# Exploring sustainable experiences in tourism

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**ABSTRACT**

This study explores the vaguely defined concept of sustainable experiences. Specifically, it questions how perceived experience value at tourism destinations can be enhanced through sustainable experience dimensions. Although experiences and sustainable tourism are intrinsically interlinked, knowledge of sustainable experiences and how they can be included in experience design to enhance perceived value is limited. Within a lake context, local stakeholders, researchers and students were invited to actively identify and co-design sustainable experience dimensions using, among others, interviews with residents and tourists. Our findings suggest four sustainable experience dimensions: interaction with the natural environment; interaction with the cultural environment; insights and views; and lake-based activities. The study advocates for future research and management to better incorporate sustainable experience dimensions to holistically enhance tourists' perceived experience value and destination sustainability.

## Introduction

In view of the need to sustainably develop tourism destinations, it has become critical to design destinations in ways that mutually facilitate experiences to enhance visitors' perceived experience value and destination sustainability. However, it is only recently that tourism research has turned its attention to sustainable experiences as a potential means to obtain competitive advantage, while enhancing destination sustainability and perceived experience value (Chen et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2016; Lu et al., 2017; Poudel & Nyaupane, 2013). To our knowledge, this concept has only been vaguely engaged without a proper definition or empirical operationalization.

The recent growth in technology, including the Internet with access to social media, and faster, more convenient and inexpensive transportation systems has made many destinations more accessible to a greater number of people (Buckley, 2012; Elmahdy et al., 2017; Scott & Gössling, 2015). In part because of this trend, unfortunate behavioural effects from visitors who do not engage with host communities or natural environments pose a series of associated sustainability challenges to destinations. For instance, some

scholars observe an increase in self-objectivizing tourism as visitors arrive with the main goal of taking selfies with destinations only as backdrops (Canavan, 2017; Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016). At the same time, there is considerable research on how tourism products and services can provide visitors with experiences that fulfil multiple needs, and create plural values and associated benefits. Such experiences are characterized as personal, entertaining, memorable, meaningful and extraordinary as opposed to ordinary everyday experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Walls et al., 2011).

By co-creating experience value, it is possible for tourism companies to consider tourists as participants in the creation of the destination product and the tourist experience (Prebensen et al., 2013). This shifts the above connotation of tourists as mere spectators to one of potential active contributors to destination sustainability and experience value.

The concept of sustainable experiences can thus be constructive for understanding how producers and visitors may mutually enhance destination sustainability and experience value. To holistically engage experience co-creation at a destination level, experience design (Jernsand et al., 2015; Tussyadiah, 2014) offers a potential means to address the overall process of designing tourism in a more sustainable manner.

Based on a case study of co-designing with local stakeholders, this study explores how tourists and residents relate to Lake Mjøsa in South Eastern Norway. Extracts from interviews with tourists and residents were presented to local stakeholders as different rewritten narratives of memorable experiences and future concerns. Based on this, stakeholders collectively identified new meanings and opportunities for sustainable experiences within the region. The study also explores the potential of developing products at this destination further. The aim of this paper is to theoretically and empirically identify and explore the concept of sustainable experiences and how visitors' perceived experience value may be enhanced through specific sustainable experience dimensions.

To capture sustainable experience dimensions, the interview questions were intentionally phrased to address two main issues. Firstly, to capture what may constitute memorable experiences, participants were asked what they in particular remembered to have done in the region. Secondly, to capture sustainability concerns, participants were asked about potential future concerns concerning future tourism development in the region. Based on this, the study reveals four sustainable experience dimensions, including empirical subcategories for each dimension (illustrated in the Result section, Figure 6). Accordingly, we bridge the subjective and memorable experience value with future sustainability concerns to create a multidimensional understanding for further operational tourism development.

The next section presents a review of the key concepts related to experiences, sustainability and experience design. The methodology and context of the study then are presented. We then identify and discuss four sustainable experience dimensions before concluding with implications.

