

# ‘Dream now, travel later’: pre-travel online destination experiences on destination websites

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*Destination marketing organisations (DMOs) seek to provide positive pre-travel online destination experiences (ODEs) to attract tourists. Thereby, DMOs understand official destination websites (ODWs) as central sources of information influencing tourists’ travel decisions. Although experiential marketing theory postulates that customers are reached through sensory, affective, intellectual, behavioural or social experiences, this theory has rarely been applied to analysing tourist experiences on ODWs. Past research and theories remain similar to models from product brands, yet fail to acknowledge the peculiarities of destination experiences. This research explores how users of ODWs experience unfamiliar tourist destinations in the pre-travel phase. To gain a deeper understanding of the nature of ODEs on ODWs, a qualitative multi-method study was conducted involving eye-tracking, retrospective think-aloud protocols, semi-structured interviews and video observations with 15 German millennials selected via purposeful sampling. Data was analysed in a qualitative directed content analysis following an abductive approach. Findings expand on previous theory by adding a spatio-temporal experience dimension. In the pre-travel phase, potential tourists explore the spatio-temporal accessibility of expected experiences and the experience density in the destination. Furthermore, this research provides new insights into the different dimensions of ODEs and proposes an advanced conceptual framework.*

**Keywords:** *online destination experience, official destination website, experiential marketing, multi-method approach, pre-travel phase, millennials*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Tourist experiences take place in three phases: before, during and after a trip. This research focuses on the pre-travel phase when tourists explore whether the anticipated experiences fit with their travel desires and needs (Larsen 2007; Seeler et al. 2018; Tung/Ritchie 2011; Volo 2010). In this phase of inspiration and orientation, ‘distant’, often technology-mediated tourist experiences occur (Sundbo/Dixit 2020; Sundbo/Hagedorn-Rasmussen 2008). Official destination websites (ODWs) provided by destination marketing organisations (DMOs) are central sources of information in the pre-travel phase (Jeon et al. 2018), particularly among millennials (for example in Germany: FUR 2020). DMOs seek to provide positive online destination experiences (ODEs) on their websites to attract tourists for future trips and increase destination

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competitiveness (Kozak/Baloglu 2011; World Tourism Organisation 2019). In light of the global travel restrictions related to COVID-19, DMOs have the challenge to reach new customers in source markets close by and to establish or maintain emotional links to would-be tourists. Apparently, ODEs become more relevant. Several DMOs have launched campaigns aiming to stimulate consumers' desire to visit after the pandemic with slogans like 'dream now, travel later' (see for example Switzerland Tourism 2020).

However, up to now little is known about the mental process of experiencing tourism destinations on ODWs. Scholars in the realm of consumer goods branding have proposed that customers are reached through five experience dimensions: sensory, affective, intellectual, behavioural and social (Brakus et al. 2009; Schmitt 1999). While the notion of experiential marketing has long been present in both tourism academia (see for example Frochet/Batat 2013; Volo 2010) and industry (Gretzel et al. 2006), conceptualisations and theoretical examinations of multi-dimensional experiential marketing remain limited in tourism and in the destination context (Ketter 2018). Contact points between the potential guest and the tourist destination in the pre-travel phase are of particular interest to destination managers as mental and emotional perceptions of the expected on-site experience play an important role in tourists' destination choices (Lohmann 2008; Tung/Ritchie 2011). In this way, the internet is particularly well suited to satisfying not only functional, but also hedonic, aesthetic, innovative and social needs during the information-gathering process (Gretzel 2009; Vogt/Fesenmaier 1998) and facilitate positive pre-trip experiences (Buhalis/Law 2008; Navío-Marco et al. 2018). Initial research initiatives to transfer the experiential marketing approach to ODEs were largely quantitative and analysed the concept broadly rather than in depth. Yet there are unique aspects of experiencing tourist destinations on ODWs that require a more nuanced approach and qualitative exploration.

