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20 Years of Nordic tourism experience research: a review and future research agenda

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ABSTRACT

During the past decades, tourism experience research has become a topical theme among Nordic researchers and in international tourism literature. This review provides an overview of the main themes of Nordic experience research, addresses the antecedents of tourism experiences, namely tourists' emotional and interest regimes, and tourism experience outcomes, namely the value of tourism. Furthermore, the focus is placed on nature-based and gastronomy tourism, which seem to form the main fields of Nordic tourism experience research. Finally, thematic avenues are identified to keep Nordic experience researchers on the frontlines of future experience research challenged by global disruptors such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic.

KEYWORDS

Tourism experience; tourist experience; experiential consumption; emotions; value

The current state of tourism experience research in a Nordic context

Six of the ten most cited articles of the *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism* address tourism experiences¹, highlighting the significance of tourism experience research as a topical theme among Nordic researchers and in academic tourism literature (Most cited articles, 2020). Several review articles have categorised research on tourism experiences (e.g. Adhikari & Bhattacharya, 2016; Campos et al., 2018; Godovykh & Tasci, 2020; Ryan, 2010). These studies most often combine cognitive and affective elements and discuss them through the antecedents linked to the pre-experience phase, the co-creation of the actual experience, and the outcomes related to the post-experience phase. Our article aims to shed light on the development and current state of Nordic tourism experience research and proposes an agenda for future research.

To outline the Nordic tourism experiences research, we examine research articles published in the *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*; 61 research articles were identified with the word “experience” or “experiential” in their titles or keywords (excluding editorials, book reviews, and research articles on employee experiences). Tourism experiences studies have been published every single year throughout the history of the journal, and the trend seems to be increasing since 2014 (Figure 1). The two peaks come from the 2007 special issue on “Tourist experiences” and the 2015 supplemental issue on “Innovation and value creation in experience-based tourism”.

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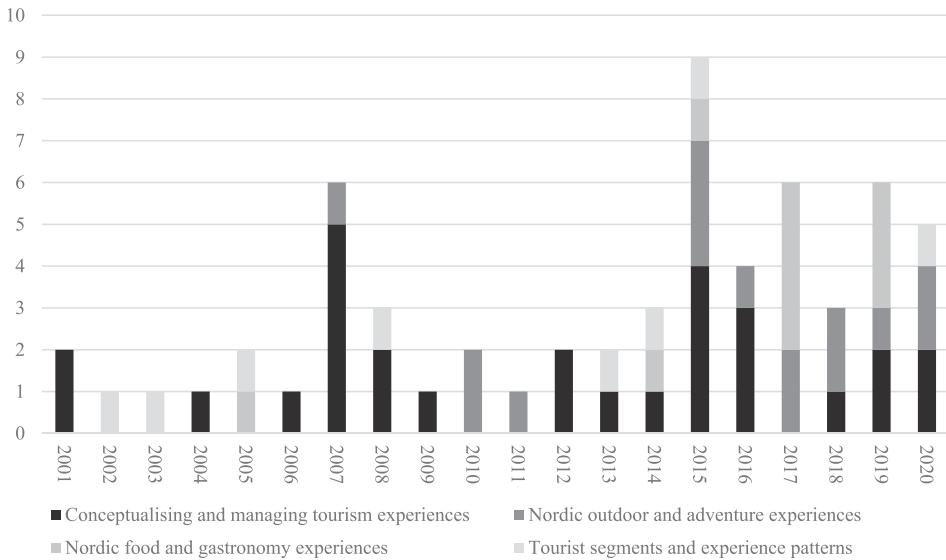


Figure 1. Research articles on tourism experiences published in the *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*.

Based on content, these studies were classified into four categories. The largest category, *Conceptualising and managing tourism experiences*, consisted of 28 papers discussing tourism experiences from different discipline perspectives (e.g. marketing, consumer research, psychology, anthropology, and geography), in relation to other concepts (e.g. memorability, sustainability, innovation, co-creation, co-production, storytelling, and branding) or focusing on methodological issues. The second category, *Nordic outdoor and adventure experiences*, included 15 studies on tourism experiences in Nordic destinations (e.g. Arctic, Scandinavian mountains, and Lapland), typical Nordic outdoor activities (e.g. hiking, skiing, and mountain biking), or other Nordic specialties (e.g. second homes and Icelandic horses). The third category, *Nordic food and gastronomy experiences*, included 10 studies on food tourism as memorable or extraordinary experiences, in combination with other constructs (e.g. innovation, destination image, loyalty, or satisfaction), or focusing on their measurement. Finally, eight studies discussed *tourist segments and experience patterns*, such as family tourism experiences, ancestral tourists, and expatriates.