## Literature review

### *Experiences*

Research on tourist experiences emerged in the 1960s, with the psychologists Thorne (1963) and Maslow (1964) publishing their studies on so-called peak experiences. They referred to a peak experience as the most exciting and rich experience a person can have, as highlights of

one's life, that in consequence are short in duration. The concept of flow represents a different understanding of experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) as it is held to represent a mental state in which a person is fully immersed in an activity to a level that is only just within the reach of that person, losing track of time and place. By introducing the concept of the experience economy, Pine and Gilmore (1999) suggested four different experiential dimensions: education, entertainment, aesthetics and escapism. When customers perceive that they will learn something, are being entertained, are immersed by just being there or doing something actively, the experience will feel meaningful. Meaningful experiences also refer to experiences that can be transformative and stimulate new and deeper understandings (Kottler, 1997), and where the outcome is a sustained change in the person (Smit & Melissen, 2018). Memorable and meaningful experiences thus emerge from people's active interactions with their surroundings (Jantzen, 2011), influenced by products in specific social, cultural and physical contexts (Lindberg et al., 2014; Mossberg, 2007), for example, a lake-based tourism context (Hall & Härkönen, 2006). They also emerge from people's involvement in the production of the experience (Alsos et al., 2014; Fynes & Lally, 2008)

Experiences may be understood from a nexus point of complex interaction between different attributes and contextual details where meanings and values emerge within given contexts (Suri, 2002). Value here is understood as the individual pleasure derived from perceiving, evaluating and judging a product (Holbrook, 1999). Co-creating experience value implies how value is created as the tourist engages various types of personal resources such as time, effort, money and knowledge with those of the provider. The more tourists engage in a co-creation process through time and effort, the more likely they will gain a positive experience and associated perceived experience value (Alsos et al., 2014; Jensen & Prebensen, 2015; Prebensen et al., 2012).

Previous empirical research on experiences also highlights the importance of storytelling, authenticity, and aesthetics, not only to enable satisfaction, but to create a deeper emotional attachment to stimulate customer loyalty (e.g. Breiby, 2015; Prebensen et al., 2012). For example, the dimension "cleanliness" significantly affects tourists' positive emotion towards nature-based experiences at a destination (Breiby, 2015). Importantly, experience co-creation may apply to several stakeholders beyond merely tourists and their value creation and contribute to the uniqueness and authenticity of the destination (Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009).

We note how the different understandings of experiences have elements in common, in that they relate to situations and encounters, which demand the attention and involvement of people experiencing them and they lead to some form of memories or learning in combination with specific emotions.

## Sustainable tourism development

In tourism literature on sustainability, confusion remains regarding what exactly sustainability is or more normatively should be. Extant research emphasizes problems related to finding a common understanding and vision of sustainability among stakeholders (Budeanu et al., 2016). Given the focus on individual and subjective tourist experiences in this paper, we rely on the recent definition of sustainable tourism development as presented by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation, which is informed by the United Nations Sustainable Development goals (UN, 2016). Accordingly, we understand

sustainable tourism development as "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities" (UNWTO, 2019). While sustainable tourism development for a large part has paid attention to products and businesses, this definition reflects an ongoing shift towards working with needs and values of tourists (Bueno & Rameckers, 2003).

The Internet with access to social media, and faster and more inexpensive transportation systems have made many destinations more accessible to more people (Buckley, 2012; Elmahdy et al., 2017; Scott & Gössling, 2015). This has resulted in an increase in self-objectivizing tourism as visitors arrive with the main goal of taking selfies with destinations only as backdrops (Canavan, 2017; Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016). This may cause sustainability problems at many destinations because of the unfortunate effects of the visitor's short stay giving low economic impacts, and increasing rescue operations or pollution in lack of infrastructure (Øian et al., 2018).