Taking a qualitative multi-method approach, this research addresses the theoretical gap related to ODEs on ODWs in the pre-travel phase. It contributes to understandings of the nature and dimensions of experiencing an unfamiliar tourist destination on an ODW. Moreover, it improves knowledge of the perception of ODWs and as such delivers insightful information for DMOs. The perspective of German millennials is taken as an example.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Experiential marketing: from product brands to tourist destinations

In the context of the experience economy (Pine/Gilmore 1998), Schmitt (1999) proposed that experiential value is created through both the consumption of products or events and their marketing. Hence, advocates of experiential marketing postulate that the marketing manager can design experiences to a certain degree (Pine/Gilmore 1998). In contrast to traditional marketing, experiential marketing focuses on holistic consumer experiences, recognises both rational and affective drivers of consumption (Holbrook/Hirschman 1982; Le et al. 2019) and uses marketing channels that can deliver emotions and complex messages (Schmitt 1999). Schmitt's (1999) strategic experiential modules of marketing focused on the multi-dimensionality of customer experiences. He proposed that customers could be attracted on five experience dimensions: sensing, feeling, thinking, acting and relating. Brakus et al. (2009) later developed a four-dimensional scale (sensory, affective, behavioural and intellectual)

to measure these widely adopted experiential marketing modules (Bleier et al. 2019; Yoon/Youn 2016).

The examination of tourist experiences from multi-disciplinary perspectives has been central in tourism research since the early 2000s (Cutler/Carmichael 2010; Godovykh/Tasci 2020; Prebensen et al. 2018; Sundbo/Dixit 2020). Tourist experiences are generally conceptualised as subjective, multi-dimensional evaluations of tourist encounters before, during and after a trip (Larsen 2007; Seeler et al. 2018; Tung/Ritchie 2011) 'reflecting in active or passive state of mind' (Chen et al. 2018: 14). In the pre-travel phase, the goal of experiential marketing should be 'to create, offer and communicate "anticipated experiences" that individuals would classify as among those they would seek' (Volo 2010:120). Nonetheless, the subjectivity of tourist experiences, that is, the individual perception of events based on personal and situational aspects (Jantzen 2013; Karayilan/Cetin 2016; Knobloch et al. 2017), and the corresponding co-creation of experiences (Pralhad/Ramaswamy 2004) limit marketers' opportunities to truly design tourist experiences (Kim/Fesenmaier 2017). Hence, experiential marketing can only set frames with a high probability of becoming relevant personal tourist experiences. This requires an understanding of the experience processes and dimensions from a tourist perspective (Knobloch et al. 2017; Tung/Ritchie 2011; Volo 2010). Nevertheless, adaptations and enhancements of the multi-dimensional customer experience model from product brands to the destination context are still scarce.

Barnes et al. (2014) were the first to apply Brakus et al.'s (2009) brand experience scale to the 'close' (Sundbo/Dixit 2020; Sundbo/Hagedorn-Rasmussen 2008) destination experience context, that is, during the trip. Furthermore, Kumar/Kaushik (2018) applied Brakus et al.'s (2009) approach in this phase and found that sensory and affective experiences had the largest influence on destination brand identification, trust and loyalty. The central roles of the senses in tourist experiences and multi-sensory experiential marketing have also been confirmed in several studies (Agapito 2020). Moreover, Rather (2020) made use of the experiential marketing approach and empirically evidenced that customer engagement has a positive effect on consumer experiences and identification in a tourist destination in India. Yet some authors still doubt that the adopted scale is applicable for tourists in the destination context (Godovykh/Tasci 2020).

## **2.2 Technology-mediated tourist experiences: pre-travel ODEs on ODWs**

ODWs are designed to promote a country, region or city as a tourist destination and serve as the central communication tool for DMOs (Jeon et al. 2018). Previous research has shown that ODWs can influence consumer behaviour in the decision-making and image-building process as 'overt induced' (that is, controlled by destinations) sources of information (Gartner 1994; Jeong et al. 2012; Molinillo et al. 2018). As ODW content is created by public organisations, trust in the provided information is higher than for other online sources (Choi et al. 2016; Jiménez-Barreto et al. 2020b). In Germany, for example, roughly one in four holidaymakers (consciously) uses ODWs for inspiration or information prior to a holiday (FUR 2020). Millennials – that is, the generation born between 1977 and 1995 (Benckendorff/Moscardo 2010) – are the most frequent users of ODWs in Germany (FUR 2020). Furthermore, millennials generally travel more than any other generation and, as digital natives, tend to be tech-savvy (Ketter 2020). Despite the fact that they use the internet more than previous generations, members of this generation are said to be mistrustful of

mass media (Huang/Petric 2010) and difficult to reach with internet advertising (Tanyel et al. 2013).

