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# **Exploring the drivers behind experience accumulation – The role of secondary experiences consumed through the eyes of social media influencers**

## **Abstract**

Despite consensus that tourists are increasingly experienced, and their desires and needs are changing, conceptual questions remain unresolved. This article expands the existing body of knowledge by providing insights into the dimensions of an experienced tourist. By treating the level of experience as an outcome rather than as an antecedent and giving a voice to the overlooked supply-side of tourism, this exploratory study contributes new findings to tourism scholarship. Findings are drawn from 15 semi-structured interviews with representatives from German and New Zealand destination management organisations. The findings challenge the previous narrow definition of an experienced tourist, which was based on only a few quantifiable factors. Specifically, the findings demonstrate that being classified as an experienced tourist is a complex, multidimensional and intertwined phenomenon based on eight dimensions that can be summarised as personal identifiers and external facilitators. The study highlights the importance of secondary experiences passively consumed through other people's eyes. It also sheds light onto the dual role of digital narratives as being both a tool for influencing tourists (sociological perspective) and for use by tourists to become influencers themselves (marketing perspective). Considering the growing importance of social influencers and the emergence of influencer marketing, this is a relevant finding with important implications for tourism practitioners and opens avenues for future research in other locations.

## 1. Introduction

The term 'experience' is widely used in academic, professional and everyday language, and the concept of experience is frequently researched in consumer behaviour and tourism research. The plethora of studies on the concept of experience in the tourism context demonstrates its relevance to the field, and while the vivid debate around the term 'experience' depicts its duality, conceptual questions remain unresolved (Sundbo, 2015). Past research has mostly taken a managerial perspective and understood experience as an object of consumption that involves commercial exchange and contributes to profitability (Jensen, Lindberg, & Østergaard, 2015), therewith following Pine and Gilmore's (2011) *experience economy*. Although the creation of memorable experiences remains central in destination management (Ketter, 2018), today's tourists are seeking engaging and interactive experiences that go beyond memorability to also contribute to self-development, personal growth and emotional catharsis through self-actualization (Bosangit, Hibbert, & McCabe, 2015). Closely related to these evolving consumer mind-sets and values comes the progression of economic value towards self-catered transformational experiences (Jantzen, 2013; Kirillova, Lehto, & Cai, 2017). A shift in destination marketing is recognisable going beyond destination characteristics and a focus on objective experiences, and instead addressing more subjective elements of experiencing, such as senses and emotions (Ketter, 2018). Equally, the research focus has shifted from managerial and mostly objective to more personal and subjective approaches and the term 'experience' is now being explored from a social science standpoint (Björk, 2014; Coelho, Gosling, & Almeida, 2018).

From a humanistic perspective, experiences are understood as knowledge or skills accumulated over time through participation in events and reflections of these lived experiences (Seeler, Lück,

& Schänzel, 2018). Past experiences have been identified as being influential in shaping personal identity and contributing to personal growth (Boswijk, Peelen, & Olthof, 2013). In addition, several studies referred to prior experiences to explain and predict decision-making, motivation and travel behaviour (e.g., Crouch, Huybers, & Oppewal, 2016; Jørgensen, Law, & King, 2018). The travel career ladder (TCL) (Pearce & Caltabiano, 1983), later refined as travel career pattern (TCP) (Pearce & Lee, 2005) is one of the most cited and applied frameworks in this context. Pearce and colleagues distinguished high and low levels of prior experiences based on the variables, quantity of domestic and international travel experiences and age and treated the level of prior experience as an antecedent to predict travel behaviour and motivation. Other studies used the term *experienced tourist* without clearly demarcating them from inexperienced tourists. Simplified assumptions were drawn, such as equating higher age with higher experience levels (Balderas-Cejudo, Patterson, & Leeson, 2019; Moal-Ulvoas, 2017) or declaring repeat visitors as experienced tourists (Han & Hwang, 2018).

Tourists with higher experience levels have also been associated with adventurers and explorers whose narratives were understood to pave the way for less experienced tourists (Laing, Crouch, Jackson, Morgan, & Hemmington, 2009) and their behaviour was assumed to be more ethically responsible (Lee, Bonn, Reid, & Kim, 2017). However, an ambiguous understanding of the process of experience accumulation and resulting level of prior experience remains, and past research has failed to identify the dimensions of an experienced tourist more holistically. This empirical study responds to the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the experienced tourist as an influential role model and promising market segment for a sustainable tourism development. It is aimed at expanding existing theories and models on the concept of experience in tourism research by exploring the level of experience as an outcome variable instead of as an

antecedent. An exploratory approach was adopted to empirically examine the underlying constructs and dimensions of an experienced tourist and to go beyond predefined measures that were used in past studies to identify the level of experience. Central to this inductive study is the definitional question of '*Who is an experienced tourist?*'

Due to today's digitally connected environment and the changing media landscape in which the consumer is democratised and takes an active part in crafting and disseminating information, experiential marketing is growing in importance and online social networking sites (SNS) are progressively utilised to realise more consumer-centric approaches (Ketter, 2018; Le, Scott, & Lohmann, 2019). These more integrative and participatory forms of marketing have contributed to modifications of traditional roles in delivering marketing messages and led to the emergence of social media influencers (SMIs). Approaches have explored the motivations of SMIs or the influence of user-generated-content (UGC) and digital narratives on the decision-making processes of others (Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Guidry Moulard, 2018; Lin, Bruning, & Swarna, 2018). Alongside the aims to explore the dimensions of an experienced tourist in general, this article seeks to explore the role of social influencers and secondary experiences in the tourist's process of experience accumulation. It addresses gaps in the literature related to the role that online digital narratives play in passive consumption and secondary experiencing through other people's eyes. As findings are based on interviews with German and New Zealand representatives from 15 Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), it also responds to the call for approaches that go beyond consumer perspectives and instead incorporate tourism employees' perspectives (Coelho et al., 2018). With an in-depth understanding of the dimensions of an experienced tourist and the role of secondary experiences in the process of experience

accumulation, new insights that expand tourism scholarship and provide meaningful implications for tourism practitioners are provided.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Duality of the term ‘experience’ in tourism research**

