Instagramming nature-based tourism experiences: a netnographic study of online photography and value creation

Eugenio Conti[a,b,*], Maria Lexhagen[b]

[a] Center for Tourism and Leisure Research (CeTLeR), Dalarna University, Röda vägen 3, 781 70 Borlänge, Sweden
[b] European Tourism Research Institute (ETOUR), Mid Sweden University, Kunskapens väg 1, 831 25 Östersund, Sweden

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to explore the role of online photography in creating experience value in nature-based tourism, and what types of experience value are conveyed through photography-based user-generated content. The paper draws from existing literature in defining tourism experience value as a subjective, inter-subjective and inter-contextual construct, performed by situated valuation practices. Consequently, the paper presents interpretive and participatory netnography as an effective method to investigate experience value, and identifies online photography on Instagram as both a valuing practice and a valuing place. Results show the capability of online photography-based UGC to create multidimensional values from strategic combinations of textual and visual content. Simultaneously, new dimensions of experience value are introduced, which exist beyond single tourism experiential encounters, but critically contribute to an iterative experience valuation. Finally, Instagram posts introduce valuation timelines that can elude linear models of pre/in-situ/post-experience valuation, and assume subjective and fluid connotations.

1. Introduction

The diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) opened several new research venues around experience value creation online (Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009; Dickinson et al., 2014; Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2012). On the one hand, the advent of Web 2.0 and social media transformed the internet into a bottom-up, user-generated space (Ibid; Pearce & Moscardo, 2015). On the other hand, the capability to access web 2.0 and social media ubiquitously, as a result of the diffusion of smartphones, allowed tourists to become spontaneous generators of online content about what they experience during their daily life (Ibid; Buhalis & Foerste, 2015). Furthermore, by sharing content online, social media and mobile technologies have enabled the establishment of online communities of value creators (Tynan & McKechnie, 2009). Such communities interact and share passions, affections and personal meanings, creating at the same time emotional bonds (Cuomo, Tortora, Festa, Giordano, & Metallo, 2016; Rokka, 2010). User-generated content (UGC) on social media is, therefore, a reflection of tourists' emotions, beliefs and preferences about their travel experience (Ibid, Buhalis & Foerste, 2015; Woodside, Cruickshank, & Dehuang, 2007). Consequently, UGC has become a relevant source of data to gain customer-based knowledge about tourism experience value directly from the tourists (Ibid; Fuchs, Höpken, &

Lexhagen, 2017; Marchiori & Cantoni, 2015; Yachin, 2018).

When using online communities to study tourism experiences, most tourism research departs from post-positivist ontologies of technology, according to which Web 2.0 is seen as a space dominated by generalizable processes of information exchange, and where human users are objectified through reductionist and deterministic theories of human behaviour (Munar, Gyimóthy, & Cai, 2013; Pourfakhimi, Duncan, & Coetzee, 2019). Consequently, current online research mostly uses "covert" netnographies, in order to minimize the interference of the researcher and maximize the amount of data gathered at a given time (Bartl, Kannan, & Stockinger, 2016; Mkono & Markwell, 2014). Particularly within management research, Ghoshal (2005) and Tribe (2008) recognize a general trend to favour post-positivist methodologies in a fashion that connect quantitative measurements, technical rationality and industry profitability. Furthermore, Hatchuel (2005) argues that by borrowing post-positivist epistemologies, the focus of managerial research gradually became the search for objective truth, thereby downplaying the human context and how knowledge is subjectively enacted.

This ontological and methodological bias is particularly problematic in the context of experience value, the understanding of which moved gradually towards multifaceted definitions which encompass subjective sensemaking, inter-subjectivity and inter-contextuality (Helkkula,

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Kelleher, & Pihlström, 2012; Kelleher & Peppard, 2011). Consequently, we argue that online research on experience value should recognize human users' status as subjects and of their authorship power (Ibid; Hatchuel, 2005; Tribe, 2008), and simultaneously provide findings that minimize researchers' preconceptions and favour users' interpretations and sense-making (Ibid; Kozinets, 2015; Pourfakhimi et al., 2019). By doing this, Woodruff's appeal to develop richer investigations of experience value, which account for the depth of the consumer's world and the different contexts of experience value creation Woodruff (1997), can be empirically pursued.

In agreement with such arguments, we adopt an interpretive stance and conduct an explorative participatory netnography, with the aim to investigate what tourism experience values are conveyed through photography-based UGC, and the role of online photography in creating experience value in tourism. The context of the study is Instagram, perceived as a social media that tourists use to share valuable aspects of what they experience by means of text and visuals (Conti & Heldt Cassel, 2019; Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen, & Carter, 2015; Lo & McKercher, 2015; Pink, 2013). More specifically, we build our sample from the Instagram geo-tags of three National Parks in Sweden: Skuleskogen National Park, Fulufjället National Park and Tiveden National Park.

Therefore, this research offers both an empirical and methodological contribution within the conceptual fields of tourism experience value, tourism social media and tourism photography. First, this research offers empirical evidence of the ability of online photography to display tourism valuations that refer to tourists' lifeworld contexts, social networks and imaginary practices (Helkkula et al., 2012). These valuations reflect the dynamic of attaching personal meanings and emotions to tourism places and resources, which makes up an important part of customer-based knowledge of tourism experiences (Yachin, 2018). Understanding such valuations, as well as what can be accepted as evidence about them, can help tourism managers in crafting adequate value propositions in a context such as tourism experiences, which is dominated by customers' subjective interpretations of value (Ibid; Helkkula et al., 2012; Verhoef & Lemon, 2013). Second, we believe that this study is an example of how adopting interpretive methodologies while studying online communities can help in showing a de-objectified view of the online space, reaffirming its nature as a human and cultural space (Kozinets, 2015; Munar et al., 2013; Tribe, 2008). At the same time, it also gives a de-objectified view of online users, restating their nature as dignified human subjects, performers, interpreters and authors (Ibid; Helkkula et al., 2012; Lugosi & Quinton, 2018).

Finally, empirical research on experience value in the context of nature-based tourism experiences is limited. Tourists' sensemaking and several dimensions of value are explored in areas such as well-being and spirituality in nature (Heintzman, 2009), but are rarely connected with experience value creation, particularly in an online context.