Only a few tourism researchers have applied the experiential marketing approach to the online context or analysed subjective, internal and multi-dimensional responses to ODWs, that is, the ODE. Jiménez-Barreto et al. (2019a) were the first to apply selected experience dimensions (sensory and intellectual) from Barnes et al.'s (2014) scale to the context of ODWs. Taking a quantitative approach, they measured the online destination brand experience (ODBE) and its effects and found that, for unfamiliar destinations, sensory experiences were more important than intellectual experiences, especially among millennials. Besides, they confirmed that the ODBE dimensions could appear sequentially, that is, that the sensory experience conditions the intellectual experience. However, through the adaptation of the brand experience scale from other industries, the complexities of tourist destinations (World Tourism Organisation 2019) were overlooked (Godovykh/Tasci 2020). These complexities impede professional destination branding (Eisenstein 2018; Tasci 2011). Some authors have also shown that typical brand elements from other industries, such as logos, play only a negligible role in the context of tourism destinations (Beritelli/Laesser 2018; Kladou et al. 2017). As such, a simple transfer of branding approaches from other industries to the destination context appears to be insufficient.

In subsequent studies, Jiménez-Barreto et al. (2019b; 2020b) aimed to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of ODBEs by including qualitative approaches in their analyses. Taking a rather broad approach, they explored the elements of a positive ODBE on different destination platforms (website, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter) and used static images of these platforms as stimuli. First, the authors confirmed Brakus et al.'s (2009) brand experience dimensions. They defined sensory ODBEs as evoked by stimuli appealing to the senses, affective ODBEs as stimuli-induced emotions and feelings, intellectual ODBEs as cognitive stimulation of the intellect by awakening interest or curiosity, and behavioural ODBEs as concrete thoughts about and activation of motivations towards the physical destination experience on-site. Furthermore, they expanded Brakus et al.'s (2009) brand experience dimensions by social ODBEs, referring to communicative aspects of the ODBE and interactive ODBEs for social media channels, referring to the perceived ability of users to change, create, or interact with the content on the platform (Jiménez-Barreto et al. 2019b). The interactive dimension reflects the concept of experience co-creation (Prahalad/Ramaswamy 2004), suggesting that experiences are enhanced if tourists become part of the experience creation. Information and communication technologies can involve tourists, among others, through interactive website elements, and facilitate the co-creation of richer, more personalised and even completely new tourism experiences (Neuhofer et al. 2014). Besides, Jiménez-Barreto et al. (2019b) found that familiarity with the destination as well as the destination scale (city or country) influence the ODBE.

Jiménez-Barreto et al. (2020b) further confirm the applicability of Brakus et al.'s (2009) four experience dimensions. Their findings also revealed that an extension of the social dimension was needed to address the idiosyncrasies of social media platforms, particularly Facebook. However, their research focused on analysing correlations with another construct: destination brand credibility. Jiménez-Barreto et al. (2020a) also developed a new scale to measure destination brand authenticity. They found that destination brand authenticity was another outcome of a positive ODBE, which had direct and indirect effects on behavioural intentions towards the destination.

Gretzel/Fesenmaier (2003) pointed to the central role of sensory information in consumers' construction of experiences in the online context. Moreover, potential tourists' desires, needs and previous experiences guide how advertising stimuli are perceived (Agapito et al. 2013; Kim/Fesenmaier 2017; Kroeber-Riel/Gröppel-Klein 2013). Accordingly, ODEs evoked by ODWs, including the behavioural responses to them, will be influenced by both personal (for example, motivation, mood, demographics) and environmental factors (for example, website usability, device used). In addition, familiarity with the tourist destination or website explored influences how users process and evaluate information (Choe et al. 2014).

