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A Multirelational Approach for Understanding Consumer Experiences Within Tourism

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This article presents and discusses a conceptual understanding of consumer experiences as multirelational. Based on consumer research, tourism research, and the being-in-the-world ontology, we propose a multirelational approach using four core concepts wherein consumers are situated ontologically in and across (a) time, (b) context, (c) body, and (d) interaction. We explore and propose how this multirelational approach can be applied to research by discussing the conceptual and practical consequences of this approach for understanding tourists’ dynamic experiences and meaning. Consequently, the article presents an alternative approach that contributes to a broader understanding of consumer experience within tourism. This approach is illustrated with examples from consumer experiences in the arctic Svalbard.

KEYWORDS multirelational approach, Heidegger, tourist experience, tourism, consumer experience, experience economy

INTRODUCTION

Today, consumer experiences are regarded as the locus of value creation within the tourism industry (Volo, 2009). In recent decades, the research community has focused on understanding and facilitating meaningful consumer experiences (e.g., Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Pernecky & Jamal, 2010; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989; Walls, Okumus, Wang, & Kwun, 2011). However, the multidisciplinary character of consumer and tourism research has created varying definitions of and
approaches to consumer experience within the tourism industry (Vespestad & Lindberg, 2011).

This so-called interpretive turn within marketing and consumer research has increased the interest in the diversity, subjectivity, context, and negotiation of meaning in the study of consumer experiences (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Uriely, 2005). However, much of this research has investigated how specific components (e.g., physical context or human interaction) may influence consumer experiences, and more holistically oriented approaches are rare (e.g., Carù & Cova, 2003, 2007a; Thompson, 1997; Walls et al., 2011). An approach that elucidates the interactions and processes that contribute to consumer experience in a broad sense is thus needed (Moscardo, 2009).

An increasing number of researchers favor a (hermeneutic) phenomenological approach to the tourist experience (e.g., Curtin, 2006; Henning, 2008; Kim & Jamal, 2007; Pons, 2003; Ryan, 2000; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; Szarycz, 2008; Wang, 1999). Pernecky and Jamal advocate for applying Heidegger’s (1927/1996) being-in-the-world ontology because it is relatively unknown, misunderstood, complex, and demanding (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010). We share the view that Heideggerian-inspired theory creates a deeper understanding of consumer experiences, and we contribute to this debate.

This article contributes to the aforementioned gaps in research on consumer experiences within tourism by asking the following question: How can a multirelational approach contribute to the conceptualization of consumer experience within tourism? By reviewing relational contributions within interpretive consumer research, tourism research, and the being-in-the-world ontology, we present a conceptual model of experience as situated, multirelational, dynamic, and meaning-based. We argue that everyday life and consumer experiences are intertwined through a tourist’s lived experiences and that experiences can be understood and studied through the intertwined components related to interaction, body, time, and context.

UNDERSTANDING CONSUMER EXPERIENCES AS RELATIONAL

The Experiential Turn in Consumer Research

In recent decades, interest in research on consumer experiences has increased as a result of the so-called interpretive turn within marketing and consumer research (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Schembri & Sandberg, 2011; Sherry, 1991). Criticizing the behavioral and cognitive focus within consumer behavior research, researchers focusing on interpretive consumer research adopt two main perspectives: individual consumer research and cultural-based consumption studies (Lindberg, 2009; Østergaard & Jantzen, 2000).

Contributing to the individual consumer research stream, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) focus on the subjective and emotional dimension of
experience through fantasies, feelings, and fun. Holbrook and Hirschman criticize the utilitarian tradition within consumer behavior research and retained Levy’s (1959) famous axiom that much consumption are based on the symbols and meanings rendered possible by products (Carù & Cova, 2007b). The individual consumer research stream assumes that the consumer experience within the tourism context is a subjective and complex whole that cannot be meaningfully deconstructed into isolated parts (Holbrook, 1995). Belk (1988) argues that consumers’ relationships with “persons, places and things to which one feels attached” can extend, expand, and strengthen consumers’ sense of self (p. 141). Experiential relationships are thus never a two-way interaction but “always three-way” (Belk, 1988, p. 147; i.e., tourist-product-tourist). Thompson (1997) viewed consumer experiences as being “contextualized within a broader narrative of self-identity,” which itself is contextualized within a “complex background of historically established cultural meanings and belief systems” (p. 440). In the tourism context, cultural layers of meaning encircle the three-way relationship between consumers and the tangible/intangible entities of a product. Additionally, consumer experiences can be viewed as dynamic self-narrating activities in which current consumption acts are strung together with consumers’ past existential life narratives to create imagined futures (Ahuvia, 2005). One can therefore argue that relationships can be understood figuratively to occur across time and between various narrative structures.