Therefore, the present study is relevant for the field of nature-based tourism, where further research on the relationship between nature-based experiences, value creation and typologies of sense-making is needed (Vespestad & Lindberg, 2011).

2. Literature review

2.1. Experience value: Paradigmatic evolutions

Definitions of consumer value are traditionally based on the rationalized cognition of utility of a product, objectified through cost-benefit equations (Salem Khalifa, 2004; Sánchez-Fernández & Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007; Verhoef & Lemon, 2013). In time, however, the concept of value is based on a more experiential and multi-dimensional definition, including utilitarian as well as hedonic, utopian and eudemonic components, which are subjectively interrelated in shaping consumers' perceptions (Ibid; Lengieza, Hunt, & Swim, 2019; Tynan & McKechnie,

2009). Holbrook defines value as "an interactive relativistic preference experience" (Holbrook, 1999, p. 5) emerging from an interaction between the consumer and the product, and attributed out of subjective interrelations of convenience, fun, quality, aesthetics, personal status, esteem, as well as personal ethics and spirituality (Ibid). Prebensen (2014) distinguishes a functional and utilitarian value from emotional, social (in terms of social status and self-image) and epistemic value, the latter dependent on excitement, skill and knowledge development. At the same time, Kozinets (2019) and Maclaran and Brown (2005) underline how utopianism, understood as imagination and storytelling related to dreaming, self-reflexivity, self-expression and self-transformation, acts as a source of personal and collective consumption values. Recently, Huta and Waterman (2014) and Lengieza et al. (2019) investigated eudemonic dimensions of value, which include perceptions of personal growth and self-reflexivity as dimensions parallel but distinguished from hedonic dimensions of entertainment and pleasure. Utopianism and eudemonia remain relatively underrepresented in comparison with other components of experience value (Ibid). Research in nature-based tourism recognize several of the aforementioned dimensions of tourism experiences in natural areas. Vespestad and Lindberg (2011) include utopian end eudemonic themes of authenticity, holiness, hedonic themes of relaxation and relational themes of socialization in recent studies of nature-based tourism experiences. These are usually connected with well-being and spiritual growth (Hansen, Jones, & Tocchini, 2017; Heintzman, 2009). The concept of "slow adventure" is recently introduced to describe Nordic-specific experiences of personal transformation, authenticity, meaningful encounters and disconnection from the everyday environment, as opposed to self-based status and thrill-related dimensions associated with "fast adventures" (Varley & Semple, 2015).

Prebensen, Chen, and Uysal (2014) discuss the critical question of who, in the interaction between the supplier and the consumer, attributes value to an offering, and underline the paradigmatic evolution from a Goods-dominant logic of production (G-D logic) to a Service-Dominant (S-D logic) (Ibid; Tynan & McKechnie, 2009). In S-D logic, according to Vargo and Lusch (2006), a product has no value per se until it is used, which means value cannot be extracted and crafted by the supplier, and then exchanged with the customer (Ibid; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Salem Khalifa, 2004). Such conceptual turns led to at least three important consequences. First, value is rooted in the customer's holistic experience of an offer during a service encounter (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Prebensen et al., 2014; Tynan & McKechnie, 2009). Experiences, therefore, characterize the very nature of service encounters and the creation of value thereof (Ibid; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Schmitt, 1999). Second, customers are the ultimate determinants of value, whether they might be involved in the development of supply-based value propositions or not (Chathoth et al., 2014; Vargo & Lusch, 2016).

Most importantly, the idea of the customer as the ultimate determinant of value led many to argue for its independence from the "use" of a given service offer. Vargo (2008) conceptualized the term "value-in-context", underlining that value can be created in situations different from the actual service experience, and include past and/or imaginative experiential contexts, as well as interactions with value-in-context experienced by others. Tynan and McKechnie (2009) emphasize that different affective, functional, imaginative and social valuations are experienced before, during and after the actual product experience. Imagining and planning are examples of valuations before the experience, whereas sensorial, utopian, emotional and relational valuations characterize the experience on-site. Nostalgia, reviewing and recommending the product to others are examples of valuations after the experience (Ibid; Yachin, 2018). However, these theoretical efforts to separate distinct kinds of values into different phases of the customer experience risk to excessively objectify and linearize the customer's valuation process, in order to keep the predetermination and control of value creation at the supply side (Ek, Larsen, Hornskov, & Mansfeldt,

2008; Helkkula et al., 2012; Kelleher & Peppard, 2011). Such criticism is relevant today, due to the diffusion of mobile technologies (Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009; Dickinson et al., 2014). For instance, ubiquitous connection to the internet allows imagining, planning and information search while being at the destination, and participation in the co-creation of value with firms and other tourists is possible at every stage (Neuhofer et al., 2012).

Accordingly, Helkkula et al. (2012) define "value in experience" as "an ongoing, iterative circular process of individual and collective customer sense-making, as opposed to a linear, cognitive process restricted to isolated service encounters" (Ibid, p. 59). According to the authors, the customer socially constructs, interprets and shares value according to his/her unique lifeworld of memories, goals, emotions, and other consumers that may hold a general and common perception of a phenomena (Ek et al., 2008; Kelleher & Peppard, 2011; Maclaran & Brown, 2005). In other words, value emerges as intersubjective rather than subjective, and "interactional within the context of […] customers' phenomenologically determined social networks" (Helkkula et al., 2012, p. 61).