In the English language, the term ‘experience’ is multi-layered, incorporates two broader semantic meanings and depicts syntactic dualities through being used as both a verb and a noun. However, no universally-accepted definition of the term exists (Sundbo, 2015) and the different meanings of experience are often misapplied in the English literature on the topic (Boswijk et al., 2013). Most studies in consumer and tourism research have used the term ‘experience’ to investigate a moment-in-time, lived experience, which equals a countable event through active participation (Björk, 2014; Boswijk et al., 2013). Taking a managerial and supply-side perspective, the objective creation of (memorable) experiences was emphasised and the principles of Pine and Gilmore’s (2011) *experience economy* were followed. With the progression of economic value from experiences to transformations, a shift towards more social-science approaches has occurred and the humanistic/subjective meanings of ‘experience’ have been explored (Coelho et. al, 2018; Jantzen, 2013). From this perspective, scholars understand experiences as complex, subjective processes containing the recollection, reflection and redefinition of memories and the transfer of these meaningful moments into personal knowledge (Boswijk et al., 2013; Smed, 2012). Therefore, the consumption of experiences and the tourists themselves are at the centre of analysis, and experiences are interpreted as deeply engrained in the individual’s mind.

To overcome semantic ambiguities related to the term 'experience' in the English language, the German translations *Erlebnis* (moment-in-time lived experience) and *Erfahrung* (accumulated experiences) are frequently used (Jantzen, 2013; Smed, 2012; Sundbo, 2015). An *Erlebnis* is considered objective as the event can be experienced by others as well, while an *Erfahrung* is considered subjective as it is the emotional and cognitive influence on a single individual and is processed in that individual's mind. Sundbo (2015) further distinguishes between experiences as hedonic products of expressive consumption (*Erlebnis*) and experiences as learning products with a focus on creating existential meaning (*Erfahrung*), while Jensen et al. (2015) note that experiences can be understood in present tense (*Erlebnis*), past tense (*Erfahrung*) or a combination thereof. In addition, the interconnectedness between the two meanings of experience has been addressed, a mutual dependency between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* established and a continuous flow between the two forms of experiencing proposed (Smed, 2012). This optimal flow of experiencing in a continuous loop of partaking and reminiscing contributes to the accumulation of experiences and shapes and develops self-identity (Bosangit et al., 2015).

Today's tourists are recognised as more sophisticated and well-travelled compared to those in the past. These experienced tourists are assumed to be more adventurous, environmentally sensitive, respectful of cultures and socially responsible while travelling more independently and becoming savvier and more demanding (Huang et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2017). The level of prior experience has also been used to explain other travel related aspects such as online information search behaviour (Crouch et al., 2016), expectations and satisfaction (Han & Hwang, 2018) or destination choice (Jørgensen et al., 2018). The importance of being experienced on the predictability of particular behaviour was acknowledged, yet despite the awareness that prior experiences are considered multidimensional subjective constructs (Sharifpour & Walters, 2014),

measures were limited and based on a few predefined variables, such as age and the number of past domestic and/or international trips in Pearce and colleagues influential TCL and TCP frameworks (Pearce & Caltabiano, 1983; Pearce & Lee, 2005). As an intelligible and empirically sound definition of an experienced tourist is missing, these research aims to address this research gap and propose a more holistic understanding of the dimensions of an experienced tourist.

Ketter (2018, p. 333) notes the importance of experiential marketing as the link between tourism destination offerings and the desires of “modern and experienced tourism consumers”. Similarly, Lugosi and Walls (2013) summarise that experiential marketing emerged as a response to the increasingly affluent, informed, sophisticated, free-thinking and demanding consumers. It takes on a consumer-centric approach, understands consumption experiences as a combination of tangible and intangible elements, acknowledges rationality and emotionality in decision-making, and seeks ways to connect the demand-side to the supply-side by focussing on engagement, interactions and relationships (Ketter, 2018). Through its engagement approach and symbolic stimuli, experiential marketing goes beyond satisfaction and is about evoking emotional and imaginative responses that encourage memorability and attachment (Le et al., 2019). Schmitt (1999) argues that this can be achieved through five ways: sensing, feeling, thinking, acting, and relating. This also means a shift away from traditional marketing towards more interactive, participatory and multisensory forms of marketing. These integrative forms of marketing are encouraged by the development of new technologies and especially the emergence of SNSs and its effectiveness is mirrored in an increasing use of IT-related communication formats throughout the different stages of a travel journey. However, more research on the role of innovation and technology in experiential marketing and the role of SNSs in active and passive experience accumulation is needed (Ketter, 2018; Le et al., 2019).



## **2.2 Social networking sites**

Technological advances, particularly in mobile technologies, have revolutionised the way tourists get inspired, plan their trips and share their experiences. The emergence and rapid growth of SNSs and the closely associated increasing importance of UGC has brought new dynamics to tourism marketing that allow for unique and rich mediated experimental environments, social exchange and interactions. Tourists are generally more actively engaged in digital information sharing, which leads to multidirectional communication, the empowerment of tourists and the development of a bottom-up communication approach (Audrezet et al., 2018; Leung, Law, Van Hoof & Buhalis, 2013). SNSs facilitate tourists to get inspired, conveniently access personally relevant information and promote learning. They further encourage tourists to immediately co-construct their own experience and become online narrators and storytellers. Accordingly, tourists are evolving from consumers of social media content to active producers.

### **2.2.1 Digital narratives**

Tourists use social media, such as platforms for crowd-sourced reviews (e.g., TripAdvisor), media sharing sites (e.g., YouTube) and online communities (e.g., Facebook, Instagram), to co-construct their experiences through shared images, videos or written narratives (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016; Leung et al., 2013). Sharing narratives and pictures online serves as an external memory storage which allows tourists to constantly reengage with their experiences and transform them into meaningful memories (Bosangit et al., 2015; MacKay & Vogt, 2012). Moreover, the constant accessibility of SNSs leads to a digital immediacy that creates opportunities to widely disseminate one's own experiences and receive feedback in real-time through social circles (Sedera, Lokuge, Atapattu, & Gretzel, 2017). These comments and

endorsements then reinforce one's reflection on the lived experience, encourage meaning-making and drive the transformation of self. The ability to leave comments or endorsements online also creates the possibility for user-to-user interaction, which then generates both sides of digital storytelling: the narrator and the listener. Some tourists use SNSs mostly for personal reasons with the aim of maintaining the magic of memories through stored narratives. However, studies have indicated that most tourists share their experiences online using strategies of self-branding and impression management (Lo & McKercher, 2015; van Nuenen, 2016). Impression management is a form of self-presentation and is defined as "the efforts and strategies employed to manage the beneficial image of self in the presence of others" (Lo & McKercher, 2015, p. 106). New ways of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) that go beyond direct social circles are established and traditional marketing is challenged with the emergence of influencer marketing.