As a parallel to the individual focus of consumer research, several researchers, inspired by cultural theory, focus on the sociocultural meaning of consumption (Sherry, 1990). The cultural consumer research stream views consumers as members of a tribe (Maffesoli, 1996) who engage in experiences and whose role “rests largely in their ability to carry and communicate cultural meaning” (McCracken, 1986, p. 71). From this perspective, the consumer experience and its inherent value are created through cultural meaning and social interaction. Naturalistic research conducted in consumption environments, such as swap meets (Belk, Sherry, & Wallendorf, 1988), flea markets (Sherry, 1990), art shows, souvenir shops, parades, riverboat cruises, and county fairs (Belk, 1991), has elucidated how rituals, traditions, myths, socialization, and status affect consumer experiences. For example, McCracken suggests that consumer experiences are determined by the advertising and fashion industries, which “move meaning from the culturally constituted world” to the consumption realm, while “consumer rituals move meaning” from the consumption realm to the consumer (1986, p. 81). Sociocultural communities thus precondition consumer experiences and individual identity projects (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koening, 2002; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001), although consumers claim to be doing “their own thing while doing it with thousands of like-minded others” (Holt, 2002, p. 83). As such, this stream of research treats every experience as being embedded in webs of culturally based relations, where meaning no longer relates to
the individual but rather involves conformity to or (fake) deviance from the sociocultural community. The focus on cultural meaning and social interaction challenges individual perspectives and contribute to a relational understanding of consumer experiences.

The sociocultural stream of research can be criticized for its cultural determinism and for undermining individual consumers. This stream of research, however, allows for a broader understanding of how the meaning of experience depends on social interactions and cultural practices (Sherry, 1991). Recent research within the consumer culture theory argues that “consumer culture does not determine action as a causal force” (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 869). Whereas consumer experiences are constrained by norms and rules, consumer culture can be viewed to frame consumers’ horizons of conceivable actions, feelings, and thoughts (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Consumers’ continuous dialogic interpretation of cultural horizons, norms, and ideologies is thus important.

Thompson and Hirschman (1995) argued for the role of bodily meaning and practices in consumer experiences, and suggested that consumer experiences were conditioned by social relationships, normative prescriptions, and moral aspects, such as self-control and discipline. Joy and Sherry (2003), studying art experiences, go further, arguing that the “cognitive unconscious” body affects the logic of consumers’ thinking about art (p. 259). This stream of research attempts to understand consumer experiences by focusing on how consumers bring their own socioculturally based—and embodied—understandings to the marketplace.

Extraordinary Consumer Experiences

Tourism organizations often attempt to provide consumers with something extraordinary (Morgan & Watson, 2009). In the wake of the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999) and consumer research (Arnould & Price, 1993; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), research has focused on extraordinary products that are experienced as something extra or surprising (Mossberg, 2007b). The focus is the co-creative role of consumers in the production of memorable experiences (Caru & Cova, 2003; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). In organizing extraordinary experiences, businesses mobilize operand resources (e.g., tangible aspects of experiencescapes) and operant resources (e.g., intangible aspects, such as themes and stories) to offer value propositions to consumers (Mossberg, 2007a; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). The experience is completed when consumers bring their own resources and co-create a staged act (Deighton, 1992), so the consumer receives “more intense, framed and stylish practices” that stand out as special and memorable moments (Abrahams, 1986, p. 50).

Inspired by the discipline of psychology (CsíkszentmiháLy, 1997; Maslow, 1964; Privette, 1983), recent contributions to the consumer
experience literature have focused on immersion, transcendence, and mindfulness during consumer experiences (Carù & Cova, 2003; Moscardo, 2009; Schouten, McAlexander, & Koenig, 2007). Schouten et al. (2007, p. 358) define transcendent consumer experiences as “flow and/or peak experiences that take place in consumption contexts.” A transcendent consumer experience can be characterized by total involvement in an activity and can be distinguished as either an extreme focus on a particular task (flow based on an optimal combination of challenge and skills; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) or an effortless moment of intense joy (peak experiences, such as an epiphany/sacred/intense happiness; Maslow, 1964). In the context of tourism, immersion during experiences implies a focus on the embodied aspect of experiences (Carù & Cova, 2003). Immersion can be viewed to be either total and immediate or partial and progressive, as well as to result from the consumer’s skills and appropriation process (Carù & Cova, 2007a). A similar view is explicated by Moscardo (2009), who argues that mindfulness, i.e., being “actively engaged in the present” (p. 101), depends on understanding experiences as interactions between the “the tourist, the place, the management and communication systems, the focus of the experience, the cognitive state, the theme or narrative, and the outcome” (p. 107).

People are assumed to seek to participate in extraordinary and transformative experiences because everyday life tends to exclude mystery, magic, passion, and soul (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Studying river rafting, Arnould and Price (1993) reported that “communion with nature, communitas or connecting with others [...] and renewal of self” are essential experiential traits (p. 31). They show how experiences can provide absorption and integration and how romantic cultural scripts contribute to the transformation of consumers so that they may return to an everyday world as renewed individuals. Studying primarily skydiving experiences, Celsi et al. (1993) proposed a holistic “extended dramatic model” that combines “macroenvironmental influences,” “inter- and intrapersonal motives,” and a “dramatic world view” to understand high-risk experiences (p. 3). Rather than viewing experiences as static with a focus on single and isolated constructs, Celsi et al. argued that experiences should be viewed more holistically, as an interdependence between constructs. Kozinets’ (2002) study on the antimarket festival “Burning Man” showed how consumers may actively co-create meaning based on the communal critique of everyday consumption. Kozinets argued that an experience could take the form of an inversion ritual “against the orderly, planned, preprogrammed, boring, and imitative aspects” of everyday existence (Kozinets, 2002, p. 36). In studying the climbing of Mt. Everest, Tumbat and Belk (2011) argued that experiences might not be as romantic and communitarian as previous research on extraordinary experience suggests. Their key finding is that tension may exist during various relationships in uncertain contexts and that consumers negotiate between various dualities of the everyday mundane and the extraordinary enchanting.
However, one can argue that research on extraordinary experiences draws attention to the relational aspects of the dynamic experience and meaning creation processes.