The theoretical advances in experience value creation are profoundly integrated into the tourism literature. Campos, Mendes, Oom do Valle, and Scott (2015) note the attention placed on the tourist as experience co-creator in several studies, which then depart from the supply perspective (tourism organizations and destinations) as well as from the consumer perspective (the tourist). In the former, current literature agrees that it is necessary to consider the participation of tourists in the generation of value before, during and after the tourism experience (Ibid; Neuhofer et al., 2012). In the latter, it is emphasized that tourists' personal everyday life is a dominant factor in shaping tourism experience value and that tourists are active performers, and not passive sightseers during an experiential consumption (Baka, 2015; Ek et al., 2008; Ren, Petersen, & Dredge, 2015). This is an important conceptual development in an industry traditionally dominated by the concept of "gaze", in which tourism is regarded as mainly a sight-oriented product (Campos et al., 2015). Hereby, the tourist moves from being a spectator, who receives a pre-packaged and objectified value in a given context (or site), to being a performer, who creates dynamic and personal valuations across his/her tourism experiential journey (Campos et al., 2015; Neuhofer et al., 2012; O'dell, 2007; Ren et al., 2015). As noted by Baka (2015) and Ren et al. (2015), tourism values and the ideas of placeness embedded in valued destinations are actively constructed by the tourist through socially situated practises of valuation, and are not outputs passively consumed, offered or exchanged in objectivized spatialities (Ibid; Fast, Ljungberg, & Braunerhielm, 2019; Maclaran & Brown, 2005). As Helkkula et al. (2012), Kelleher and Peppard (2011) and Vargo (2008), we conclude that tourism experience value is phenomenologically constructed by the tourist through inter-subjectively situated valuing practices, which reflect unique and dynamic combinations of functional, social, hedonic, utopian and eudemonic components.

2.2. Online photography: Performing tourism experience value

Like tourism, photography has been traditionally associated with gazing at an objectivized space, projecting a set of supply-given place values, taking pictures and, once home, printing and/or sharing them through face-to-face interactions, building social and self-based values based on "having been there" (Prideaux, Lee, & Tsang, 2018). Under a performative view, instead, the ways that pictures are taken and shared are integral parts of tourists' subjective processes of placemaking, place valuation and identity building (Ibid; Baka, 2015; Chopra-Gant, 2016; Conti & Heldt Cassel, 2019; Pearce & Moscardo, 2015). Coincidentally, the tourist is the ultimate definer of the values conveyed by the picture, the media used to share it and the audience with whom it's shared (Ibid; Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009; Buhalis & Foerste, 2015). Finally, both taking the picture and sharing it are acts that happen potentially at every moment of the tourist experience (Ibid; Prideaux et al., 2018).

Arguably, one of the most important technological developments experienced by photography in recent times is the implementation of digital camera technology in smartphones, which resulted both in an unprecedented massification of the use of photography worldwide and in changes in the way photography is practised (Chopra-Gant, 2016; Pink, 2013; Prideaux et al., 2018). A great number of pictures are taken from smartphones and shared on Internet through social media apps designed to capture, modify and share pictures related to different value propositions (Ibid). Examples of online photography platforms are Flickr, Tumblr, VSCO, Muzy and Instagram, but online photography features are also implemented by popular social media such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn.

Online photography apps can quickly emulate lens and post-processing effects to foster a sense of nostalgia, authenticity (Chopra-Gant, 2016), skilfulness (Prideaux et al., 2018) or self-based idealized and imagined ways of "being there" (Conti & Heldt Cassel, 2019; Fast et al., 2019; Lo & McKercher, 2015), thereby acting as a vehicle of utopianism (Maclaran & Brown, 2005). Users can also assign hashtags, captions and geo-tagging to their pictures to describe contexts, emotions, and opinions that may not be self-evident in the photos (Abbott, Donaghey, Hare, & Hopkins, 2013), and to link the picture(s) to a specific group of posts with similar content (Cuomo et al., 2016; Fatanti & Suyadnya, 2015). According to Chopra-Gant (2016), post-processing effects and customization tools become iconic elements which are added to the subject of the picture. These features make communication with friends, and broader groups of users who share similar interests, particularly convenient and appealing (Cuomo et al., 2016; Ting, Wong, de Run, & Lau, 2015). Therefore, online photography apps help the tourist in interpreting, capturing and expressing something meaningful about being in a specific place, in relation to his/her self and their lifeworld, and in sharing it in a digital context (Conti & Heldt Cassel, 2019; Lo & McKercher, 2015; Pearce & Moscardo, 2015). An example of such apps is Instagram. In 2012, Instagram was the second most popular social network in the world after Facebook (Abbott et al., 2013; Hu, Manikonda, & Kambhampati, 2014). Once logged in to Instagram, users can take pictures by using the in-built camera app, or even upload existing pictures. They can then apply different "filters" to the pictures, as well as include geotags, hashtags, tag Instagram users or pages, and add a text caption to be visualized under the pictures. The picture can then be shared on the Instagram profile of the user, as well as Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr.

In the tourism literature, few studies that focus on Instagram and/or online photography can be identified. Usually, Instagram is cited as part of more general studies on tourism social media, which investigate correlations between tourists' posts, destination image and consumption patterns (e.g.Rossi, Boscaro, & Torsello, 2018 ; Shuqair & Cragg, 2017 ; Smith, 2018 ; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013 ; Tenkanen et al., 2017). Most of these studies use covert and/or quantitative research designs, with few exceptions (e.g. Baksi, 2016; Conti & Heldt Cassel, 2019; Fatanti & Suyadnya, 2015; Lo & McKercher, 2015).

3. Methodology

3.1. Participatory netnography on Instagram

Helkkula et al. (2012) and Rageh and Melewar (2013) agree that, because of their nature, tourism experiences and experience values are inaccessible to the researcher, and the only accessible source of data is the researchers' interpretations of tourists' reflexive narratives about experience and experience value. Consequently, we consider an interpretive and qualitative research design to be appropriate for this research (Ibid).

Following Baka (2015) and Law and Singleton (2000), we identify online photography on Instagram as both a valuing practice and a valuing place Accordingly, we use netnography, one of the most

commonly used methods of inquiry and analysis of "cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications" (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62) in this study. Netnography's roots in anthropological and ethnographic analysis make it a well-suited method for the collection and analysis of data related to consumption and consumer communities, once these are recognized as spheres of cultural production (Cuomo et al., 2016; Kozinets, 2002, 2015; Rokka, 2010).

As already mentioned, as authors of this research we are proponents of the use of participant online observations. Apart from reflecting an interpretive paradigmatic stance (Hatchuel, 2005; Helkkula et al., 2012), participant online observations are particularly suitable for tackling an essential step of netnography. Namely, the possibility, through disclosing and establishing dialogues with users, to expand and deepen the understanding of cultural meanings and contexts attached to a particular content shared online (Kozinets, 2015; Mkono & Markwell, 2014; Rageh & Melewar, 2013; Rokka, 2010). We follow Kozinets (2015) in arguing that a researcher's participation online is important to ensure the capability to confirm, dispute or elaborate the researcher's interpretations, as well as comply with ethical research codes.