### 2.2.2 eWOM and the social media influencer

While word-of-mouth (WOM) remains the most powerful source in consumer decision-making (The Nielsen Company, 2015), digital media has opened new channels for customer-to-customer communication and peer-to-peer information transmission leading to the emergence of eWOM (Lin et al., 2018). Qualman (2013) postulates that social media and mobile technologies have contributed to a shift from word-of-mouth to *world-of-mouth* in which information circulates beyond direct social circles to include weaker relationships and unknown contacts. Closely associated with this shift towards more multidirectional forms of communication is the growth of SMIs and influencer marketing as a powerful tool for information dissemination and informal branding (Audrezet et al., 2018; Stoldt, Wellman, Ekdale, & Tully, 2019). Influencer marketing is generally considered a hybrid of old and new marketing tools as it leverages the power of celebrities for product and brand endorsement. As today's consumers are savvier and more

difficult to reach, the current trend moves away from celebrity endorsement towards micro-influencers and nano-influencers (Haenlein & Libai, 2017). Micro-influencers (10,000 to 50,000 followers) and nano-influencers (1,000 to 10,000) are the smaller tiers of SMIs with less followers and mostly niche audiences, yet are characterised by a highly engaged community, real-life relationships and powerful persuasions (Lin et al., 2018). This also means that anyone can be an influencer and, with more people sharing experiences online, the media environment becomes more cluttered.

The rise of micro-influencers and nano-influencers can be beneficial for tourism businesses due to their lower price points, higher authenticity and trustworthiness. Existing studies have looked at the implementation of influencer marketing in overall marketing strategies, investigated the motivations of bloggers and influencers and explored the voices created online (Park, Seo, & Kandampully, 2016; Xu & Pratt, 2018), yet literature on how DMOs actively engage with social media influencers as digital content creators and promoters of their destination remains limited (Stoldt et al., 2019). In addition, little attention has been given to the role of secondary experiencing through digital media and to the question of how tourists virtually consume experiences through other people's eyes. In describing primary experiences as direct interactions personally lived through and secondary experiences as those experienced by others and shared through online stories, the American psychologist Reed alerted already in 1996 that secondary experiences might replace primary experiences due to the technological development. Boswijk et al. (2013) also acknowledge the incremental role of social media for consuming secondary experiences. However, research to date failed to acknowledge the roles of passive and secondary experiencing when distinguishing between experienced and inexperienced tourists. This study

contributes to the research in this area as it examined the roles of SMIs and secondary experiences in the process of experience accumulation.

### **3. Methodology**

This qualitative-exploratory study employed a post-positivist paradigm to examine the dimensions of an experienced tourist (research aim 1) and the role of secondary experiences consumed through other people's eyes in the process of experience accumulation (research aim 2) from a supply-side perspective. The study diverts from previous research as it explored the antecedents of being identified as an experienced tourist instead of using the level of experience as predictor variable. Against the background that an authorized definition of an experienced tourist is missing, an exploratory and inductive research design proved most suitable to approach the complex topic and generate thick descriptions (Stebbins, 2001).

Scholars have identified post-positivism as an offspring of and reaction to the critiques of positivism and view it as a marginal deviation and extension from purist interpretations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Although post-positivists generally strive to be as neutral as possible, purists' worldviews are denied and naturalistic perspectives approximated (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Ontologically, the study takes a critical realist perspective. This proved most suitable considering that only a snapshot in time can be achieved and reality is propositional to change as tourists constantly accumulate experiences which means that the level of experience and respectively the studied phenomenon changes (Danermark, 2002). The objective reality inherent in the researched objects is imperfectly apprehended through the subjective interpretations of researchers (Roberts, 2014). From a critical realist perspective and understanding knowledge as a modification of absolute objectivism, this study accepts that the depicted reality of the dimensions of experienced tourists are subject to change, yet can be believed as ultimate truth until proven false (Easton,

2010). As reality autonomously exists prior to consciousness and independently of the researcher's or subject's knowledge of it, critical realists accept that multiple realities might exist (Danermark, 2022). This multiplism of realities is corroborated using two case studies in this research, Germany and New Zealand. Case studies allow the deeper understanding of complex social phenomena, reinforce the discovery-led purpose and the integration of multiple case studies supports the robustness of the findings resulting in analytic benefits (Yin, 2014).

### **3.1 Sampling strategy and data collection methods**

Qualitative semi-structured interviews with industry representatives from DMOs were conducted in both case-study countries and a purposive sampling strategy was implemented to deliberately select participants who could generate meaningful insights and support the exploratory nature of the research project (Denscombe, 2017). The aim was to reflect the overall destination landscape and achieve a representation of DMOs with different destination responsibilities and destination properties, yet similar professional expertise of representatives. Specific criteria (e.g., destination level, destination general properties) were defined and a six-step approach was applied for selection of participants that were representatives of executive positions (Table 1).