Tourist Experiences

Uriely (2005) argues for a distinction between a modern view that postulates that tourist experiences are opposite of everyday life and a postmodern view that postulates that everyday life cannot be separated from tourist experiences. Seminal research on tourist experiences has focused on the sacred search for authenticity (MacCannel, 1976), the search for novelty and strangeness (Cohen, 1972), the search for pseudo-events (Boorstin, 1964), the role of posttourists (Lash & Urry, 1994; Urry, 1990), the postmodern tourist (Cohen, 1995), and experiential modes that vary in type and form (Cohen, 1974, 1979).

The modernist view of authenticity reveals a tourist who is driven by the sacred quest of visiting places, people, and cultures. The relationship to the authentic place thus becomes important for understanding what a tourist experience is, although most tourists will not be able to experience or see the authentic (MacCannel, 1976). A tourist experience can be conceptualized in terms of its relation to the strangeness of the “other” (e.g., foreign culture) and to the tourist’s zone of novelty (Cohen, 1972). Later, Cohen claimed that the view of tourist experiences depends on “the place and significance of tourist experience in the total world-view of tourists” (Cohen, 1979, p. 179). Cohen (1988) thus proposed a socially constructed version of authenticity. A phenomenological experience is contextual and situational, depending on humans’ “adherence to, or quest for a ‘spiritual’ centre” (Cohen, 1979, p. 193). This perspective embraces various experiential roles (i.e., the familiar and social mass tourist who can gaze at the other from the safety of a bus or the explorer or drifter who looks for novelty and change in a foreign culture). The sociocultural layer of the place, with its moral virtues, and thus the “lifeworld” of the tourist, is conducive to the experiential modes in question because of the dynamism of familiarity and/or strangerhood. The phenomenological view of Cohen was reconsidered by Lengkeek (2001) and extended by the addition of role theory (Wickens, 2002), with contributions by Borrie and Roggenbuck (2001; dynamic wilderness experiences), Uriely et al. (2002; heterogeneous backpacking), Ryan (2000; phenomenographic analysis), and others. Hence, certain streams within tourism research have argued in favor of relational aspects by focusing on the pluralizing and dynamic nature of experiences when consumer lifeworlds meet places within cultures.

The postmodernist or late modern (Wang, 2000) view of tourism considers tourism to be play (e.g., Urry, 1990). Not unlike the hedonic consumer of Hirschman and Holbrook (1982), from a cultural perspective, pleasure
seeking and romantic gazing are regarded as the main aspect of tourist experiences, which may occur in any place and at any time (Lash & Urry, 1994). There is no singular gaze. Instead, the gaze depends on the culture, social group, context, and time. Uriely (2005) concluded that four significant trends can be identified: differentiation to de-differentiation of everyday life and tourist experiences, generalizing to pluralizing portrayals, focusing on the toured object to focusing on the role of subjectivity within culture, and providing contradictory and decisive statements to providing relative and complementary interpretations.

In the wake of late modern trends, we find research taking a relational perspective through a focus on paradoxes of consumer independence (Caruana, Crane, & Fitchett, 2008), the role of hermeneutics in heritage experiences (Ablett & Dyer, 2009), the meaning-based constructions of budget travelers (Obenour, 2004), the dynamic experiences of long distance walking (Breejen, 2007), the construction of authentic experiences (Chronis & Hampton, 2008), the multi-dimensional nature of experiences (Walls, Okumus, Wang, & Kwun, 2011), and experiences as interactions (White & White, 2008). In line with developments within consumer research, these contributions take into account the complex dynamism of experiences by focusing on relational factors. For example, Walls et al. (2011) examine emotions/cognition and the extraordinary/ordinary in human interactions, relationships toward physical elements, situational factors, and individual past experiences.

The Being-in-the-World Ontology

Several researchers have sought inspiration in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger (1927/1996) and his successors to understand experiences and meaning creation. Pernecky and Jamal argued that experiential issues related to being-in-the-world remain largely unexplored, that the paucity of discussion “has been ambiguous at best,” and that many publications avoid discussing the original theory (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010, p. 1057). According to Ritchie and Hudson (2009, p. 117), researched within tourism uses phenomenology mainly as “methodologies for understanding the consumer/tourist experience” from the perspective of the tourist. Thus, consumer research can be strengthened by focusing on its philosophical underpinnings (Szarycz, 2009), such as its ontology. While Heidegger’s philosophical legacy has been given many labels, we refer to the being-in-the-world ontology, which is a major component of his theory (Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2005; Luft & Overgaard, 2012; Sköldberg, 1998) and has a relational focus.

Heidegger (1927/1996) introduced existential and hermeneutical elements into phenomenology (Luft & Overgaard, 2012). Heidegger was one of the first 20th-century philosophers to radically question the person-world and
mind-body dualisms, and he replaced Husserl’s emphasis on consciousness with a focus on the structure of our everyday being-in-the-world (Wrathall & Dreyfus, 2006). Unlike individual consumer research (e.g., Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982) and descriptive phenomenology within tourism (e.g., Andriotis, 2009; Curtin, 2006), being-in-the-world experiences are not subjective understandings of a situation. Rather, such experiences are relational. Heidegger and scholars inspired by this line of thinking strive to replace the Cartesian dualism and the mental constructs of earlier thinkers with a focus on inter-subjectivity and the relationship between “subjects” and “objects” (things in the world; Pernecky & Jamal, 2010, p. 1058). The being-in-the-world ontology thus represents an interpretive turn through a conceptual focus on relationships, situatedness, historicity, temporality, understanding, and meaning (Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2005).