Here, we establish participation in the form of online, text-based, photo-elicited and unstructured interviews with purposefully selected users, which followed from an initial collection and analysis of relevant posts, obtained during online observations (Salmons, 2014). The collection of data through unstructured interviews is usually the norm for participant forms of observations (Fontana & Frey, 1994). The aim of the unstructured interviews was to interact with a theoretically relevant, albeit small, sample of users based on their post(s), to elaborate on the post(s) in order to confirm or dispute the researcher's interpretation and to shed further light on relevant dimensions detected during the observations. This aim implies the need to ensure maximum flexibility and freedom to build on the comments from participants and justify the choice of conducting the interviews in an unstructured way, whose form is closely related to informal conversations and interactions (Ibid; Bryman, 2008). No real interview guidelines were developed in advance, and besides a small number of recurring questions, each interview followed their own structure regarding length and questions (Ibid). A total of twelve interviews were conducted, in English, with participants of mostly Swedish nationality.

Although Instagram is a social media based on photography, Instagram posts are combinations of visual and textual material. This is not surprising, considering that Web 2.0 is inherently a multi-media space, an aspect that according to Rokka (2010) transformed an initially text-based netnography into a multi-method approach based on the collection and analysis of text, audio and visual data alike. Consequently, the interviews related to visual as well as textual elements of the post(s), such as captions.

3.2. Analysis based on grounded theory

Before conducting interviews, data from online observations were selected, collected and analysed by the means of grounded theory (Rose, Spinks, & Canhoto, 2014). The choice of using grounded theory is optimal in explorative research and when the aim is to highlight patterns and themes in the data (Ibid), as it should be for interpretative approaches to experience value (Helkkula et al., 2012). Whereas in netnography data collection and data analysis are often seen as two distinct and subsequent steps (Bartl et al., 2016), in grounded theory these happen at the same time, as themes and patterns are conceptualized and then iteratively refined by new data (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001; Rose et al., 2014). Correspondingly, posts and users were selected and integrated based on how their characteristics related to the conceptual themes that the analysis was developing, and with the aim of providing confirmation or, instead, challenge and expand the initial analysis. This reiterative circle proceeded until saturation

(Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001; Rose et al., 2014; Salmons, 2014). Around 370 posts were processed, using the geotags of the national parks mentioned in the introduction as a starting point, before reaching saturation. Several analysed posts were in Swedish, but the fact that one of the authors is of Swedish nationality helped in checking the validity of translations (Temple & Young, 2004; Young & Ackerman, 2001). After selecting a sample of posts which reflected the themes refined through observations, the research proceeded by contacting a purposeful sample of authors, on Instagram Direct, to conduct the unstructured interviews.

4. Findings and discussion

These sections present and discuss the findings, and are structured according to the most relevant themes that emerged, in the authors' opinion, during the coding, both in terms of recurrence during the data observation and of feedback received during the online interviews. In addition, they are themes which shed more light on the themes and concepts brought up in the theoretical framework and the research questions.

4.1. Experience values conveyed through posts

A co-existence of different experience values in one post could be observed during most of the online observations and was confirmed by all the participants.

For instance, Igla agrees that the pictures in her collage (Fig. 1) have an aesthetic value which ties the subject(s) and the pictures themselves (Holbrook, 1999), but they also represent "*all the different parts of the park*" that her group enjoyed, and what constitute an imagined "perfect day" (Maclaran & Brown, 2005). "*We climbed the mountains and even that it was in the spring I layed on the beach and put my feet in the water, enjoyed the hotdogs over open fire. Perfect day in beautiful Tived*". The possibility of summarizing all these significant moments in one collage is valued because of its convenience (Holbrook, 1999; Prebensen, 2014). The presence, in the pictures, of people with whom Igla shared the experience at the park, as well as a @tag in the caption clarify relational dimensions of experience value (Tynan & McKechnie, 2009). In a post describing the experience at Tiveden of her and her family, Sate is similarly able to underline aesthetical, relational and sensorial themes (related with the beautiful weather, peacefulness, being together with "*the best company*", and awe for nature).

Being more interested in offering what he, labels as a "*documentation*" about his experience in Skuleskogen, Per confirms that crafting

Fig. 1. Instagram post by Igla.

multiple posts with different captions helps in delivering a chronological narration, each with distinct experience valuations. This is aimed at clarifying details of each situation "*so the audience can see a little bit better from my perspective*", in a way that a picture (or a collage of pictures) alone cannot possibly communicate. For instance, the following caption: "*Before I went down through the Slåttdalsskrevan, I went up beside it to get this tremendous view of the landscape opening up from the Slåttdalsberget to the sea. It took a few moments till I realized that this tiny red hut beside the frozen lake was going to be my place to sleep for the night - after realizing I was even more stunned. Over night the reflective, partly snowbound ice turned into an evenly dull white surface*" accompanies a photo of a landscape with a red hut emerging from the trees, taken from an elevated position. Here the focus is on the chronology of what is happening during a valued unit of time, and the values subjectively associated thereof, which can be seen as a combination of aesthetical, epistemic, utopian and emotional values (Holbrook, 1999; Maclaran & Brown, 2005;Prebensen, 2014 ; Tynan & McKechnie, 2009). Valued sensorial elements of the experience-scape such as dullness and coldness (Dann & Jacobsen, 2003), which are difficult to convey through the "visual" picture alone, can be evoked by referring to the text. Other posts with similar content, based on his experience at Skuleskogen National Park, follow the same pattern.