Nordic and international research in tourism experience research

Nordic basics of tourism experience research

The Nordic countries have developed theories and research on experience and the experience economy, both generally and within tourism research; thus, they are on the frontlines of the research stream (e.g. Eide et al., 2017; Hansen & Mossberg, 2013; Jensen et al., 2015; Jernsand et al., 2015; Mossberg, 2007; O'dell, 2007; Prebensen et al., 2013a; Sundbo & Dixit, 2020). Their research has taken its departure from another strong Nordic discipline, service theory and service research, which emphasises experience as a factor that creates value for customers (Edvardsson et al., 2011; Payne et al., 2008;

Skålen et al., 2015). Translated into more emotional situations within tourism experiences is the value creation factor for tourists, thereby satisfying them and encouraging them to spend time and money on tourism as a consequence (Andersson, 2007; Ek et al., 2008; Jensen & Skallerud, 2015; Prebensen et al., 2013a; 2013b; 2017; Sørensen & Jensen, 2015).

Tourist experiences are analyzed as a psychological phenomenon where expectations, individual sensing and perception and memorizing are crucial for the experience (Larsen, 2007). Arousal has been a factor in explaining this phenomenon (Andersson, 2007; Jantzen, 2013).

Experience-based consumption requires interaction between actors and events in real-time. Consequently, tourism is about individual motivation, involvement, contribution, creation, and general interest regimes (Prebensen et al., 2013b; Sundbo & Sundbo, 2018). Key to understanding tourism is to comprehend why (motivation) and how (action) the consumer wants to be present and participate in co-creating their own experiences (Björk, 2014; Hansen & Mossberg, 2013; Prebensen & Foss, 2011). The tourist's presence is vital for their experiences, as experiences are subjective and determined by the tourist. This is a premise not only for the tourists to fulfil the various needs comprising their travel but also for the industry to exist. The host holds a set of knowledge, skills, and tools that they employ to facilitate the tourist to participate in creating value. The relation between host and tourist is important (Selstad, 2007).

Tourists' emotional and interest regimes

To understand tourism and value creation in the experience or transformation economy, it is crucial to understand what creates meaning for individuals. One solution is to analyze tourism motivation within special interest or theme tourism, referring to tourists who seek specific activities and experiences while travelling. These activities are viewed as expressions of general interests that have a deeper meaning in tourists' lives. This approach has been developed in the Nordic countries, with a focus on emotional experiences. Jantzen et al.'s (2012) general theory, "emotional regime", emphasises hedonic aspects that characterise "the good life" and the pursuit of self-realisation for experiential consumption. Emotional regimes are dominating in experience consumption at the beginning of the twenty-first century, including in tourism. Other researchers explain theme tourism as activities in which tourists get immersed (Blumenthal, 2020; Blumenthal & Jensen, 2019; Hansen & Mossberg, 2013, 2017; Løvoll, 2019) and sometimes even have a flow experience. Sundbo and Sundbo (2018) introduced a theory of interest regimes, explaining experience consumption as an expression of a general interest sphere (e.g. football, gastronomy, opera, or bicycling). By applying it to gastronomic tourism, they suggest that interest regimes are elements of identity and social status in postmodern individual society. Vittersø et al. (2017) focused on eudaimonic emotions, hedonic, and functional emotions, disclosing the importance of learning and experiencing new and exciting places (novelty) and the subsequent intention to revisit a destination.

The value of tourism experiences

Experiences generate value for tourists, tourist firms, and institutions through interactions, i.e. value co-creation. Value creation is a customer's creation of value-in-use; value co-creation is a function of interaction (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). The degree to which interactions

with spheres, e.g. experiencescapes (Bærenholdt et al., 2004; Mossberg, 2007; Prebensen & Foss, 2011), which have been particularly emphasized in the Nordic countries, take place may also lead to different forms of value creation and co-creation. As tourism is an agglomeration of business sectors, smooth actor interactions in different network constellations are crucial in staging, branding, and marketing experiences.

Value is relativistic and comparative. Tourists choose and value experiences differently depending on their personal needs, expectations, and resources as well as on the situation and context (Holbrook, 2006; Sheth et al., 1991). Several scholars have adopted the concept of perceived experience value as continuously changing personal, unique, and individual needs (Addis & Holbrook, 2001). According to Leiper (1995), travel to different destinations provides consumers with different types of emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and physical value.