Consumer experiences are formed through ongoing interpretations within the world that are bound to the concrete situation of the consumer (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010). Normally, the experience of everyday human life and the transformations between activities are familiar and a tacit aspect of being-in-the-world. How people understand, interpret, and create meaning would consequently also often be familiar and tacit (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). In situations in which the familiar becomes unfamiliar and perhaps challenging (which can occur within extraordinary tourism contexts; Tumbat & Belk, 2011), one’s belonging in the world tends to become thematized and take the form of reflection on action.

Turner and Mannings (1988) criticized research that neglects Heidegger’s focus on worldliness and the role of bodily being and emotions. Pons (2003) argued that humans are involved in the world as bodily beings through lived experiences. Thus, consumer experiences cannot be understood apart from the objects of tourism (Wang, 1999) or the social and political context within which the experience may belong (Belhassen, Caton, & Stewart, 2008). From this point of view, consumers can be considered to project a certain understanding and perspective composed of all of the interconnected elements that are brought to light in various tourism contexts (Obenour, 2004; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). For example, the experience of visiting Disney World would differ depending on whether it involved a family trip in which children were present or two lovers. The contrasting understandings in these two different situations would make apparent different aspects of the location, people, logics, symbols, and attractions. Furthermore, meetings in tourism contexts enable tourists to learn about their worlds, themselves, and other people because these contexts often “force” a different horizon of understanding on the tourist through transformative experiences and the tourist moment (Cary, 2004).

Kim and Jamal applied the ideas of phenomenology to experiences at a Renaissance festival to show how meaning is co-constructed through a variety of relational practices and rites (Kim & Jamal, 2007). The tourists’ changes
are dramatic and “total” in the sense that the thematic context allows tourists to become different people with different understandings, perspectives, and practices. Kim and Jamal’s research shows how relational spheres, such as the altered body (costumes), the festival context, Renaissance time, and role interactions create lasting friendships within a normative community that become part of the tourists’ lives.

The temporal structures of past, present, and future permeate lived experiences in *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1927/1996). Consumers are embedded in contexts and situations with specific logics, languages, and meanings from the past. However, experiences are also distinguished by the future through upcoming projects. The future embraces humans’ continued existence and involves thinking and acting “for the future” (Fløistad, 1993, p. 133). Every interpretation of the future implies actions and relations aimed at something or someone in the present, and the process mostly depends on how one was embedded in the past. As has been emphasized within consumer culture theory, consumer experiences are primarily distinguished by the “socio-cultural, symbolic and ideological aspects of consumption” (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 868). Nevertheless, research on extraordinary consumer experiences argues that consumers often meet unfamiliar tourism contexts that demand a certain renewal of the self (Arnould & Price, 1993). The dynamics of the future and the past during tourist experiences are argued to be more complex than mundane experiences.

According to the being-in-the-world ontology (Heidegger, 1927/1996; Taylor, 1985), emotions and attunements are primordial. These emotions run deeply through human existence, and they cannot be “stepped in and out of.” Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) argued that pre-reflexive bodily emotions imprint experiences as a form of pre-reflexive understanding. Thus, implicit emotions, in addition to implicit knowledge, must be regarded as basic to all human knowing (Polanyi, 1958).

The being-in-the-world theory views experiences as interpretive endeavors that are deeply rooted in relationships during consumption. Consumer experiences are dynamically structured through temporality, and consumption is embodied, situated, and emotional when people co-construct understanding and meaning in commercial places in familiar or unfamiliar cultures. Because of experiences and meaning constructions are dynamic and continuous, being-in-the-world is a continuous process of becoming-in-the-world. That is, the being-in-the-world theory suggests both a relational and a processual understanding of consumer experiences.

**A Multirelational Approach**

Based primarily on interpretive consumer research, tourism research, and the being-in-the-world ontology, we have learned that consumer experiences are always “interactions-with” and in relation to bodies, contexts, and time and...
that these dynamic components define experiences and meaning constructions. Human becoming and change during consumption are particularly interesting and a process that is never finished, fully determined or fully free/isolated. The being-in-the-world ontology shares the view that human beings are whole persons, encompassing and intertwining all of the primary domains of cognition, emotion, and action. We propose that the following conceptual framework (see Figure 1) be used to understand consumer experiences and meaning as situated, multirelational, and dynamic.

Based on the multirelational approaches identified in this article, we propose a conceptual framework that consists of four co-existing core components that consumers always are situated within and across throughout experiences and meaning constructions: in context, in time, in interaction, and in body. These four components were chosen for their potential utility as a theoretical tool and to provide a broader understanding of consumer experiences and meaning construction.