Sofie similarly, uses captions to deliver non-visual cues to the pictures, which reveal specific valuations. Fig. 2 shows an example where the caption "*softness of autumn*" accompanies a picture taken in Skuleskogen. The caption helps in delivering the sensorial cue of "softness" associated with the fog, as explained by Sofie: "*when the fog covers the landscape and the colors in it, you experience it as soft*". This constitutes a multisensory valuation (Dann & Jacobsen, 2003; Pan & Ryan, 2009) which is connected to an aesthetical beauty of the scene, as well as the goal of the author "*to convey a feeling, a presence*" which is associated to utopian, eudemonic and spiritual valuations of nature (Holbrook, 1999; Lengieza et al., 2019; Maclaran & Brown, 2005). Another example is a post with a long shot of a hiker with the forest in the background, described in the caption as "*just another proof of the smallness of man...*"

Text captions as a way to convey multisensory cues, emotions and meaningful valuing narratives about the experience frequently occur in the online observations. Close-ups of cups of coffee, or people preparing a cup of coffee, are associated with captions describing the accomplishment of doing something normally easy, which in a natural environment turns into" *a 1 h project*" (as in Mark), or how "*special*" it feels to drink a cup of coffee in the wilderness as compared to the everyday (as in Anja). Close-ups of people posing together with landmarks are associated with emotional, relational, epistemic and self-based social outcomes of reaching the destination (Holbrook, 1999; Prebensen,

Fig. 2. Instagram post by Sofie.

Fig. 3. Instagram post by Alex.

2014; Tynan & McKechnie, 2009), as in Matt: "*We were out here for 6.5 h but the waterfall we reached was worthy*".

Alex's post (Fig. 3) depicts relational values attached to a hike experience at Fulufjället National Park: "*I shared it because I was on a vacation in Dalarna and we found some people that wanted to go to Fulufjället. We spontaneously tagged along without knowing what that place was all about and had a great hike to the waterfall and back*".

The participant's comments about the post reflect the theme of the picture and the caption, which can be translated into "*a nice hike, new acquaintances out in the forest and Njupeskär in the background*" and suggest a performance of epistemic values (Prebensen, 2014) as well as relational (Helkkula et al., 2012; Tynan & McKechnie, 2009).

4.2. Experience values and photography-based value

Other than affecting the nexus of experience values conveyed by the post, the general role of photography highlights the importance that the tourist's lifeworld plays in creating experience value (Helkkula et al., 2012).

Sate, as a photographer, is interested in showing different aspects of the experience as well as showing her photographic skills. Although she agrees that her post shows different valuable aspects of her experience at Tiveden, the value of showing her photographic work "*to my photography interested followers*" is particularly dominant. A similar position is affirmed by the hobbyist Eric; although he posted a picture of a person at Fulufjället National Park in snowy weather, with a caption "*when we almost got lost in a snowstorm*", which suggests epistemic and emotional values (Prebensen, 2014; Tynan & McKechnie, 2009), he underlines how the value of the post is "*probably more about the photo*". By this, he means his hobby of photography, which provide fun ("*I really don't have any opinion on my skills or however I'm good or not, I do photography for my enjoyment and that's it pretty much*") as well as exposure (Holbrook, 1999; Kozinets, 2019; Prebensen, 2014).

The connections between different experiential values, associated with the experience at the park, and photography itself, are at times more complex than what a single post may suggest, and embrace relations between different users who share the same experience. Wes, a photographer, shared a post with a picture of his partner Atina, taken at Tiveden National Park by himself (Fig. 4).

The picture is shared by Wes as part of a composition in which he explains the picture's architecture and post-processing. The post reflects feedback from his followers (around 8000), as explained in the caption: "*in one of my recent posts, a lot of you wanted to learn more about my*

Fig. 4. Picture from Instagram post of Wes (on the left) and Instagram post of Atina (on the right).

photography. Now I may not have all the answers, but in my coming posts I will highlight what I think makes a good photo, what makes it worthy of uploading to Instagram to me! I got inspired by the amazing work @p***** does with his behind the scenes for lighting setups, so I hope he's okay with me doing something similar! What do you guys think? Does seeing my thoughts and process provide value to you? ↠ A7R3 ↠ 70-200 GM @ 115 ↠ f/2.8 ↠ 1/1600 ↠ ISO 100".

The post includes several hashtags, some ascribed to outdoors and hiking, such as *#outdooradventures* and *#hikevibe*, but for the most part related to specifications of the camera setup (*#sony, #a7rm3, #sonyalpha, #bealpha, #70200, #70200 g*). Atina shared the very same picture on her profile (Fig. 4), yet not post-processed and with the caption "*The wilderness holds answers to more questions than we have yet learned to ask*". The majority of hashtags (e.g. *#adventure, #hikingadventures, #wilderness, and #outdoor*) relate to outdoors, adventure, hiking and wilderness. Similar themes emerge throughout Atina's profile, which often includes captions that suggest eudemonic and utopian meanings related to her relationship with nature, hiking and the wilderness (Lengieza et al., 2019). She specifically mentioned her audience to be "*the hiking community*".

These posts about a shared experience at Tiveden may be different: the former may be expressing values more oriented towards status, skills, impression management (similarly as Sate and Eric), and the latter expressing a more spiritual and emotional valuation of the human/nature divide, as in Sofie (Holbrook, 1999; Lengieza et al., 2019; Prebensen, 2014). Yet, these underlying value groups do not necessarily contradict each other. Instead, they constitute different angles of a more complex value nexus shared by the couple. In this regard, Wes affirms that he can personally relate with Atina's caption, and that "*if you know her as a person and you see her sitting there, all calm and enjoying nature then you could definitely connect the two*".

Wes's Instagram profile (around 8000 followers) certainly reflects what constitutes both his passion and his job (photography), but this co-

exists with other themes closely connected with his personal lifeworld, such as experiences in the nature and the way he shares them with his partner Atina and their dog (who also has an Instagram profile). Often all these themes are present in one single post, and Wes agrees they reflect a multifaceted experience value:

"*I always have my camera with me and I share the photos that I like the most. I'm an outdoor person and I love to be out in nature. [...]. Pictures help me remind me of those nice times. I then upload the nicest ones to share with family and friends, and because I'm a photographer to show off my work and get exposure. There's a lot that goes into these posts!*".

4.3. New dimensions introduced by sharing: Experience communities

The act of post-processing and sharing is iconic per se (Chopra-Gant, 2016) and can bring context-sensitive values, an aspect eloquently described by Alex:

"*sharing is the final step in the process of thinking and of taking a picture, selecting the ones that I think recreates the experience as how I interpreted it, editing/postprocessing and finally posting it. As I posted it several days after it was actually taken, sharing it actually made me happy about thinking of that experience once more*".