*[Table 1: Six step selection approach]*

Employees in higher positions are known to have broader industry knowledge and expertise, greater impact on strategic decision-making and are mostly good communicators, which has been shown to enhance the richness and depth of the data (Darbi & Hall, 2014). Thus, interviewing DMO representatives in managerial positions has supported the validity and reliability of information. In the case of New Zealand, all 32 DMOs that were members of Regional Tourism Organisations New Zealand were taken into consideration and built the sample frame. In

Germany, due to the large size of the country and its compact DMO structure, the sample frame was reduced to DMOs that: (1) were members or cooperation partners of any of the 16 federal state DMOs; (2) were the only entity that represented a specific region; and (3) had at least two million overnight stays in 2015. This narrowed the total sample frame down to 70 German DMOs to consider for the participant selection process. Emphasis in the case selection process was not on the individual participant, but on the destination and the DMO representing the respective destination. Once destinations/DMOs with the overall best fit were identified (steps 1– 5), participants were determined (step 6). As selected interview partners were public persons, the contact details were accessible online, and all participants were recruited personally through email invitations. Representatives from sixteen DMO were invited and fifteen invitees (seven German; eight New Zealand) expressed their willingness to partake and confirmed their participation within a few days. A second email with proposed dates was sent and time arranged to conduct the semi-structured interviews between May and August 2016.

Collecting data through semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the tourism experts' shared assumptions of the dimensions of an experienced tourist. These benefits were accomplished through probe and supplementary questions flexibly integrated into the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). An interview guide containing loosely defined questions in a logical sequence was used to ensure internal consistency, comparability and minimisation of possible interviewer effects, Bearing in mind the exploratory inductive nature of this research, questions were drafted open-ended with the flexibility to change the order of questions, ask follow-up questions or rephrase questions when required (Denscombe, 2017). The following two open-ended questions were prompted:

1. In your own words, how would you define an experienced tourist?

2. What factors influence an individual's process of experience accumulation?

Thirteen of the fifteen interviewees directly referred to social media and elaborated unprompted on the influential role of secondary experiences. If participants did not relate to any external factors or the role of digital media, they were asked the following probe questions:

1. Can you think of any external influences in the process of experience accumulation?
2. What is the role of digital media in the process of experience accumulation?

In addition to the topical questions related to the experienced tourist, introductory and closing questions were prompted that were directly linked to the participants and respective DMOs. This approach more directly strengthened the positive partnership between the researcher and interview partners as questions were highly relevant to them and relatable (Creswell, 2013).

All interviews were completed face-to-face in the respective DMO offices. The average completion time was 50 minutes and all interviews were digitally recorded with the consent of respondents. With the aim of becoming immersed in the data at an early stage, the interviews were transcribed by the primary researcher herself (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interview partners were asked to approve the verbatim transcripts which supported the credibility of the data (Creswell, 2013). Because of the multiple case-study approach involving two countries, interviews were completed in the respective native language of participants and transcribed as recorded. Qualitative data analysis was bilingual, and the only parts translated were those used as quotes in the findings and discussion sections.

### **3.2 Qualitative data analysis**

Bearing in mind the inductive and discovery-led nature of the study and the complexity of the research phenomenon, data were analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) well-established principles of thematic analysis. This study deployed a slightly adapted, four-phased and sequenced coding technique that encouraged a flexible and recursive approach to data analysis. Familiarisation with the data started during transcription and was intensified by reading and rereading the transcripts while taking manual notes, creating a summary of keywords per interview and generating initial codes using paper-and-pencil tools. Coding is a cyclical, dynamic and iterative process that enables the researcher to become deeply immersed in the data, which facilitates and stimulates analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Once initial coding was completed, the emerged codes were taxonomically organised, categorised and continuously revised, rearranged and reclassified. This enabled the synthesis and consolidation of meaning, which resulted in the identification of dominant patterns and eventually the generation of themes. The computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software NVivo11 was used in this second phase of coding and codes were digitally created. These manual and digital processes of inductive coding stimulated a duality of closeness to and distance from the data, which gave rigour to the analysis (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Themes were revised and labels redefined in the third analytical step to ensure that internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity had been achieved (Miles et al., 2014). Once no new themes were being generated (data saturation) with a limited, yet significant, number of derived categories, the themes were given unambiguous and self-explanatory labels. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant (Table 2) and destination names were replaced with generic placeholders for data reporting. The organisational names are



not included for reasons of confidentiality and only minimal information on the DMOs' properties are provided to reduce the risk of uncovering personal and organisational identifiers.

*[Table 2: Overview of participating DMOs and their employee representatives]*

Three DMOs were represented by two employees, resulting in a total of 18 representatives from 15 DMOs participating in the semi-structured interviews. The establishment of protocols and clear procedures, including audio recording and the iterative and multi-phased coding process, ensured the trustworthiness and confirmability of the data.

## **4. Findings**

The eight overall dimensions of an experienced tourist that emerged from the thematic analysis are presented below. With references to the second research aim, emphasis is then given to findings that address the influential role of secondary experiences and digital narratives.

### **4.1 Eight dimensions of an experienced tourist**

The idea for this research originated in the critique that the traditional classification of an experienced tourist is too narrowly defined. Although official tourism statistics confirm that today's tourists have quantitatively more travel experiences, the study participants agreed that the quantity of trips is not a sufficient indicator to determine whether a tourist can be classified as experienced.

*Tobi: [...] the horizon of experience does not grow with the number of trips when the travel pattern remains unchanged.*

It was highlighted that, additionally, experienced tourists will have been exposed to different cultures and will have travelled more widely, meaning that the quantity of trips must be accompanied by a breadth of experiences that includes breadth in travel mode and destination choice.

*Jakob: First, you visit attractions such as Paris and Neuschwanstein Castle. Once you have seen that you will say 'Okay, I know these places already, now I want to explore more rural areas that are off the beaten track.'*

At the same time, there was consensus that experienced tourists continue travelling to traditional/must-see tourist destinations. Consequently, their processes of experience accumulation are defined by this hybridity and the alteration of holiday trips to achieve the best possible outcomes for the self. The hybridity of travel behaviour was also associated with more independent forms of travelling and it was suggested that higher levels of experience generate higher degrees of independence:

*Harriet & Chris: [...] with the increase of past travel experience, there is a tendency to travel more individually, detached from ready-made, packaged trips.*

While there was unanimous agreement that travel experience is likely to build up over an individual's lifetime, DMO representatives challenged the relationship between greater age and higher levels of experience. The younger generations' travel behaviour differs from the travel behaviour of their parents when they were young because today's young people can access different and more mature forms of travel than were available to previous generations.