One can argue that Heidegger (1927/1996) specifically elaborated on three of these core components (or structures): time, interactions, and context. However, in their reading of Heidegger, Dreyfus, and Dreyfus (1999, p. 41) concluded that “dasein is not necessarily embodied.” We have thus referred to Merleau-Ponty’s (1945/1962) body phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty’s work has been elaborated on by scholars such as Bourdieu (1977), Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1999), and Polanyi and Prosch (1975), depicting bodily and tacit being, relating, and knowing. In this discussion, such an understanding is intertwined with the other main relational structures.

For analytical purposes, we have separated the four aspects from each other and from the center of the framework shown in Figure 1. However, a multirelational approach to tourist experiences must include all of the dimensions simultaneously.

![Figure 1](image-url) Situated, multirelational, and dynamic experiences and meaning (color figure available online).
In Time

Time is often not thematized during experiences because of its omnipresent character. Because the world, directly or indirectly, is the origin of meaning (McCracken, 1986), the timing of things/others and the various logics relating to time (e.g., clock time) that consumers encounter influence consumer experiences (Curtin, 2006; Van Manen, 1990). Cotte, Ratneshwar, and Mick (2004) focus on consumers’ timestyles, defined as “the customary ways in which people perceive and use time” during experiences (Cotte, et al., 2004, p. 333). Bergadaà (1990) finds that present-oriented consumers prefer relaxing and non-organized holidays, while future-oriented consumers prefer personally organized and enriching holidays.

First, time can be understood as a dynamic experiential phenomenon that continually influences the experience and meaning before, during, and after the tourist activity. Former or similar experiences, associations, expectations, media, and marketing influence the perceived images of products. However, tourists may not be aware of this process. Because of the dynamic aspect of time, consumers often incorporate both the past and the future into their experiences (Cotte, et al., 2004). Tourists might compare present experiences with former experiences. Thinking about future activities may also affect the present moment (e.g., being anxious about dog sledding down a steep hill the next day). Likewise, tourists continue to relate to and make sense of the experience after the event has taken place. This ongoing process is an important part of nurturing consumers’ memory and identity and points toward the social and relational dimensions of sense making (Weick, 1995), as well as the narrative and bodily dimensions of experience.

Second, tourism cultures and contexts influence the temporal belonging of consumers, previously conceptualized as environment time (Bergadaà, 1990). Change in environment time can be experienced when entering/engaging in tourism contexts and when moving between experiencescapes (Mossberg, 2007a). For example, when consumers are dog sledding in the Arctic Svalbard, they must change from an urban temporality in which clock time is emphasized to a wilderness temporality in which nature time rules. Sometimes, the search for a different temporal experience may be a consumer’s primary tourist motivation (Bergadaà, 1990). Tourists may choose a quiet destination when they want to escape stress. The change from one state of being to another may prove challenging for consumers when they face a destination. For transformation and valuable meaning to occur, tourists must switch temporalities and become immersed in the present moment (Carù & Cova, 2006). However, several challenges may occur during such processes because the past and the future may dominate consumer experiences. For example, new technology, such as social media, enables tourists to keep in touch with their everyday lives while they are on vacation (White & White, 2008). Instead of becoming immersed in
their consumer experience, tourists would, for example, focus on their work relationships. Tourism firms should therefore try to facilitate transformations that are likely to enhance valuable meaning creation.

In Context

Understanding tourists’ context is imperative in understanding the consumer experience. The combination of a tourist’s physical, cultural, and social contexts is integral to understanding his or her context as a whole. The characteristics of contexts may vary between permanent experiencescapes (e.g., museums), nonpermanent scapes (e.g., festivals), and larger experience areas (see Mossberg, 2007b).

First, tourists are always situated in relation to a physical space or context. Space and place have been debated in tourism research (see Griffin & Hayllar, 2009; Stewart, Hayward, Devlin, & Koirby, 1998; Suvantola, 2002). Otto and Ritchie (1996, p. 168) argued that elements of the physical environment “have strong potential to elicit emotional and subjective reactions.” The physical context includes both natural surroundings (e.g., landscape, weather) and the man-made environment (e.g., design, symbols). Although our relationship to the physical context in which we find ourselves is often tacit, it influences the way that we feel, e.g., feeling small and humble when dog sledding in the immense Arctic wilderness. Shifting from an urban to a rural space could be experienced as intimidating or liberating, depending on the tourist’s background. Dog sledding could be a peak experience for a tourist who feels affectionate toward dogs and who enjoys this quiet mode of moving through the landscape, whereas a tourist lacking this interest might find dog sledding boring. Because tourists interpret their physical context differently, the physical context could be argued to be partly constructed (or designed) throughout experiences (Ek, Larsen, Hornskov, & Mansfeldt, 2008).

Second, the tourist cannot avoid viewing phenomena through a cultural “lens” that provides initial meaning (McCracken, 1986). Therefore, culture as context influences a tourist’s experience because tourists are always embedded in culture. For example, the history and stories of the polar explorers Shackleton and Scott can play an important role in attracting attention to and creating the initial image of the Polar Regions, and the stories may continue to influence tourists (particularly British tourists) throughout their polar experiences. Our pre-understanding and, consequently, the way in which we are embedded within the cultural context tend to be tacit. Tourists may become aware of their embeddedness and experience cultural confusion (see Suvantola, 2002) if they do not make sense of activities in strange cultures.