A similar pattern is present in all the participants where this issue was part of the interview, with many that, similarly to Alex, associate value to "*tell my followers (mostly friends and family) about that experience*". This introduces social values of happiness, self-esteem and status among others (Holbrook, 1999; Prebensen, 2014) as well as nostalgia (Tynan & McKechnie, 2009), but also constitutes an occasion for sharing imaginative narrations related to utopian selves in utopian natural contexts (Kozinets, 2019; Maclaran & Brown, 2005).

The majority of the valuation explained above could be easily related to what is normally labelled as the post-phase of the experience, which, as shown in the literature, is often described as a phase of nostalgia, remembrance, review and share (Buhalis & Foerste, 2015;
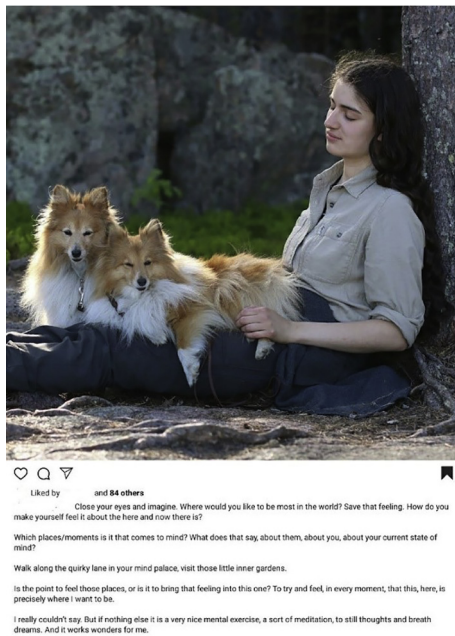
Fig. 5. Instagram post by Shela.

Prideaux et al., 2018; Tynan & McKechnie, 2009). Yet, sharing a post about a particular experience can also introduce aspects that are valued for the significance that they have in a more complex and personal user's lifeworld. For instance, following and tagging "new acquaintances" on Instagram allows Alex to be introduced to new hedonic, emotional, utopian and eudemonic values, as well as potentially introducing future pre-phases of new experiences (Tynan & McKechnie, 2009): "*They were kind of cool people travelling a lot abroad* [...] *I kept following them for inspiration, which gives me great value in tips and ideas for upcoming trips*". These inspirations and tips relate to what Alex and his acquaintances experienced at the park together, and yet constitute the introduction to new personal and collective valuations related to future posts, ideas, travels, etc.

Sate and Wes agree about the possibility to establish meaningful connections thanks to posting on Instagram, with Wes mentioning this, in relation to his posts:

"*I always like answering questions if people want to know something, to teach or to share my ways. Because I think it's fun to have my platform for my own thoughts and to find people who think likewise or like similar things. These always lead to interesting conversations, opportunities, new friends, interesting projects or getting sponsored with free products or anything else*".

The possibility of mentioning the photographic gear as hashtags, observed in several posts, is relevant to mention here. Such hashtags allow a post to connect with other posts with the same tag: Wes and Eric, among others, used hashtags such as *#sony #a7iii*, and it is relevant to mention the presence of a comment under Eric's post by another user: "*nice feed! I'm using a sony a7iii too! Have a look at my feed!*". Wes confirmed that the camera setup is often the subject of communications between him and his followers. The mention of photographic gear in the form of hashtags, as well as the potential for further interactions, introduce the existence of value tribes, which, as noted by Cuomo et al. (2016) do not exist in digital platforms in the form of specified heterogeneous groups, but fluxes of communications composed of pictures, hashtags, comments, and messages. Sofie mentions in her profile "*follow me and share your thoughts*". She specifically indicates that she composes the captions of most of her posts (among which some pictures taken at Skuleskogen) "*in a way where the followers have to reflect a bit*" on valued eudemonic themes such as "the smallness of humanity", and "*to be aware of the complexity both on earth and in the whole universe relate to me as a human*".

Leia posted a picture taken during a hike in Skuleskogen National Park, with a caption that describes her grief after learning that a close friend, "*someone I knew through social media and our mutual community online*", passed away. The connection with the picture is explained by the fact that the deceased "*made me rediscover my love for nature. She inspired me to seek strength in the forest*". The post was shared a week after Leia became aware of the passing, and constitute a way to communicate Leia's emotional and affective context in the moment of grief, allowing her to reposition her experience among a wide network of acquaintances (Gibbs et al., 2015). This creates "a sense of proximity, connection, and co-presence" (Ibid, p. 266), as confirmed by Leia, who felt the need to share her thoughts "*to feel less alone and make others feel less alone*".

All these valuation practices relate with tensions, acknowledged by the literature, to build digital platforms centred on interacting, commenting and sharing, building, therefore, a sense of experience community (Cuomo et al., 2016; Neuhofer et al., 2012; Rokka, 2010). However, they cannot be entirely encapsulated into linear experience valuation frameworks (e.g. by looking at number of likes as the single indicator of valued status or esteem), and reflect instead how single acts of experiential valuations connect, fluidly and subjectively, with experience communities and the personal lifeworld of the user (Ibid, Helkkula et al., 2012).

4.4. Personal timelines of experience valuation

All of the users confirmed that their posting activity is temporally located days after, sometimes even months or years, the experience at the park. Yet, several posts, coupled with statements emerging from the interviews, allowed the detection of complex, at times, not linear valuation timelines.

Shela went to Skuleskogen three times during summer 2018, and nine months later decided to share the post that can be seen in Fig. 5. As explained by the author, the post includes a caption inviting reflections about personal growth by the means of "*a very nice mental exercise, a sort of meditation, to still thoughts and breath dreams*". This connects the imagined future, past and present: "*where would you like to be most in the world? Save that feeling. How do you make yourself feel it about the here and now there is? […] to try and feel, in every moment, that this, here, is precisely where I want to be*". The centre of Shela' post is the caption, which concerns recent reflections, as she explained: "*I wanted to share with the world a way of thinking that I had recently discovered helped me. […] I was also happy with how I had managed to put my thoughts into words and wanted to share a part of me that I felt important and true*". The connection to her past experience, in this regard, comes from the fact that Skuleskogen is "*a place where I sometimes find my mind wandering in moments such as described in the caption […] I was looking through my photos for one that would fit the caption, and this was the one in which I looked (and remembered feeling) the most peaceful.*"

In Leia's post, a past experience at Skuleskogen is re-valued, through the act of sharing on Instagram, according to a timeline connected with her personal lifeworld. The post itself recalls a past experience, re-interpreting its value in the light of an event, (the passing of a member of her network), which happened after the experience at the park. This event comes to be part of the overall valuation act of hiking, which was part of the experience at the park. In the words of Leia: "*she loved hiking, that was what she was known for and it was her passion in life. When I am in the forest and hiking, I feel close to her*". The passing changed the way she values and interprets her former experience at the park, inducing "*a deeper appreciation of life […] I will always think of her when I hike*". This connects to the inspiration that the deceased one brought her, mentioned in the caption.