*Harriet & Chris: They [Generation Y] might have grown up differently, have consumed much more conventionalised goods early in their life. Everyone has an iPhone, everyone*

*has the same experiences. Maybe they have stayed in hotels since their childhood and that is the reason why they are looking for more authentic places.*

However, the findings of this exploratory study reveal that the factors influencing experience accumulation are not limited to the sociodemographic factor of age and travel-related indicators; other factors that are partly unrelated to travel and are external/collectivistic in nature also strongly influence the process. Two independent yet interconnected themes emerged that were broken down into four categories each and comprised several factors identified as influencing experience accumulation (Figure 1)

*[Figure 1: Eight dimensions of an experienced tourist]*

With the aim of this study in mind, emphasis is given to external facilitators that encourage the process of experience accumulation: the advances in (mobile) technologies and online media, more precisely the role of digital narratives and secondary experiences.

#### **4.2 The influential role of secondary experiences and digital narratives**

Industry experts associated the increasingly hybridity and multi-optionality of today's tourists with their generally higher experience levels and discussed the related changes in travel behaviour and decision-making with reference to technological advances and the growth of mobile technologies. In the digital society, tourists have more access to information and are continuously receiving travel inspiration, making it more difficult to identify the actual sources of inspiration. The growing importance of UGC in relation to tourists' booking behaviour is reflected in the following statement:

Jeremy: *Fifty percent of the people who see somebody's post will be encouraged to visit the location. [...] It is just word-of-mouth on stereo. It is just a slightly different channel to tell the story.*

Digital media also bring transparency and comparability, which result in greater degrees of autonomy as mobile technologies facilitate the 24/7 availability of information. This constant availability of information and connectivity contributes to an increased pace and scope of experience accumulation. It gives tourists the feeling of being better prepared and more secure as they can receive more specific information during their trip. This makes travel more flexible and gives tourists the chance to adjust their behaviour based on the situation.

Harriet & Chris: *We are aware that our smartphones are our tour guides wherever and whenever we travel. [...]. People know that their smartphones will always provide some ideas and advice [...] and if you cannot receive the desired information through geo-based data, you ask an online community. You can do that anywhere in the world.*

Rebecca: *So now you don't need to make decisions, maybe you decide to fly to see the land of the Hobbit, but then you get here and you just ask your friends what to do.*

Advances in mobile technologies and the ever-increasing access to data roaming give tourists a sense of safety and “*confidence that they will be ok*” (Rebecca). It was further assumed that the emergence of platforms to digitally narrate one's own experiences provides new methods of eWOM and contributes to higher degrees of transparency, which translates into the accumulation of more knowledge without even travelling to specific places.

Besides information exchange and getting inspiration for future travel, industry experts addressed other underlying and more passive processes of experiencing associated with the sharing of

personal stories without being prompted. Considering the nature of Web 2.0 and the growing amount of UGC, it was suggested that today's tourists accrue experiences through other people's eyes. Several industry experts noted the role of secondary experiences in the process of experience accumulation and postulated that other people's narratives contribute towards higher levels of experiences:

*Peter: So that whole social media world means that they probably have secondary experiences through other people's interactions.*

*Harriet & Chris: In terms of past travel experience it has to be distinguished between what was built up through actual, lived-through travel behaviour and what has been added virtually through the media behaviour.*

Industry representatives further addressed the fluent nature of influencers and the low barriers to becoming a digital storyteller.

*Jack: Anyone in our roles, everybody is playing some role in social media now.*

*Garett: Well the distribution channels might be changing and evolving from broadcast to online [...] And now of course that does include bloggers, and Instagrammers and everyone who wants to call themselves an influencer of some sorts and there is a very low barrier to entry in that space, almost no barrier to entry, actually.*

In a topic closely related to these new forms of social influence and eWOM, industry experts addressed the outward-oriented motivations for using SNSs to share experiences and challenged the authenticity of secondary experiences.

Hamish & Alice: *Part of enjoying the experience is the ability to brag to others back home – “this is a premier event, I have been there, you haven’t”.*

However, one other expert noted that the presentation of self in the online context is no longer limited to the validation of ‘been there, done that’. Shared content rather relates to unique experiences that put the self at the centre of an unexpected journey that is desirable for others to (passively) experience, and thus positively contributes to experience accumulation of both, the narrator and the listener/reader.

Tobi: *[...] I have seen quite a bit of the world already, and the Eiffel tower is not paramount, at the end of the day I want to experience the atmosphere in Paris. I think that has always been the tourists' desire [...] but as I no longer need this 'show-and-tell' to differentiate [...] When they post a picture on Instagram 'Look, I am at the Eiffel tower' that is not too exciting. But if you say I am in a super unique location and eat something typical for the region and say 'Look at this – super exciting here.'*

Although experts ascribed secondary experiences an important role in the process of experience accumulation, they did not consider that digital and virtual experiences lived through other people’s eyes will replace active experiencing. Instead, it was postulated that new technologies and passive ways of experiencing can be supportive tools towards higher satisfaction levels and the fulfilment of the desired personal growth. As a result, the perceived level of experience increases and the self-identification as an experienced tourist is promoted.

## **5. Discussion**

This exploratory study sheds light into the dimensions of an experienced tourist and contributes empirically-grounded insights into the role of secondary experiences in the process of experience

accumulation and the identification of experienced tourists. The study is methodologically novel in its approach as it gives DMO representatives a voice to represent the supply-side's perceptions of an experienced tourist. The study's major finding lies in the realisation that the identification of an experienced tourist is grounded in a multidimensional accumulation set. Thereby this study departs from past research that based their definitions of an experienced tourist on simplified measures without empirically tested evidence. Research participants negated a narrow definition and demonstrated that age and the quantity of prior trips are only two of many influencing factors. Regarding the possible influence of age, findings are in line with Filep and Greenacre (2007) who postulated that having more opportunities to travel does not automatically result in higher levels of experiences as individuals might not have made use of these opportunities. Current studies demonstrate that the travel propensity is no longer attributable to age as today's younger generations accumulate experiences much earlier in their lives through overseas travelling, school trips, working, studying or a combination thereof (Kožić, Mikulić, & Krešić, 2016). However, scholars still use the term *experienced tourist* in relation to senior tourists (Balderas-Cejudo et al., 2019; Moal-Ulvoas, 2017) which is an indication of applying the term without challenging its definition. It further adds to the general issues and incorrect use of the concept of experience in tourism research (Boswijk et al., 2013) and underscores the relevance of this study.