In the experience process, tourists and hosts more or less willingly and actively engage to create value for themselves and/or their travelling partners. Informed, involved, motivated, and active tourists affect the value of a vacation experience (Gram, 2005; Prebensen et al., 2017). Thus, experience value becomes an integrated process between hosts and guests within the tourism system of different actors. This co-creation behaviour is delineated as “the joint, collaborative, concurrent, peer-like process of producing value, both materially and symbolically” (Gummesson et al., 2014, p. 644), including both physical and psychological magnitudes (e.g. Prebensen et al., 2017).

Co-production focuses on how firms benefit from consumers passively buying/using products and services, while co-creation is about creating value in interactive consumer-firm relationships (e.g. Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Prebensen et al., 2017; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Within the Nordic context, Prebensen and Foss (2011) argued that consumers’ value creation depends on the situation and present actors, yet an individual’s imagination can be a resource in the process.

For tourists to become satisfied, research shows that they should participate in value creation, for example through physical and psychological dimensions and mastering (Bertella, 2014; Minkiewicz et al., 2014; Prebensen & Xie, 2017). Staging and storytelling are important tools for stimulating certain emotional states, images, and interests among tourists (Mossberg, 2007). Grönroos (2006) argued that it is not customers/tourists who get to engage in the service provider’s process; rather, the service provider can create opportunities to engage itself with the tourists’ value-generating process. Thus, experiencescapes should include elements that involve the tourist emotionally, physically, spiritually, and intellectually (Mossberg, 2007). Konu (2015) also highlighted the importance of customer involvement in value co-creation and proposed various methods to facilitate experience design with customers. Räikkönen and Grénman (2020), in turn, discuss the potential of emotion tracking in measuring emotional consumer experiences in real-time and real-life situations. Cai et al. (2020) and Wu and Chang (2020) studied value creation through Arctic experiences for Chinese tourists in Scandinavia, and Mehtiyeva and Prince (2020) researched how tourists with Nordic roots get value through ancestral experiences in Sweden.

The main fields of Nordic tourism experience research – nature and gastronomy

Two particular experience themes have been studied recently in the Nordic context: nature and outdoor activities and gastronomy tourism. Profoundly documented in

international research, experiencing nature has long been a motive for tourists. Admiring the Northern Lights in the Nordic countries has become one of the world's greatest tourism experiences. Simultaneously, tourists have become more interested in physical activities, creating a boom in sports and outdoor activity tourism. This trend is partly caused by tourists' increasing focus on health and well-being but is also related to hedonic and eudaimonic enjoyment. Ski tourism, which has become one of the largest tourism sectors (Jacobsen et al., 2009), is a good example of combining physical health and well-being with hedonic pleasures, including feasts, alcohol, and social interaction.

Nordic research, in particular, has investigated how tourists increasingly relate nature and sports tourism to deeper psychological and existential considerations; they seek self-insight (Walle, 1997), inner journeys (Rantala et al., 2016), and meaningful experiences (Large & Schilar, 2018). These themes have been related to the growing adventure tourism market, consisting of activities like mountain climbing, whale watching, paragliding, and glacier expeditions (Gyimothy & Mykletun, 2004; Mykletun, 2018). Individuals seek adventure tourism to challenge nature's conditions for life and their own physiological and mental abilities – yet in controlled forms. The flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002) is included in adventure tourism as individuals often must exercise and procure knowledge about the activity (e.g. mountain climbing) while becoming immersed in the topic (Vespestad et al., 2019), which may lead to the flow experience. Furthermore, extreme sport and adventure tourism are often a bit dangerous, so tourism firms have to focus on risk management.

Twenty years of Nordic tourism research on culinary or gastronomic experiences, including various eating and drinking activities, demonstrate how food has become valuable for many tourists, a core motive for a small niche, and a resource for development and marketing for firms, regions, and destinations (Andersson et al., 2017). Tourists consume food for cultural, social, and sensory experiences, excitement, health issues (Frisvoll et al., 2016), and more (Sthapit et al., 2019; Tikkanen, 2007). Food and drink experiences are generally positive for tourists, influencing overall holiday experiences, travel satisfaction (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2017), and even destination choices (Henderson, 2009).