Isolde posted a picture of a past hike at Skuleskogen, with a caption that depicts a situation that happened the day before the posting. A rough translation of the caption is, "*yesterday on my way home I was driving off the E4, because I was staring at the Northern lights that were*

playing in the sky. Unfortunately, I did not take any picture. Sometimes, I forget why I moved from home two years ago, but then there come such breath-taking moments that there are no more doubts in the whole world. The picture is from when we hiked in Skuleskogen and we were struck by all the beauty, quite unfortunate that I missed this all these years". Several distinct time dimensions can be detected here, which all contribute to situating a valuation of a past experience at Skuleskogen in a personally constructed valuation timeline.

Emma's post, shared 6 years after a camping experience of the couple at Fulufjället, is a compilation of two pictures portraying two partners preparing food on a bonfire, accompanied by a caption which roughly translates into "*Our visit to Fulufjället in June 2013 was a step in the preparations to hike the whole Kungsleden later the same summer. We had therefore packed deliberately heavy and planned for two long daily stops. Everything to test both the equipment and the two bodies. We realized it's really heavy to hike steep up with extra heavy backpack and had the chance to revise our packing list. It's always valuable to make a test for a longer ride and on Fulufjället we learned to pack as light as it goes and to start all tours calmly*". This caption follows a post that highlights epistemic values related to skill development and adventure (Prebensen, 2014) which come to be meaningful in light of another experience, temporally located after the one depicted in the picture, but before the posting.

As noted by Kelleher and Peppard (2011) and Helkkula et al. (2012), users build up experience value in subjective and iterative ways, based on their previous experiences or understanding, drawing alternatively from past and future experiences and values, according to how meanings are iteratively imagined and constructed in the users' own lifeworld. This happens in ways that, consequently, can elude overreaching and industry-led chronologies of valuation during the tourist's experiential journey (Ek et al., 2008), and instead refer to more personal hermeneutic spirals of sense-making in which the past finds unique valuing connections with the present and the future (Helkkula et al., 2012). It is noteworthy to mention again, in this regard, the multiple associations, constructed by participants' statements, which connect single experiences depicted in pictures with more general valuations of nature. Valuations of the self in nature, in turn, draw from other experiences in subjective ways. This often introduces new eudemonic, hedonic, relational and utopian values, which relate to a general process of personal growth and meaning-making more than linear and definite outputs of experiential encounters. Wes refers to this when he specifies that a reflection shared by her partner Atina on the wilderness is a statement "*not only connected to the experience at the park, because the park represents just a small part of our collective experience […] Tiveden was just another destination, a getaway from the city and a chance to be out in nature*". Atina mentioned that one of the aesthetic values of her picture relates to a general emotional stance towards wilderness and animals: "*I liked the colours and the paws on the knitted shirt which made me think of the wilderness and my love for dogs and animals*". Captions that can be observed in several of her posts refer back to a general valuation of wildlife and the general self in nature, which follows personal timelines of spirituality, personal growth and self-realization: "*in nature I'm calm and at peace. I believe if we spend more time in nature we will realize what truly matters […] to me it's almost spiritual in a way*". Sofie, as well, mentioned that the feelings uncovered from her posts relate "*with all nature*" more than Skuleskogen alone.

5. Conclusion

Although this paper is explorative and operates within a limited scope of observations and interviews, several important themes emerge from the data.

The nature of experience value as a multi-dimensional and personal construct emerges while looking at the experience values conveyed by single posts, where aesthetic aspects coexist with several other types of value. These range from other hedonic (such as multisensory

engagement and fun), relational, (connected to sharing the experience with others at the destination), as well as emotional and epistemic (particularly in relation to happiness, adventure and skill development). Additionally, spiritual, eudemonic and utopian aspects are important dimensions of experience value, which should be further researched, particularly in the context of national parks and nature-based tourism, where these dimensions are often not connected to consumption value or cultural production (Vespestad & Lindberg, 2010). In such regard, it is important to note the functional capacity of online photography on Instagram to act as a performative tool of such multifaceted experience value. Iconic acts such as the addition of text captions, hashtags and tags, as well as other customizations allow users to enact personal strategies of experience valuation, which reflect how different dimensions of experience value are combined according to their personal and collective lifeworld. The embedded text allows valued sensorial experiences other than sight, such as touch and thermoception, to be associated with the subject of the picture(s) and contribute to delivering an overall valuation.

The role of photography in users' subjective and intersubjective value nexus can introduce new experience values, related to esteem, fun, personal status and impression management, which can represent an added dimension of experience valuation as well as a dominant one, at least in terms of what emerge from single posts. On the other hand, in several instances, experience values were not associated uniquely to the destination experience portrayed in the picture, but to the author's social ties and social networks, which exist beyond single experiential encounters at the national park. Findings show that the act of sharing opens up value tribes in the form of fluxes of communication by following, liking, commenting, tagging, asking others to follow and, generally, communicating with an audience (Cuomo et al., 2016). These tribes can relate to valuing themes of nostalgia, eudemonic or utopian values connected to situated relationships between a utopian self, humanity and nature, or epistemic values related to skills and can introduce values linked to self-esteem and status. Most importantly, they exist beyond isolated tourism experiences or experiential encounters but critically contribute to their iterative experiential valuation (Helkkula et al., 2012). This happens, for instance, when a user *is inspiring* his/her audience throughout one or more posts or *is inspired* by users they follow.