In part because of this trend, unfortunate behavioural effects from visitors who do not engage with host communities or natural environments pose a series of associated sustainability challenges to destinations. For instance, some scholars observe an increase in self-objectivizing tourism as visitors arrive with the main goal of taking selfies with destinations only as backdrops (Canavan, 2017; Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016). At the same time, there is considerable research on how tourism products and services can provide visitors with experiences that fulfil multiple needs, and create plural values and associated benefits. Such experiences are characterized as personal, entertaining, memorable, meaningful and extraordinary as opposed to ordinary everyday experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Walls et al., 2011).

A partly contrasting discourse of development can however also be identified. There has been notable growth in the number of tourists who wish to engage in the surrounding environments of destinations. This kind of tourism is associated with a wish to finding a deeper meaning, such as co-created experiences related to various forms of cultural tourism, rural tourism, lake tourism and eco-tourism (e.g. MacCannell, 2002). In response, a new strand of research pays attention to the importance of identifying individual and contextual factors that encourage and facilitate tourists' awareness about the social and environmental aspects of their visits (Campos et al., 2018; Jovicic, 2014; Saarinen, 2015). Moreover, individual differences and contextual features surrounding tourists may enhance awareness of environmental and social sustainability (Krider et al., 2010). Given that meaningful experiences can enhance tourist-perceived value at a destination, Smit and Melissen (2018) suggest that sustainability and experiences may be closely linked, although hitherto overlooked.

### *Sustainable experiences*

Recently scholars have turned their attention to sustainable experiences as a means of obtaining competitive advantages while enhancing destination sustainability and experience value (Chen et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2016; Lu et al., 2017; Poudel & Nyaupane, 2013; Smit & Melissen, 2018). Chen et al. (2011) demonstrate the importance of tourist experiences related to sustainability issues and suggest that in the long run, environmental awareness may lead to changes in tourists' travel intentions. Liu et al. (2016) focus on the relationship between sustainable experiences and satisfaction in natural resource conservation zones. They find that if tourists feel a sense of "novelty" about a tourist destination, it can increase

their sustainability experience and further enhance willingness and satisfaction towards sustainable tourism. Lu et al. (2017) found that feeling "awesome" is an important emotional experience in sustainable tourism within a mountain destination. Poudel and Nyaupane (2013) found that positive changes in attitude and behaviour indicated that environmental interpretation (e.g. by a tour guide) can serve as an effective tool to minimize environmental and socio-cultural impacts. However, it is of note that despite the increase in interest and publications on this issue, the concept of sustainable experiences remains vaguely defined and empirically operationalized.

## *Experience design*

The shift towards focusing on tourists' needs and values in sustainable tourism implies that tourists are participants in the development process instead of passive receivers (Bueno & Rameckers, 2003). Tourism involves a wide array of services from transport to accommodation, which also include exploration of places that enables tourists to interact with objects (e.g. natural sceneries), people (e.g. locals) and other resources at destinations. As a result, design elements such as service touch points and customer journey as stand-alone design elements are too simplistic to apply in tourism (Tussyadiah, 2014). Accordingly, experience design is better equipped at designing tourism experiences in a sustainability context. Experience design can be understood as a practice of designing products, services, processes, events, and environments with a focus on the quality of the user experiences; a deliberate, careful creation of a total experience for customers (Shedroff, 2001). Hence, more holistic experience design grasps the multifaceted nature of sustainable tourism. Importantly, experience design is not a matter of creating a tour package or staging a theme park. Rather, it implies designing the experiences that tourists will be invited to have on the tour or at the park. Moreover, experience design thrives on participation at each stage of the design process and includes active engagement of end users together with stakeholders (Jernsand et al., 2015; Tussyadiah, 2014). Herein also lies the opportunity for design practices to address wider societal needs and to serve as a resource for development (Sanders & Stappers, 2008; Wetter-Edman, 2014).

## Method

This study is part of a larger industry-oriented research project in South Eastern Norway and the data in this paper is based on a single case study using collaborative tourism design (co-design). Co-design is especially relevant within a destination context where the integration of knowledge production, management, application and implications is an important issue. We first outline the case and then discuss co-design and associated methods and tools.