Many theories such as consumer behaviour, psychology, social psychology, and consumer culture theories have been used in exploring and positioning food experiences in the context of tourism (Goolaup & Mossberg, 2017; Lindberg, 2015). Tourists are becoming more interested in experiencing pure, fresh, ethical food, i.e. Nordic food (www.newnordicfood.org). Nordic food is as simple as the Scandinavian word *husmanskost* denotes, but it can also signify gastronomic excellence. Drinking experiences have also been included in Nordic tourist agendas, for example microbreweries, wine, and fruit wine (e.g. Sundbo & Sundbo, 2018). The New Nordic Food concept (founded on the Nordic Kitchen Manifesto, see Sundbo et al., 2013) can potentially leave tourists with memories to be shared with others (New Nordic Cuisine). Food experiences on holiday for identity construction was noticed by Andersson et al. (2017, p. 3) as an "important future research avenue"; through the lens of identity construction, opportunities are still open for research on how food consumption and other food-related experiences affect tourist behaviour. Moreover, identifying the potential of analysing food experiences as a "travelling phenomenon" in terms of souvenirs purchased, ingredients (Sthapit & Björk, 2019a), kitchen equipment, tableware, and cooking practices may enable a

deeper insight into how touristic food experiences interact with and influence our mundane everyday cooking, experiences, and savouring (Sthapit, 2019) for well-being, quality of life (Uysal et al., 2018), life satisfaction (Björk, 2014), and local community development (Boesen et al., 2017).

The future of Nordic tourism experience research

The COVID-19 pandemic more or less stopped tourism in March 2020, and recent studies suggest that the crisis will be long and lead to profound changes in global tourism (Gössling et al., 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). Understanding and preparing for the “new normal” has become critical. The disruption (cf. Christensen, 1997) may make previous knowledge somewhat irrelevant, or alternatively, global tourism may eventually return to how it was before. As the future is uncertain, tourism researchers are challenged to actively contribute to understanding the consequences of the pandemic. In line with research on the behavioural consequences of crisis and terrorism (Larsen, 2011; Wolff & Larsen, 2017), important aspects of travel-related risk perception and worry must be further addressed in relation to tourism experiences. It will be important to *follow the development of individuals’ motives for becoming tourists, how they address their interests, and whether the tendency towards more meaningful tourist experiences based on their life perspective will be reinforced*. Concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential to *examine how and to what extent the crisis changes peoples’ fundamental values, motives, and tourist behaviours, how it boosts the short-distance/domestic market and virtual tourism experiences, and whether it may eventually benefit climate change adaptation and mitigation or provide solutions for overtourism*.

Although previous literature highlights the vital role of consumer participation, engagement, and enactment in value creation processes (e.g. Prebensen & Xie, 2017; Vargo & Lusch, 2008), *more knowledge regarding how and where value is created, not created, or even destroyed in consumption processes is required* (Rihova et al., 2015; Sthapit & Björk, 2020; 2019b).

The demand for nature-based and outdoor tourism is expected to increase and will likely connect more strongly to health and well-being tourism, particularly if the ecological crisis increases near-proximity tourism considerably (cf. Rantala et al., 2020). Research questions regarding these themes could *address whether new, innovative forms of outdoor tourism experiences will be developed and whether tourists will be interested in more distant rural areas*. Nature tourism can, indeed, be a factor in developing peripheral communities (Sundbo & Sundbo, 2019), and there are indications of a growing demand for second homes, camping, and staycationing, referring to tourist experiences in one’s everyday environments (James et al., 2017).

Food and gastronomy tourism may also benefit peripheral communities. Important future research questions include *whether the interest in local food* (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2014) *will continue to grow and whether “grand” food experience concepts, such as the New Nordic Cuisine, will succeed in a post-COVID-19 era*. Many competencies and skills are at risk of disappearing if the pandemic causes restaurants to go bankrupt or cut resources for innovations and creative food development. Notably, research on how to enhance tourism and hospitality workforce resilience and how to arrange efficient training (online, on- and off-site) is also expected to increase.

In any case, future research should address both sustainable and digital tourism experiences. Sustainability has been highly prioritised in Nordic tourism research for decades, most recently from the perspective of emotional experiences (e.g. Breiby et al., 2020). Future research might address *the Nordic tendency to promote sustainability as interesting and enjoyable experiences in the context of eco-tourism* (cf. Holm et al., 2013; Kaae et al., 2019) and beyond. Concerning digital tourism experiences that have gained popularity during the pandemic, future research could *investigate the range of new digital experiences and technologies and their power to benefit tourist destinations, firms, and other institutions*. Research should also address *how digital innovations will transform tourism experiences* as new business models are likely to provide shifts in how tourism experiences are bought and enjoyed. Relevant issues include, for instance, how improved marketing and booking platforms and new digital experiences can be integrated into current tourism attractions and whether virtual tourism experiences can truly replace live experiences if long-distance tourism becomes more expensive and restricted. The vast amount of unanswered questions demonstrates that Nordic tourism experience research will have plenty of reasons to continue flourishing for at least the next two decades.

Note

1. Have the word “experience” in their title. Notably, for consistency, the term “tourism experience” is used for both tourist and tourism experiences.

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