Third, the tourist setting might create a special social context (White & White, 2008). Many experiences involve sharing and communicating with others who are having the same consumption experiences (Wang, 1999).
We concurrently belong to different social tribes and communities (Celsi, et al., 1993; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), and how we relate to and within them affects who we are during the experience. Being a tourist sometimes involves engaging in activities and social norms different from those observed in everyday life (e.g., adopting an “explorer role” of being tough and not complaining about being tired or hungry while dog sledding). Additionally, tourist communities enable new friendships to form (Kim & Jamal, 2007). However, tourists can also relate to a social context without any direct social interaction. The observation of other tourists’ (strangers) engagement, actions, and responses may influence one’s own experiences (Lehn, 2006). The “social makeup” and pressure, as well as a tourist’s need to belong, can also force tourists into group behavior. Thus, the presence of other people in a social context can either undermine or enhance the consumer experience, even when the focal person does not directly interact with other people.

In Body

Our prepositioned body is engaged in various situations and functions as our primary connection to the world and the major locus of our senses and emotions (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962). The body is not an outer shell that contains the “real me” (Nyeng, 2005). Instead, the body, emotions, and consciousness are regarded as integrated parts of one experiential being. Our bodies are involved in experiences through our senses, attunement, approaches, attention, and movement. Recent studies have emphasized the embodied and multi-sensory aspects of experience (e.g., Joy & Sherry, 2003; Lehn, 2006). Instead of considering only sensory information, we argue that our different bodily relations influence our experiences and how we value those experiences.

A consumer experience can be understood as a bodily relation-toward process (see Küpers, 2000) within certain contexts. The body often knows how to act, and this knowledge constitutes a normal state of being in which tourists do not reflect on the existence of their body in the world. However, tourists become aware of their bodies if they experience negative or positive divergence or fail to cope during consumption. A tourist who is unfamiliar with dog sledding or canoeing may struggle during these experiences instead of enjoying nature or being social. A skilled tourist is able to turn the activity into a tacit bodily endeavor more easily. This ability is what Polanyi (1966/1983) called from-to attention in tacit knowing.

Because we relate to the world through our bodies, active and passive activities influence our experiences differently. Watching dolphins or swimming with them (Curtin, 2006) are examples of passive versus active bodily relations. Many adventure tourists are positively triggered by bodily challenges during activities such as kayaking, horseback riding, and
mountaineering. Tourists may choose such activities because they want to challenge their comfort zones and transform into other ways of being. Hence, they seek to learn and cope within challenging contexts. The bodily experience of wellbeing and realization of the self act as rewards for the struggle.

In Interaction

Consumer interactions can range from more externally oriented (e.g., with others or objects) to more internally oriented (e.g., self-reflection). Within the limitations of this article, we have chosen to focus on four main types of interactions: (a) with the self, (b) with others, (c) with animals, and (d) with objects. The nature of interaction is, however, dynamic and co-existing, so the distinction is made for theoretical purposes. During consumer experiences, interactions with the self, others, animals, and objects may occur simultaneously, and the interactions may change rapidly as the tourist engages in various activities.

First, interaction with the self can be considered a process of self-discovery resulting from our relationship to the world. Interactions with the self include reflection, awareness of needs and desires, attention to feelings and thoughts, and reflexive awareness. Interaction with the self often takes place as sense making of what is happening (Galani-Moutafi, 2000). This process explains how self-reflection during an experience can weave current experiences together, both through selective memories from former experiences and through dreams and expectations. Dog sledding through a barren Arctic landscape can, for example, trigger reflections about a tourist’s hectic and materialistic urban lifestyle. These reflections can open people up to changes in their lives when they return home. Consumer experiences often involve participating in new activities and visiting new places and may therefore promote self-reflection. Tourists “can be considered observers who gaze into the elsewhere and the other, while looking for their own reflection” (Galani-Moutafi, 2000, p. 220). Experiences can also become significant when tourists reflect on and make memories of them after a trip (Curtin, 2006). Thus, reflexive awareness and interaction with the self are important elements of the consumer experience.

Second, social interaction can be argued to be one of the most fundamental and important element in how tourists examine, experience, and make sense of the experiencescape (Lehn, 2006; White & White, 2008). Some tourists use vacations to strengthen social/family bonds and their sense of belonging. Even if they engage with people who they know from everyday life, the tourist context tends to change the nature of the interaction. Experiences differ depending on whether they are shared with friends, a romantic partner, or a teenage child. Extended interaction can lead to camaraderie and new friendships (Arnould & Price, 1993; Celsi et al., 1993). Factors such as group dynamics, the amount of time that the group spends
together, and how they cooperate during the experience are all examples of what might affect the experience. The role of the guide can be viewed as both narrator (Henning, 2008) and facilitator of interaction, involvement, and transformation. The roles of other consumers or local inhabitants can affect the experience both positively and negatively (Mossberg, 2007b). Sometimes, tourists may want the “mere presence” and comfort of other tourists to obtain a sense of reassurance and security (White & White, 2008).

Third, human–animal encounters are the core of many tourist products and represent a relationship that differs from social interactions between human beings. Such interactions can take place at various levels and with varying intensity. Although the interaction is less verbal and more embodied, the connectedness and emotional relationship can still be profound. Some tourists form emotional relationships with wild animals (e.g., whales) when observing them in their natural habitats. Certain animals, such as dolphins, are even assigned symbolic and anthropomorphic qualities that clearly have an effect on how tourists interpret and experiences with them (Curtin, 2006). Other experiences may involve close interactions with domestic/tamed animals, such as dog sledding, horseback riding, or farm visits. Research shows that animals can function as “social lubricants” and that animals encourage conversations and stimulate social interactions (Hunt, Hart, & Gomulkiewicz, 1992). How tourists relate to and interact with animals depends on several factors, such as the behavior of the animal; the tourist’s skills, interests, and former experience; cultural meaning; and the information and instruction provided by guides.