We present an explorative case study in which we examine perceived experience value within a real-life context based on local particularities and sustainability issues (Jennings, 2010). The Mjøsa region was chosen in cooperation with an assigned project working group of public and private stakeholders as well as the researchers. Criteria of selection included among others: its cultural landscape and rich natural and cultural heritage; it extends across two regions and has three cities with sizeable trade; as well as its potential for all-year tourism and subsequent transfer value to other similar destinations. Moreover,

the region has a history of tourism and in 2017 the total number of commercial guest nights at hotels and cabins was 1.5 million (Statistikknett Reiseliv, 2018) where 70% were Norwegians and 30% were international visitors (June–August). There are approximately 160,000 residents in the region.

The overall research process was guided by our continuous engagement through co-design with local stakeholders including private and public tourism actors (e.g. DMMO), regional and municipal authorities and volunteer organizations. While co-design is a growing and increasingly diverse field (e.g. Sanders & Stappers, 2008; Trischler et al., 2017), we understand co-design as an open-ended and emergent "co-generative and co-learning research and development endeavour" (Heape & Liburd, 2018, p. 239; Liburd et al., 2017, p. 29). Referring back to the concept of experience design, co-design enables stakeholders to partake as active designers of the sustainable experience design process. Importantly, and contrary to assigning such experience process meaning beforehand, meaning emerges from the ongoing interaction between stakeholders, which may in turn be expressed as thematic patterns of meaning (Sproedt & Heape, 2014). Throughout the research process, co-learning included working with private and public tourism stakeholders, organizations, researchers and students based on a quintuple helix approach (Carayannis et al., 2012). This model is broader and more comprehensive than the triple – and quadruple helix, adding the quintuple helix (and perspective) of the "natural environments of society". Ren et al. (2010) emphasize that tourism researchers need to be an integral part of the process to fully reflect the human element, the self-awareness, the perspective and the cultural consciousness of the researcher. By bringing into play a multitude of perspectives in the creation of sustainable experience dimensions, the process accordingly shifts from solely individual perspectives to an emergent interacting and interconnected level of sustainable experiences. In turn, attention must focus on the potential steps in working towards the phenomena of sustainable experiences within a dynamic and complex ecology of local tourism systems. Next, we detail the different steps and responses taken during the research process as two interlinked phases of research.

### *Phase one: fieldwork*

Fieldwork was planned in cooperation with the three destination marketing management organizations (DMMO) in the region. To understand the essence of subjective experiences and couple these to sustainability, a series of interviews were conducted with locals and visiting tourists. By experiencing the area *as* a visitor and *with* visitors, it is possible to obtain a first-hand experience and in-depth understanding of the multitude of ways of experiencing the area.

During July and August 2018, 62 interviews were conducted on-site with nearby residents (42%), domestic visitors (32%) and international visitors (26%). Only English-speaking visitors were interviewed among the international visitors, but this did not apply to, e.g. visitors from Sweden. Most of the interviews were conducted on or nearby the paddle steamer Skibladner and central cultural attractions. Approaching visitors on-site was a delicate matter as occupying the tourists' vacation time can be perceived as disturbing; nine visitors declined to participate. The interviews were semi-structured following an interview guide; they varied from 5 to 40 min. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. To capture sustainable experience dimensions, interview questions addressed two main issues. First, participants

were asked what they remembered doing in the region. Second, participants were asked about their concerns regarding future tourism development in the region. As such, we bridge the subjective, personal, unique and memorable experience value with future sustainability concerns to create a multidimensional understanding. Moreover, to elucidate these more heightened experiences, participants were asked to share with us a photograph they had taken to facilitate a more nuanced understanding of the many ways to experience the lake; 50% of the interviewees responded positively to this request.

