', with a growing number of regional towns focusing resources to become 'RV friendly'. To this end, there is a need to differentiate between OzNomads and tourists by considering these full-time lifestyle travellers 'as a [recognized] group in society' (female, 35-44), contributing to local communities.

We found no evidence that OzNomads are unwilling or unready to integrate in community life, as was found by Drakakis-Smith (2007). On the contrary, they normally become temporary members of local communities in which they stay. But, like tourists, it is this temporality that positions them as the 'Other' by their sedentary neighbours, and worthy of dispossession in times of crises. This in itself is a paradox for a nomadic population without a fixed home to feel displaced, and we recommend that future research investigate this idea further.

In times of pandemic, anxiety and fear related to infection can lead to acts of discrimination and xenophobia (Devakumar et al., 2020; Usher et al., 2020). To avoid 'xenophobic tendencies among residents' (Zenker & Kock, 2020, np), and allow local communities to reap the benefits presented by OzNomads, government measures should be more inclusive of the OzNomad community. In attempting to include OzNomads in relevant discussions on tourism trends and policy, the emerging recommendations in this study are derived from the community's views. The study highlighted the lack of consistency in rules between states affecting the OzNomad community's capacity to seek accommodation and/or work. Legislation, administration and subsequently decisions developed to manage a pandemic, are reflective of a sedentary lifestyle, where fixity is privileged over mobility, and roots over routes (D'Andrea, 2006). As such, a department/agency should be responsible for working in partnership with this location-independent community to develop and implement strategies, services and policies that support their nomadic lifestyle. For example, we foresee a change to driving permits and car registration whereby instead of being state-

issued, they could be issued federally with tax proceeds being distributed equally to states and territories. This would reduce discrimination based on state registration plates during pandemics and the need for border-crossing permits, similar to those issued for 'essential workers'. Such an approach would assist in identifying the number of OzNomads, while supporting state and local governments who need to provide sufficient numbers of safe, cost effective accommodation for this community in times of crises. Furthermore, this data could be used to provide adequate mental health support during and after crises, including outreach programs (Priebe et al., 2012).

To further extend the findings, and the identification of suitable policies and measures to support OzNomads during times of crisis, future research can examine the perspectives of other stakeholders. These may include National and State Governments, Local councils, National Park managers and rangers, regional employers in agriculture, tourism and hospitality, and residents of regional/remote communities. It would also be beneficial for future studies to consider the economic, social, and environmental impacts of OzNomads on regional communities pre, during and post COVID19.

While we have presented a context-specific case of lifestyle travel in Australia, the findings are equally relevant and have implications for nomads in other countries, such as the US, where national and state government policies differ in a pandemic. In addition, for lifestyle travellers overseas there is a need to consider the impact of measures such as closure of international borders and reduction of international flights. We recommend that future research unpack the themes from this study, and trace their evolution, especially in a pandemic, such as COVID-19, which has no end date.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethics approval

This study has been approved by the University of Technology Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (UTS HREC), ETH20-4986.

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