Fourth, we propose that interactions with objects influence a tourist’s experience and the meaning created. Examples include the relationship with a canoe during canoeing, with a bicycle during a bicycling holiday, or with an audiovisual guide in a museum. The degree of awareness of the object depends on how familiar tourists are with those objects and whether the interaction occurs smoothly. Interactions with objects are often more or less embodied. For example, experienced bikers would focus not on riding the bike but on the landscape and other interactions. Experienced bikers know how to bike and are one with the bike (Dreyfus, 1991; Polanyi, 1958, 1966/1983), similar to Polanyi’s famous example of the blind man who becomes one with the stick. However, if the tourist lacks practical knowledge of biking, or if the bike breaks down, focus and attention are replaced with a struggle with the bike and hence a change of focus, identity, and activity, which influences the meaning and value of the consumer experience.

Dynamic Experience and Meaning

The multirelational approach would imply that consumer experiences are considered dynamic phenomena in which meaning is continually negotiated as consumers move between embedded, value-laden activities in time.
and as bodily beings. Time dynamically affects experiences (see center of Figure 1) because activities are embedded in time and humans dwell in time. When tourists move between places, they may face different conceptions of time, such as when they move from a city into nature. Additionally, tourists narrate movements from one activity, one type of interaction, and one context and time orientation to another. These stories signify changes in experiences, bodily being, understanding, and meaning. According to the being-in-the-world theory, experiences are normally marked by the sociocultural-historical past. Research on extraordinary experiences shows how consumption can be intense and a renewal of the self (Arnould & Price, 1993), as well as represent a dramatic world view (Celsi et al., 1993). Tourism capacitates extreme experiences. However, the context and the body, with their culturally embedded and embodied meanings, and social interaction, with its social meanings, dominate tourist activities. Therefore, the process of sense making and the negotiation of meaning are dynamic because they are not the same for all tourists. Certain events will stand out in the foreground to different consumers, while other events recede into the background (Thompson et al., 1989). We argue that understanding such dynamics is important in understanding what it means to be a tourist throughout experiencescapes.

Including and combining diverse relational structures when making sense of experiences may be complex. Therefore, we present Figure 2 to illustrate the notion of dynamic experiences. We must emphasize that this is just an illustration and does not approximate the lived experience (see arrows). We use an example of a 3-day commercial dog sledding adventure in the Arctic Svalbard in which the tourists operate their own sleds pulled by six Alaskan huskies. The example focuses on the first day, on which the tourists depart for the dog yard (which is designed as a replica of a trapper station). The tourists learn how to assemble their own dog teams and drive to a remote cabin at the opposite end of the island.

Figure 2 shows various activities that illustrate different experiencescapes. The first part of the trip can be divided into six experiencescapes: (a) briefing at the hotel, (b) acquiring warm clothes at the

![FIGURE 2 The dynamic experience of dog sledding at Svalbard.](https://example.com)
storehouse, (c) riding a minibus to the dog yard, (d) taking a guided tour of the trapping station, (e) harnessing the dogs, and (f) leaving the dog yard on the sleds (see Figure 2). The illustration of experiencescapes in the figure is based on the assumption that all of the main ontological structures suggested in this article coexist. Depending on the characteristics of the experiencescapes, a variety of relationships may be in the foreground or the background of the tourist’s experience (illustrated by the size of the circles). For example, the in-body experience (Circle 1) may be salient when equipment, including the sled, become an extension of the body during the trip. The in-context experience (Circle 4), including both physical and sociocultural aspects, is strengthened when the tourist moves from civilization (e.g., hotel reception) to the isolated dog yard outside town. Interaction (Circle 3) can be a predominant feature in all experiencescapes, but the focus of the interaction will vary from relationships with other tourists (e.g., during the initial briefing) to interaction with the dogs in the dog yard. If a tourist is afraid of dogs, the interaction with the dogs may turn the experience paradoxical and challenging. If a person is coping well, the interaction with the dogs may turn embodied and the experiential focus may turn towards nature.

Time is illustrated by three elements in Figure 2: (a) a chronological timeline for the various activities, (b) arrows representing the transition between the different experiencescapes, and (c) the tourist’s relationship in time within each experiencescape (Circle 2). This illustration shows that dynamic experiences can occur both within the activity and across activities. The chronological timeline represents the progress of the experience as such. The tourists’ relationship to time is expected to vary between experiencescapes. The wilderness time, perhaps in contrast to the urban clock time, is likely to “force” tourists to become immersed in their tourism experiences during one or several experiencescapes. For example, because of the intense interactions with the dogs and the Arctic (in context) when the tourists depart from the dog yard, most tourists are likely to focus on the activities before them. The transformation between experiencescapes may help tourists change their belonging and meaning as beings-in-the-world (i.e., transform from an urban identity to an Arctic dog sledding identity).