### Phase 2: workshop

During the second phase, selected local stakeholders were invited to participate further in co-designing sustainable experience dimensions through a workshop that was planned and facilitated by researchers at a conference centre near the lake. Local stakeholders involved both private and public tourism enterprises, regional and municipal authorities, and volunteer associations. BA tourism students and researchers from local institutions were also participating. In total, 33 participated in the workshop, which lasted three and a half hours. The workshop was documented through generated materials, notes, photos and detailed summaries. During the workshop, participants were divided into groups of four. Beforehand, participants were asked to bring a photo representing what Mjøsa means to them personally. The first task was to present their photo and reflect on their dreams and hopes for the future of Mjøsa. Groups were then asked to identify common themes and values arising within their interaction. Second, the interview materials from tourists and residents were presented to the participants at the workshop rewritten as different narratives of memorable experiences and future concerns from which they collectively identified new meanings and opportunities for sustainable experiences within the region Figure 1.

### Method of analysis

The written data were coded into words and phrases based on the research question. For example, answers to the question about "Memorable experience" were combined with answers to the question about "Concerns for future tourism" to generate the "sustainable experience dimensions" as identified by stakeholders. To further detail the content of these dimensions, the data was analysed using the qualitative data analysis software package



**Figure 1.** Interviews, workshop and output from the co-design process.

NVivo 12 (García-Horta & Guerra-Ramos, 2009). NVivo aided the process of analysis, as we were able to combine manual and electronic means of analysis according to the research reality of available time and resources while benefitting from the advantages of each (Welsh, 2002).

## Results

Based on the interviews with tourists and residents, four sustainable experience dimensions were identified of the stakeholders: (1) interacting with the natural environment; (2) interacting with the cultural environment; (3) insights and views; and (4) lake-based activities Figure 2.

Stakeholders identified the dimension of "interacting with the natural environment" through expressions such as "beautiful nature", "being close to the lake", "new landscapes", "the largest lake in Norway" and "clean water". A Japanese tourist described it as follows:

> I feel really happy about this big nature, how can I say it, like sometimes when I go into the big nature I feel like I am part of nature and I get that same feeling here with the lakeside, and it is very comfortable like I feel it in my whole body.

Many interviewees were concerned about the natural environment. Emergent issues were "too much garbage", "water pollution", "factories near the lake" and "climate change". A visitor from the US state of Georgia noted:



**Figure 2.** Photo taken by a 24-year-old man from Tokyo.

**Figure 3.** Photo taken by a 64-year-old man from Norway.

> *Well, when we are back in Georgia where we live, at some of the more popular lakes … a lot of people leave their trash, garbage, bottles and cans … you will see it like on the beaches you know … so that will probably be the biggest thing for me, it is so beautiful and clean right now, you will hate to see trash, garbage you know.*

Stakeholders also identified the dimension of "interaction with the cultural environment" as illustrated through their focus on "old/traditional buildings", "cultural attractions", "original city centres", "farms with local food and beverages", and "stories from local authors and art". One Norwegian interviewee added:

> Skilled guides increase the value of the visit. It is the histories behind that are fantastic. I have taken a picture of the windows here, I'm writing an article about windows. Therefore, it's nice to see some of the early examples Figure 3.

Writing an article about old windows, this interviewee found a nice example at a local cultural attraction. During the interview, he also had ideas about how to develop and protect the old buildings. Other interviewees were also concerned about "cultural heritage" and mentioned the situations of "no conservation of the old buildings", "empty city centres", "not proud of local products" and "too many similar places" as critical concerns regarding future tourism development. One couple stated:

> Yes, and it's something that we have found everywhere in Norway, in general the houses and the buildings are not that well-kept as we are used to in Luxembourg and the countries nearby.

Stakeholders also identified "insights and views" as a central sustainable experience dimension. This includes elements such as a "nice view of Lake Mjøsa", "silence and peace", "learning something new", "meeting people" and "cultural landscape". One of the interviewees also commented:

> The landscape, it's so nice and peaceful … It's very different from where we come from … . The fields are fantastic. It's very special for us … we are not used to it Figure 4.