This study claims that hybridity of travel forms and experiences is a decisive indicator of an experienced tourist. Contemporary tourists' identities are fluid and their hybrid travel experiences are now the norm (Boztug, Babakhani, Dolnicar, & Laesser, 2015) which underpins this study's overall proposition that today's tourists are more experienced. With hybrid travel behaviour comes the trend to travel more independently, visit newer, more exotic and less-visited

destinations and a growth of first-timers, which adds not only to the quantity but quality of experience accumulation. In this regard, van Nuenen (2016) argues that the concept of getting lost and fully immersed in the unknown disappears with the constant availability of information and connectivity. This is somewhat opposed to the notion of independent travel where novelty-seeking, surprise and serendipity and making new and unexpected discoveries, including the discovery of self, are at the forefront. However, Huang et al. (2014) found that serendipitous travellers source information predominantly in situ as it allows them to embrace the desired flexibility and leave potential for surprise while ensuring that the best possible outcomes are achieved. By contrast, those aiming for more structured holidays engage in pre-trip planning. These findings endorse the industry experts' assumptions that mobile technologies and digital media encourage tourists to accumulate travel experiences that are memorable and contribute to progressively being identified as an experienced tourist. Thus, the active, yet strategic involvement with digital and mobile technologies is an indication of being experienced and adds a dimension that has previously been overlooked.

It remains the responsibility of the tourism industry and DMOs to ensure that the unexpected hidden gems and local secrets can still be explored. Huang et al. (2014, p. 181) propose that DMOs should learn from the movie industry: "Just like movie trailers, destination websites and promotional materials should try to draw people to the theatre without giving away the plot twists and ending." The difficulties in preserving these images, however, are related to digital media and the nature of multidirectional communication in which tourists are democratised from being passive consumers of broadcast media to being active creators and narrators themselves. Industry experts echo past research in emphasising the dual role of digital media and shared narratives: they represent new ways of receiving information and are reassuring to tourists making decisions;



at the same time, they are new ways of communicating that allow tourists to share their own experiences online and to become storytellers and digital narrators (Leung et al., 2013). These personalised digital narratives not only enable people to organise their experiences, the digital storage prompts tourists to continuously reengage with them. As a result, tourists are supported in transforming their experiences into meaningful memories which then contributes to both, shaping personal identity and the realisation of oneself becoming an increasingly experienced tourist. Thus, the identification as an experienced tourist entails more qualitative elements related to memorable experiences and is not limited to the fact that previous experiences have been accumulated quantitatively. Therewith the study deviates from previous research that used the term *experienced tourist* to label people that actively engage in online communities purely because they had visited a place in the past (Arsal, Woosnam, Baldwin, & Backman, 2010). Jansson (2007) argued that the immediacy of online sharing takes away the magic of coming home as a repeated retelling and re-experiencing of stories through personal exchange is no longer needed. However, sharing narratives online also enables tourists to engage in sense-making throughout the trip as they receive immediate endorsement and feedback from their followers in online communities. Findings from this study not only confirm that sharing experiences online strengthens memorability, the study also proposes that through deliberately reflecting upon the accumulated experiences, the self-identification as an experienced tourist is reinforced.

Alongside their own memories, today's tourists also consume secondary experiences through other people's digital narratives. These digital narratives of others serve as an inspiration source. This is particularly relevant as recommendations from friends and family remain the most important source of travel information as they are ascribed higher reliability and considered to

reflect the ‘true’ picture of an experience that is not retouched for marketing purposes. Secondary experiences also stipulate that tourists no longer must physically travel to a destination to accrue travel experiences – they can engage in virtual travel. This supports the findings of Kim and Fesenmaier (2017, p. 28) who suggested that social media allows people to “experience the traveller’s footsteps without physically being there.” The individual’s level of experience is then a mixture of personally lived experience and secondary experiences asynchronously consumed through the digital narratives of other travellers. This is in line with Campbell’s (1995) differentiation of primary and secondary qualities of experiences, which he further distinguished as ‘having an experience’ (active) and ‘knowing an experience’ (passive). With the growing importance of social influence through digital narratives and (audio-)visual content sharing on tourists’ decision-making behaviour (Sedera et al., 2017), the likelihood of secondary/passive experiencing increases. At the same time, influencers are becoming more fluent (Haenlein & Libai, 2017) and, as also addressed by industry experts in this study, a trend of *anybody-ness* and invisible influence is emerging.

From a managerial point of view, marketing is constantly changing towards more multidirectional and experiential forms of communication in which consumers are empowered and informal branding is growing in significance. Due to the novelty of the topic, research to date is limited and most existing studies have focused on either SMIs or on managerial implications (Audrezet et al., 2018; Park et al., 2016). This study sheds light into the influential role of secondary experiences gained through other people’s digital narratives on the perceived level of experience. Based on the findings of this study, it is suggested that experiencing places through other people’s eyes contributes to the process of experience accumulation. Thus, an individual’s experience level is composed of both their own, lived experiences (active experience) and

secondary experiences consumed through other people's narratives (passive experience). This indicates that digital narratives and the influence of SMIs is not only of managerial relevance in regard to tactical marketing decisions, but are of sociological interest and relevance as digital narratives also serve as secondary experiences that add to an individual's process of experience accumulation – an area that has been neglected in research to date. It further stresses the cognitive and partly subconsciously perceived nature of experience accumulation and advocates for the overall assumption that the classification of experienced tourists needs to go beyond a few quantifiable and measurable facts.

With attention to the role of social media, Figure 2 synthesises the dynamics of *being influenced* in the accumulation of primary and secondary experiences and *becoming an influencer* through digitally narrating own experiences.