Posts show valuation timelines which can elude linear pre/in-situ/post-experience valuation frameworks, and assume connotations that are more fluid. This is particularly important in terms of advancing our understanding of the tourism experience as a dynamic process, instead of a static object (Ek et al., 2008; Helkkula et al., 2012). Several examples showed that not only is the user the ultimate determinant of how experience value is created and conveyed through online photography, but also the determinant of how such value is built and processed in time (Ibid). A post generated once back home can express values related, at the same time, to past memories, future plans, a more widespread personal growth, utopian views or professional projects. A similar post may relate values associated with the destination depicted in the post with other previously valued destinations. Finally, a post can express a subsequent experience valuation in light of valuing events that happened shortly before the posting, but long after the experience at the destination. Sharing such valuating performances online may encourage feedback from followers, such as manifestations of empathy, inspiration and friendship, which generate a different combination of values created after sharing the post. If experience is understood as a process (Ibid; Tynan & McKechnie, 2009; Yachin, 2018), such a process is not linear and future research on tourism experience and experience value creation needs to acknowledge the existence of personalized timelines of meaning-making, in which the past finds personalized valuing connections with the present and the future.

In all this, the user's imagination, creativity and the seek for recognition certainly emerge from the "tweaking" of some posts through post-processing, the addition of evocative captions, and the use of

particular hashtags which link back to value communities or general exposure. Yet, the fact that a picture is modified or evocatively presented through captions, hashtags, etc. should not be treated as a mere element of exhibitionism or disingenuousness which undermine the truthfulness of an expression of the "real" experience lived in the "real" world by the "real" self. This would probably be a preoccupation for post-positivist approaches concerned with finding an objective truth behind a post, or approaches close to the "paradigm-based gloomy vision" mentioned by Ghoshal (2005), which in a highly deductive way would label imagination, creativity or the pursuit of a certain aesthetic goal in online photography as mere strategies of self-promotion. Instead, under an interpretative paradigm, these qualities emerge as significant components of experience value, across the tourist experiential journeys, deeply attached to utopian, hedonic, social and eudemonic values based on performing personally and iteratively the real world.

6. Implications

This paper follows many studies within customer value management in suggesting that tourists' experience valuation is characterized by more than cognitive aspects, and combine different elements which are interpreted, valued and performed in personalized ways (Verhoef & Lemon, 2013). Accordingly, the importance of utopian and eudemonic valuations in consuming tourism experiences is particularly stressed (Lengieza et al., 2019; Maclaran & Brown, 2005), and the need for tourism value management frameworks and experience value research to focus more on such components is consequently reaffirmed (Ibid). This is particularly important when looking at how tourism experiences and destinations are valued through social media. Multimedia user-generated content online greatly affects tourism travel patterns (Smith, 2018), and plays an increasingly crucial role in tourism value management frameworks (Verhoef & Lemon, 2013).

Additionally, our findings reaffirm how valuations are performed according to their deep and complex connection with the tourist's lifeworld, personal and collective meaning-making process (Helkkula et al., 2012). As a result, Helkkula et al. (Ibid) argue that a refined understanding of consumer experience value is normally difficult to capture by using traditional methods. Accordingly, this study provides important evidence of the capability of online photography-based social media such as Instagram to represent a strategic touchpoint, which organizations can use to learn about how tourists value experiences by looking at tourists' performative narratives (Haurum & Beckmann, 2014; Van Doorn et al., 2010). Our findings show that these narratives are rich in meanings, and can even uncover sensorial valuations other than sight. The importance of multisensory valuations are recognized in multisensory models of the consumer experiencescape (Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007; Martins et al., 2017; Schmitt, 1999) but often downplayed in tourism, where the visual alone is emphasized (Dann & Jacobsen, 2003; Pan & Ryan, 2009). The easiness of access to Instagram and similar photography-based social media represent certainly an added opportunity from an organizational point of view, particularly for tourism SMEs and micro firms, which often face resource and know-how constraints in crafting value propositions by learning from tourists (Yachin, 2018).

Although the context of the study introduces themes that are particularly relevant for nature-based tourism organizations, additional research using similar interpretive and qualitative methodologies applied to other tourism experiences and destinations is encouraged. This is particularly true for special interest tourism, e.g. heritage tourism, where eudemonic relations to heritage attractions have proved to be relevant (Ebejer, Smith, Stevenson, & Maitland, 2019).

7. Limitations

The authors fully acknowledge the degree of subjectivity inevitably involved in our choice of research design, due to its reliance on the researchers' interpretations, its explorative nature and the somewhat limited number of interviews which is associated with a larger number of collected posts. Several aspects highlighted in the findings can be elaborated in further research. For instance, asking participants to elaborate more on likes, comments and other forms of feedback from specific members of their target audience (as opposed to others) could shed further light on the role of followers and value tribes in creating experience value.

The presence of more than one researcher to discuss data interpretation and the use of different typologies of data certainly enhanced critical reflections on the findings and improved their overall quality, but did not eliminate entirely the researchers' biases (Denzin, 1978; Flick, 2013). This study is based on data collected after the posts were shared on Instagram. Further research on experience value creation online could add precious insights by engaging in field-based methods, observing and enquiring tourists about their UGC creation real-time, or by using diary studies.

Authors contributions statement

Mr. Conti and Prof. Lexhagen shared the conception and design of the study, after an initial input by Mr. Conti. Mr. Conti drafted the conceptual draft and the article, which Prof. Lexhagen revised throughout the process, providing an important intellectual contribution. Mr. Conti was also responsible for writing the literature review, the methodology and for the bulk of the data collection, but he shared data interpretation and analysis with Prof. Lexhagen. Both authors approved the final version to be submitted.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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Eugenio Conti is a member of CeTLeR (Centre for Tourism and Leisure Research) at Dalarna University, Sweden, and a doctoral student in tourism studies at Mid-Sweden University, where he is also member of ETOUR (European Tourism Research Institute). His research focuses on nature-based tourism experience staging, interpretation and experience value co-creation, particularly in relation to online platforms.

Maria Lexhagen is an associate professor of tourism studies at Mid-Sweden University, with a PhD in Business Administration. She is a former director of ETOUR. She worked in several research projects focusing on digital marketing and management in tourism and tourism destinations, innovation and trends in tourism, as well as popular culture tourism and fan travel. Her current research interests are business intelligence in tourism destinations, branding of tourism destinations, destination development and management, social media in tourism such as topic detection and sentiment detection, popular culture tourism, trends in tourism.