**Figure 4.** Photo taken by a 46-year-old woman from Norway.

At the same time, some interviewees were concerned about "traffic noise", "too many tourists", "not preserving the viewpoints", and "overgrowth of the cultural landscape":

> … they had cut down the trees around Pilegrimsleden to widen the road. They're going to build a highway. You need to preserve it [leden] like it was. Is it necessary to cut down trees to create a new view?

"Overgrowth of the cultural landscapes" reflects a challenge of maintaining cultural landscapes when reducing the agricultural areas. Concerns regarding too many tourists suggest potential negative effects on the livelihood and well-being of the host communities.

"Lake-based activities" were identified as a sustainable experience dimension and incorporate elements such as "bathing", "the paddle steamer Skibladner", "activities from childhood", "fishing", and "paddling". One of the interviewees provided the following example:

> I remember the fishing … to fish is very memorable for me, it's the first time I've fished in Norway, and I caught a perch and ate it [laughing], here's a photo showing it still on the hook Figure 5.

Other interviewees were concerned about issues such as "too many cars on the roads for biking and hiking", "no new activities", and "no places for the disabled to be close to the lake" affecting future tourism development. One man expressed it as follows:

> Yes, two or three times now we did not have such nice conditions on the streets … , when there were no pedestrian facilities near the roads and we had to hike on the highway. Most of the drivers really take care, but two or three did not, and that was scary.

Figure 6 summarizes the four sustainable experience dimensions. These were identified from the interviews with visitors and residents by combining the interview questions that addressed the issues of "Memorable experience" and "Future concerns" in the region. The four dimensions are: (1) interaction with the natural environment, (2) interaction with the

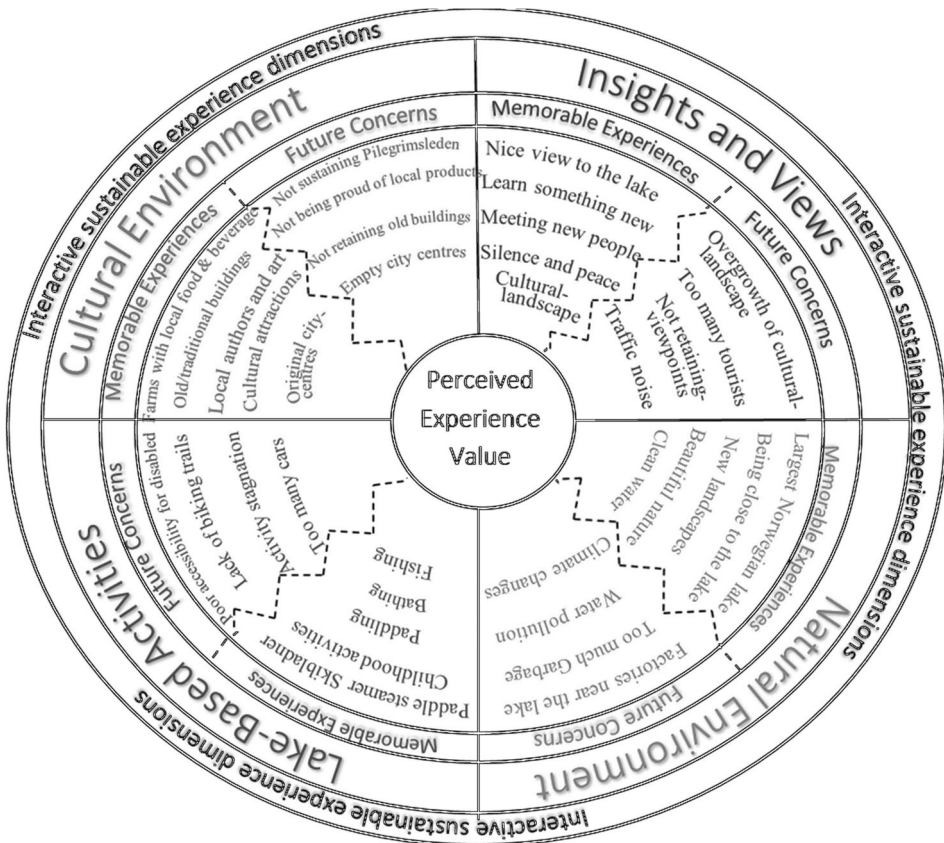**Figure 5.** Photo taken by a 21-year-old man from Belgium.