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This article suggested, elaborated, and briefly illustrated what we have entitled “a multirelational approach.” Inspired by contributions within the literature on consumer research, tourism, and the being-in-the-world ontology, we have proposed a multirelational model with four main ontological concepts that shape consumer experiences, becoming, and meaning constructions (see Figure 1). These four main concepts point to relationships that occur in and across experiences in time, context, interaction, and bodily being.
We propose the following three claims based on this article: First, the multirelational approach contributes to an understanding of consumer experiences as largely sociocultural-historical. Thus, consumers always reside in networks of meaning when they face tourism contexts. This approach changes the character of the experience from tourist as subject (e.g., Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982) to one that is more relational and shared. Some researchers argue that tourists conform to cultural meaning as they are supposed to (McCracken, 1986; Urry, 1990). However, according to the core aspects of the being-in-the-world ontology (Luft & Overgaard, 2012), such a view is culturally deterministic. Second, the multirelational approach contributes to a dynamic understanding of consumer experiences and meaning. Tourists move across places, interactions, and time. They bring with them their past and their future, as well as their understanding, which affect experiences in the same manner that sociocultural factors do. Experiences are therefore transient and cannot be considered events that are determined only by (tacit) bodily belonging (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006). Third, by focusing on relationships in and across experiences in time, interactions, contexts, and bodily being, we can learn more about the dynamic experiences and interpretive meanings of tourism. We suggest that encounters within tourist contexts enable the consumer to learn about one’s world, oneself, and others throughout transformative experiences. Such transformative learning processes are particularly interesting because they bring deeper insight to significant consumer experiences, as well as to how activities can hamper or facilitate valuable experiences. The multirelational approach suggests that we can develop a deeper understanding of activities and experiences in and across these tourist relationships, including where the tourists come from and where they are going (Sköldberg, 1998).

This article adopts a contemporary experiential view within interpretive research (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Carù & Cova, 2003; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989) in which consumption is defined as activity that involves the experience of meanings and symbols, rather than a utilitarian view of the consumer as an information seeking and multi-attribute processing subject (Carù & Cova, 2007b). The multirelational approach contributes to a broader and more holistic orientation (which is regarded as rare within marketing research; Carù & Cova, 2003). While co-creation between provider and consumer has been argued to be the main driver of consumer value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), the multirelational approach questions and expands this line of thinking by highlighting the complexity of co-creation. Few scholars have explored how the consumer adds value to his or her final experience (Prebensen & Foss, 2011). In contrast, we provide a multirelational understanding that addresses how consumers may become involved in, and value, tourist situations. Consequently, and unlike what is theorized within the experience economy (e.g., Pine & Gilmore, 1999), meaning and value creation may take place outside the control of tourism providers.
The multirelational approach signifies that consumption is situated, intertwined, and dynamic. Everyday experiences and consumer experiences must be considered a whole, i.e., as lived experiences, with similarities and differences (Nunkoo, Gursoy & Ramkissoon, 2013). Thus, both researchers and the tourism industry must understand what takes place before and after the consumer experience, rather than only during consumption. While much tourism research focuses on a pluralist portrayal and de-differentiation of experience (Uriely, 2005), meaning, or lack thereof, may, according to the multirelational approach, originate in everyday life just as it may originate in tourism consumption. The approach thus contributes to a view of the consumer experience as complex and enduring and augments the understanding of how value creation may occur during consumer experiences. Furthermore, interactions and relationships are not just dedicated to the physical relationships between humans or between humans and objects (which is theorized within the service and experience marketing literature; Bitner, 1992; Mossberg, 2007a). Symbolic relationships may be just as important for tourist experiences in that the past and the potential future may influence meaning creation during consumption.

Within the tourism literature, an increasing number of scholars have adopted a (hermeneutic) phenomenological approach to understand lived experiences (Kim & Jamal, 2007; Pernecky & Jamal, 2010; Ryan, 2000; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; Szarycz, 2009; Wang, 1999). While several of these authors contribute the understanding of tourism from a being-in-the-world perspective (e.g., Wang, 1999), we contribute to this stream of literature by using the being-in-the-world perspective as an ontology that distinguishes the nature of consumer experiences within tourism. Thus, all four abovementioned concepts are present, to various degrees, during consumption.

We have proposed a broader conception of consumer experiences and are aware of other holistic alternatives (Ek, et al., 2008; Jafari, 1987; Knutson & Beck, 2003; Quan & Wang, 2004; Walls et al., 2011). Jafari refers to “the springboard metaphor,” in which six transformations from everyday life to tourist life and back are regarded as important for understanding tourist experiences (1987, p. 151). Such process models are common in outdoor recreation (Borrie & Roggenbuck, 2001), and one must be aware of the essentialist problem when assuming what transformations tourists undergo. Thus, the lived experiences define the limits of consumer experiences, not the limitations of a theory. In their recent review of experiential research, Walls et al. (2011) aim to develop a holistic conceptual model based on a distinction between the external (physical, interaction, individual, and situational) and the internal (cognitive, emotive, extraordinary, and ordinary) elements of the experience. This model attempts to broaden the understanding of how consumers respond to external elements during experiences. However, the model suffers from a dualist ontology that makes it difficult to interpret how (“external”) sociocultural-historical interpretations affect lived
experiences. Although models of consumer experience within tourism cannot overcome dualisms, the multirelational approach attempts to reduce the focus on the internal and external by emphasizing in-use activities in which cultural and social meaning are present from the outset.

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