*[Figure 2: Duality of being influenced and influencing in the process of experience accumulation]*

The model depicts the different players involved in the process of experience accumulation, namely the tourists themselves, friends and family members, SMIs and DMOs and the tourism industry in general. While demonstrating the interaction and relationships between the different stakeholders, considering the transitory nature of experiences and highlighting the interplay between primary and secondary experiencing, the model bears analogies to Williams and Anderson's (2005) theatre perspective. Tourists in this model can take a more passive and spectator-based role and represent the audience that mostly consumes information and is *being influenced*. This resonates a more traditional play with a functional script where core messages are transported by DMOs and the tourism industry itself as scriptwriters, directors and lead actors

while SMIs, friends and family occupy more supportive roles. By accumulating experiences and actively engaging in sharing memories online, tourists progressively become more active players and influencers themselves which is also reflected in the growing importance of experiential marketing (Ketter, 2018). This study's findings echo Williams and Anderson's (2005, p. 14) assumptions that theatre is about "recreating a reality" (here storage function) or "bringing to life a fantasy" (here sharing function) while extending the self and understanding one's own changing role. As social media elevates the degree of tourists' involvement, the script moves more towards improvisation theatres where actions are more creative, spontaneous, unpredictable and uncontrolled (Vera & Crossan, 2004). Only if tourism businesses acknowledge the modification of roles and actively integrate tourists as leading actors in their overall marketing messages, can they secure the roles of scriptwriters and avoid that they become the audience themselves. The focus in these improvisational plays is on the collaborative processes and not the outcomes (Vera & Crossan, 2004; Williams & Anderson, 2005). This lends further evidence to the significance of this study exploring the continuous and multi-layered processes of experience accumulation and growth towards becoming an experienced tourist.

## **6. Conclusion, implications and limitations**

Recognising the role of prior experience on future travel behaviour (Crouch et al., 2016; Jørgensen et al., 2018; Pearce & Lee, 2005) and the assumption that experienced tourists travel in a more socially responsible way and are more environmentally sensitive (Huang et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2017), it seems vitally important to understand the dimensions of an experienced tourist more holistically. This study is novel as it explored the level of experience as an outcome variable instead of as an antecedent or predictor and therewith provides a valuable theoretical contribution to tourism scholarship. This article sets out to define the dimensions of an

experienced tourist from the perspective of DMO representatives in order to advance the understanding of today's increasingly experienced tourists. The methodological choice of integrating industry experts from German and New Zealand DMOs appears to be the first of its kind to provide a comprehensive assessment of the underlying constructs that classify a tourist as experienced from a supply-side perspective. Furthermore, the study is methodologically novel as it employed a qualitative research agenda and departs from most existing studies, which have applied quantitative data collection tools to investigate prior experience levels.

Findings indicate that the previously dominant narrow definition of an experienced tourist no longer provides a sufficient understanding of this promising market segment. Instead, the identification of a tourist as experienced is assumed to be multidimensional and complex consisting of eight overall dimensions that range from personal identifiers to external facilitators. The study further advocates the significant role of advances in technology and digital media in the individual's process of experience accumulation. While the study confirms the important role of social media and social media influencers in tourists' decision-making processes, it also postulates that social influence goes beyond these initial stages of inspiration and travel planning. The study suggests that secondary experiences consumed and passively accumulated through other people's online narratives also contribute to higher self-perceived experience levels. Therefore, a new theoretical understanding of the role of secondary experiences in the process of experience accumulation is achieved going beyond previously dominant managerial implications associated with influencer marketing.

Considering that today's experienced tourists are savvier, prefer real people's opinions over sales pitches, and that decision-making is increasingly crowd-sourced and peer-validated, these findings are of critical relevance for tourism marketing and strategic planning. The findings of

this study further reveal the duality of being influenced and becoming an influencer. It advocates the multidirectional communication established through digital media, particularly social media, adds a dimension to the roles and responsibilities of SMIs and validates the importance of experiential marketing. As SMIs have not only the power to influence the decision-making processes of others but have also an impact on the individual's level of experience through passive learning and experiencing, DMOs need to reconsider the role of SMIs in overall marketing strategies. Considering that tourists can be guided towards more desirable travel behaviour through passive experiencing, DMOs should endeavour to integrate SMIs more holistically in marketing and destination strategies. SMIs are not only scriptwriters, narrators and lead actors to distribute the company's message and contribute to economic (short-term) success, but are also valuable assets to ensure a more sustainable future of the tourism industry in general.

This research is not without limitations. Experts from German and New Zealand DMOs were interviewed – two markets that are considered relatively mature with a high degree of professionalism in destination marketing and management. While the aim was to reflect on experienced tourists in a more global sense and industry experts referred to tourists from different source markets that are in different stages of maturity, it is likely that the experts' comments mostly pertained to tourists within their own destination. Future research on the topic should overcome this situatedness and consider incorporating voices from professionals representing markets that are less mature and DMOs that are at different levels of organisational professionalism. The purposive sampling strategy was aimed at DMO representatives at executive level, who are frequently neglected in tourism research. Despite the critical importance of other tourism and hospitality providers in the creation of experiences, these were not acknowledged in this study. Future studies should consider incorporating other supply-side

voices as well (e.g., tourism operators, accommodation providers). It is also important to note that the findings presented in this article are industry representatives' perceptions from an outsider perspective and, due to the rapidly changing nature of tourists' levels of experience, it is likely that the dimensions of an experienced tourist will shift over time and that reassessment will be required. It is recommended to incorporate a demand-side voice in future research, either in the form of qualitative in-depth interviews with tourists who consider themselves as more experienced or in the form of large-scale representative quantitative studies. Lastly, it would be interesting to explore how SMIs, particularly micro-influencers and nano-influencers, consider their roles as providers of secondary experiences. In this regard, future studies should also explore whether SMIs are aware of their significant role, not only in a tourist's personal development but in the overall development of a sustainable tourism future.