**Figure 6.** The four sustainable experience dimensions with subcategories.

cultural environment, (3) insights and views, and (4) lake-based activities. Figure 6 also includes related empirical subcategories for each of the four sustainable experience dimensions according to "Memorable experience" and "Future concerns". Bu doing so, we intentionally bridge the subjective and memorable experience value with future sustainability concerns to create a multidimensional understanding for further operational tourism development.

The following sections provide a discussion of findings in relevant literature. This is followed by a brief conclusion, which further addresses the implications of the four identified sustainable experience dimensions.

## Discussion

### Concept of sustainable experiences and different dimensions

To our knowledge, there is no clear definition of the concept of sustainable experiences. Even if empirical studies (Chen et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2016; Lu et al., 2017; Poudel & Nyaupane, 2013) emphasize the importance of linking tourist experiences to certain sustainability issues, the concept is diffuse and vague. Our study adds to previous research by combining memorable experiences and future concerns (proxy of sustainability issues) into the four specific sustainable experience dimensions of interaction with the natural environment, interaction with the cultural environment, insights and views, and lake-based activities (or contextual activities).

The first three sustainable experience dimensions support previous findings that sustainable experiences are linked to interaction with the natural and cultural environment providing, for example, joy, novelty and awe emotions (Chen et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2016; Lu et al., 2017; Poudel & Nyaupane, 2013). The findings also confirm earlier studies emphasizing that memorable experiences stem from people interacting with their surroundings (Jantzen, 2011; Prebensen et al., 2012), and the individual's sense of "small self" in big nature (Jantzen, 2011; Lu et al., 2017). Moreover, they align with previous empirical studies in that cleanliness significantly affects tourists' positive emotion towards nature-based experiences of a destination (e.g. Breiby, 2015).

However, our findings clearly extend previous work by including the concerns of visitors and residents regarding environmental and socio-cultural sustainability issues such as garbage, water pollution, climate change, and not paying enough attention to local and highly situated cultural issues (e.g. preserving old buildings). The fourth dimension of "lake-based activities" is particularly supported in previous research with regard to users' active involvement in the production of the experiences and its effect on perceived experience value (Alsos et al., 2008; Poudel & Nyaupane, 2013), as well as the positive effects from tourists being active in their co-creation processes of experience value at the destination (Prebensen et al., 2012).

Based on this study's results, we suggest an initial definition of sustainable experience in tourism as "an experience that raises deep, meaningful emotions and memories that can encourage tourists' contribution toward destination sustainability". This may be enabled through the specific sustainable experience dimensions of interaction with the natural environment, interaction with the cultural environment, insights and views, and contextual activities. This is a broad definition, and an attempt to extract the concept of

sustainable experiences that is relevant to redesign and co-design destinations in ways that invite experiences that reciprocally enhance perceived experience value and destination sustainability.

### Including sustainable experience dimensions in experience design

Regarding transformative experiences (Kottler, 1997), the four sustainable experience dimensions can enhance users' perceived value. The outcome of designing destinations that deliver sustainable experiences may be a sustained change in a person with experiences of a longer duration (Smit & Melissen, 2018). Therefore, the four sustainable experience dimensions can benefit the experience design to enhance perceived value for visitors and sustainability of destinations. For example, the interaction with the natural and cultural environment on a guided tour, where the tourist spends time and effort over a longer stay (Prebensen et al., 2013), may give rise to awe emotions (Lu et al., 2017) and new insights, and thereby deeper and more meaningful experiences. At the same time, a longer stay may also include economic impacts at the destination and less frequent short trips. In our context, the lake-based activities connected to the environment may give tourists the feeling of joy.

Regarding sustainable experience dimensions as part of experience design, our four sustainable experience dimensions support Pine and Gilmore's (1999) two experiential dimensions of "education" and "escapism". When customers perceive that they learn something when actively participating in a tourist activity, the experience may feel meaningful. Following Pine and Gilmore (1999), Breiby (2015) defined the experiential dimension of "aesthetics", not only as the visual and passive receiving of stimuli, but as how individual tourists experience their surroundings through an active interplay of senses. The present study supports this notion, as the sustainable experience dimension "insights and views" fits well with Breiby's (2015) extended aesthetic dimension of "scenery/viewing".

The four sustainable experience dimensions with, for example, a learning component, can be framed as final experiential products based on tourists' experiences of feelings, emotions and knowledge (Liu et al., 2016). This also emphasizes the relevance of including tourists as participants in product development processes (Bueno & Rameckers, 2003).

## Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the concept of sustainable experiences and whether perceived experience value at the destination may be enhanced through specific sustainable experience dimensions. The tourism literature has only recently turned its attention to the concept of sustainable experiences as a means of obtaining competitive advantages for tourist destinations and enhancing their sustainability (Chen et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2016; Lu et al., 2017; Poudel & Nyaupane, 2013). That said, sustainable experiences have so far only been vaguely defined and loosely touched upon empirically.

This study contributes significantly to further informing the field of sustainable experiences in tourism by proposing a proper definition, including the four interlinked sustainable experience dimensions that combine memorable experiences and concerns related to future destination sustainability. Based on this study's results, we define sustainable

experience in tourism "an experience that raises deep, meaningful emotions and memories that can encourage tourists' contribution toward destination sustainability". This may be fostered by the four sustainable experience dimensions of (1) interaction with the natural environment, (2) interaction with the cultural environment, (3) insights and views, and (4) contextual activities (illustrated in Figure 6).

These four dimensions including empirical subcategories divided into "Memorable experiences" and "Future concerns" for each of the dimensions, may assist destination management of tourism development that enhances users' perceived value as well as strengthens sustainability and competitiveness of the destination. Specifically, three main implications emerge in response to the identified sustainable experience dimensions. First, it is important for destination management and marketing organizations to include tourists as active contributors and invite them as participants in destination design development processes that identify experiences that enhance perceived value and sustainability. One approach for a destination may be to make sustainable experiences just as attractive, memorable and as much fun as unsustainable ones. Second, destination managers and marketers can constructively focus on sustainable experience dimensions when designing experiences to increase tourists' and residents' perceived experience value and their sustainable behaviour (e.g. in our context, with guided tours to experience cultural landscapes close to the lake). Third, destination management and marketing organizations can offer courses to enhance the expertise, attitudes and knowledge of employees who interact with tourists and other users at destinations.

We acknowledge that the study has some limitations. First, the study is limited to one case study within a very specific lake context. Second, the representation from the municipal authorities and local organizations could have been higher to facilitate synergistic cross-sectorial reflections. Third, we did not have sufficient resources to conduct more in-depth interviews regarding, for example, informants' natural and cultural preferences.

To more fully acknowledge sustainable experiences as a comprehensive research field, further research on the sustainable experience dimensions in different tourism contexts is necessary. Each of the four dimensions and their subcategories can be further elaborated for various contexts; moreover, it is relevant to try to measure their significance for tourists' perceived experience value including specific sustainability indicators. Future research could focus on three interrelated aspects of sustainable experiences: first, the extent to which the experience that tourists seek fails to imply sustainable activities and behaviour, either environmental, social or economic; second, whether the experiences tourists have increase their awareness of the social and environmental effects of their visits; and third, whether and eventually how destinations are able to take into account all three dimensions of sustainability to provide tourists with opportunities to achieve sustainable experiences.

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## Disclosure statement

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