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*Table 1: Six step selection approach*

<b>Step</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Variables</b>
1	Identify the destination level and level of responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National</li> <li>• State/region</li> <li>• Municipality</li> </ul>
2	Identify the geographical location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• North</li> <li>• South</li> <li>• West</li> <li>• East</li> </ul>
3	Identify the destination's general properties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mountainous</li> <li>• Nature-based/rural</li> <li>• Coastal/beach</li> <li>• City</li> </ul>
4	Assess the overall performance and importance of tourism in the destination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Annual tourist arrivals</li> <li>• Growth rates</li> <li>• Market share</li> </ul>
5	Collect background information about the DMO representing the destination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Size of organisation</li> <li>• Organisational structure</li> <li>• Functions &amp; responsibilities</li> <li>• Strategic aims</li> </ul>
6	Identify representatives of DMOs as interviewees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CEO</li> <li>• Marketing/communications manager</li> <li>• Consumer insights manager</li> <li>• Tourism manager</li> </ul>

Table 3: Overview of participating DMOs and their employee representatives

<b>Case study</b>	<b>Employee pseudonym</b>	<b>Employee position(s)</b>	<b>DMO size<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>DMO funding and government structure<sup>b</sup></b>
GER	Melanie	Head of visitor services	Large	Public-private partnership with shareholder structure
GER	Jakob	Head of consumer insights	Large	Government funded
GER	Tobi	Head of consumer insights	Medium	Public-private partnership with shareholder structure
GER	Harriet & Chris	CEO Head of consumer insights	Medium	Membership organisation with elected government board and additional government funds
GER	Finn	CEO	Small	Membership organisation
GER	Matt	CEO	Medium	Membership organisation
GER	Claus	Head of consumer insights	Medium	Membership organisation
NZ	Jack	Head of tourism	Large	n/a
NZ	Rebecca	Head of marketing	Medium	Mostly city council and local government
NZ	Garrett	CEO	Small	Tourism promotion levy on commercial rate payers; governed by a board of elected representatives
NZ	Jeremy	General manager	Small	Funded, owned and governed by cooperating tourism operators
NZ	Peter	General manager of regional promotion	Small	n/a
NZ	Hamish & Alice	Chief advisor Communications manager	Small	Membership organisation with additional government funds
NZ	Max & Gary	CEO Head of visitor services	Medium	Public-private partnership, council controlled with independent board
NZ	Lena	Consumer insights analyst	Large	Government funded

<sup>a</sup>Number of employees: small  $\leq 19$ , medium 20–99, large  $\geq 100$ .

<sup>b</sup>Information provided by participants at time of interview completion.



Figure 3: Eight dimensions of an experienced tourist

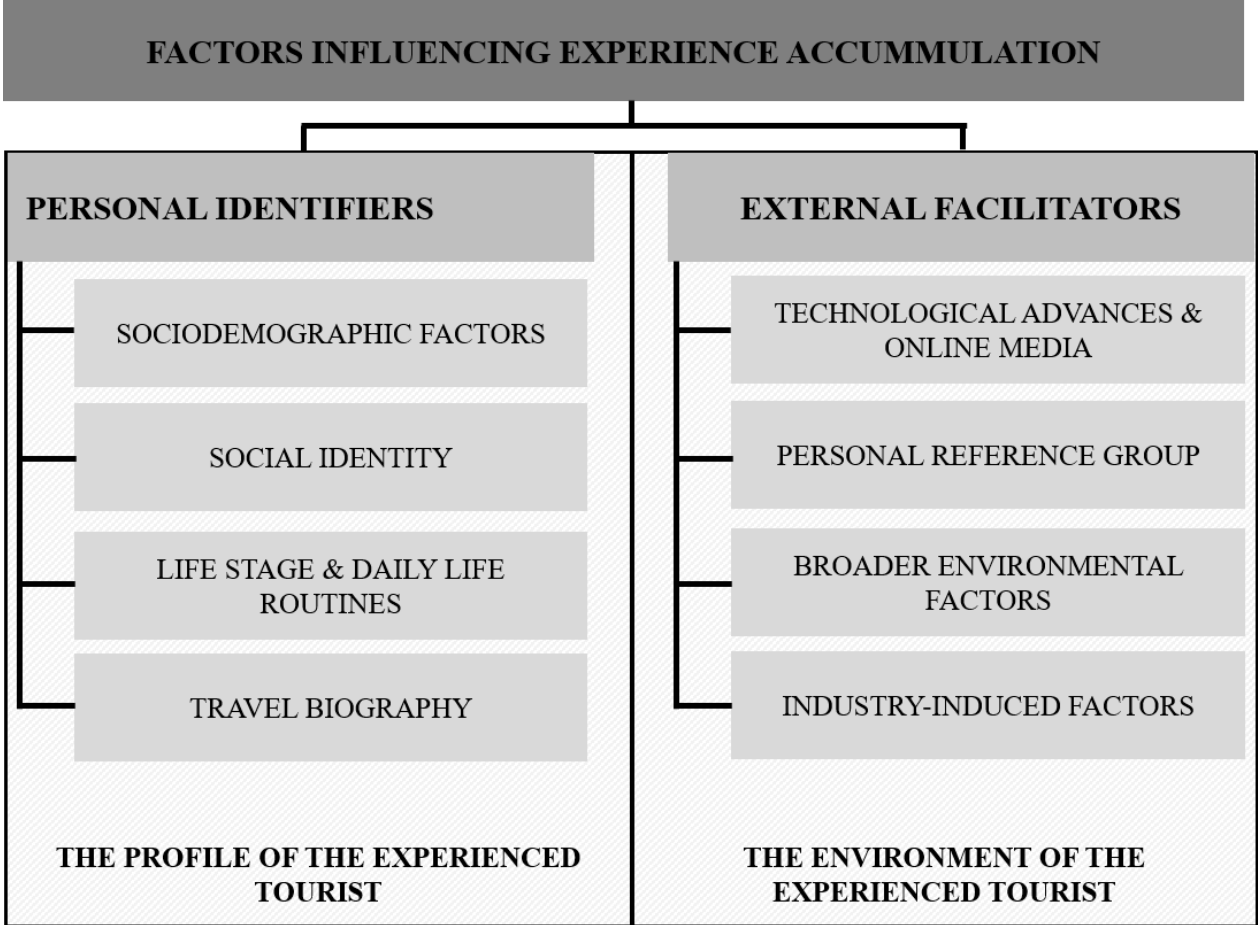


Figure 4: Duality of being influenced and influencing in the process of experience accumulation