### **2.3 Constructs related to ODEs in the ODW context**

Some authors have applied other theories from cognitive psychology regarding hedonic or experiential responses to ODWs. Lee/Gretzel (2012) and Lee et al. (2010) demonstrated the importance of sensory and intellectual stimulation in the persuasiveness of ODWs and mental imagery. Mental imagery refers to the process – not the structure – by which sensory information is represented in working memory (MacInnis/Price 1987). Experiential marketing stimuli are designed to evoke a high level of imagery elaboration, which can enable tourists to develop a concrete travel vision and immerse themselves in fantasies and dreams (Le et al. 2019). Choi et al. (2007) analysed the utilitarian and hedonic aspects of ODWs and their effect on users' perceived online immersion, or telepresence (Shih 1998). Zhang et al. (2018) introduced a model of the experience value co-creation process on official ODWs and social media, which identified emotional and behavioural components. In their model, the cognitive platform experience focuses on user experience with the technology (aesthetics, usefulness, ease of use, trust and interactivity), while the emotional experience is operationalised as the expectation of pleasure and excitement when travelling to the destination. In their experimental study, the authors also found that the cognitive platform experiences have an effect on affective and conative reactions.

### **2.4 Research approach and objective**

The review of the literature revealed that most studies of ODEs adopted a quantitative, confirmatory approach, used established scales from other industries and applied exclusively self-report methods. These approaches limit researchers' abilities to investigate important emotional reactions (Godovykh/Tasci 2020; Li et al. 2016; Scuttari/Pechlaner 2017). Previous studies have also not sufficiently acknowledged the complexity of ODEs on ODWs and concentrated on positive emotional responses while neglecting potential negative effects. Thus, research on this topic is still in its infancy and there is a need for inquiries that go beyond previous approaches which aimed for breadth rather than depth of knowledge to ODEs on ODWs. Therefore, this research explores the following question from a German demand-side perspective and takes millennials as an example: How do users of ODWs experience unfamiliar tourist destinations in the pre-travel phase?

Cognitive psychology focuses on the research of the perception of tourist experiences and thus on the processes that take place in the tourists' minds (Jantzen 2013; Sundbo/Dixit 2020). In this regard, the stimulus-organism-response (SOR) model claims that various environmental aspects can act as stimulus (S) that influences an individual's internal state (O), leading to the individual's behavioural response (R)

(Mehrabian/Russell 1974). The SOR model has been proven to be a suitable framework to explain tourist experiences (Kim et al. 2020; Le et al. 2020) and online user behaviour (Zhai et al. 2020) and is used in this research to advance the conceptual framework of ODEs on ODWs. In contrast to the predominating positivist and/or single-method research on this topic, an explorative, qualitative multi-method approach was applied.

### 3 METHODS

Participants were selected using purposeful sampling (Patton 1990), a sampling method in which information-rich cases are selected based on a set of criteria. As German millennials have demonstrated a higher than average use of ODWs in the pre-travel phase compared to the overall German population (FUR 2020), membership of this generation (aged between 25 and 42 years) was set as the first criterion in participant selection. Prior experiences with ODWs and high affinity for travel were further selection criteria. A call for participation was first made to members of the author's home university (staff and enrolled students). Additional participants were recruited using snowball sampling (Patton 1990). Theoretical saturation was reached after 15 participants. A minimum of 12 participants was set beforehand based on findings on the necessary number of interviews for reaching saturation in studies with relatively homogenous groups (Guest et al. 2006). Three runs with no new themes were defined as a stopping criterion (Francis et al. 2010).

During the data collection process, participants were shown a selection of ODWs. To simulate the travel inspiration and early information phase, participants had no previous experiences with these destinations and their respective ODWs. Website selection was guided by critical case sampling (Patton 1990) based on the results of quantitative studies about the use of ODWs in the pre-travel phase. Types of holiday travel with a high usage of ODWs were identified (for example, adventure travel) (FUR 2018a) and destinations promoting those types of holidays were selected. Additionally, destinations with a high probability of being unfamiliar to the subjects were chosen based on the travel behaviour of German millennials in the past (FUR 2017; 2018b; 2019). Moreover, destinations of different scales (that is, country, region, island and city) were selected in order to learn about possible impacts on the ODEs. Finally, a range of ODWs of destinations fulfilling these criteria were evaluated by three independent web usability or experience experts from the tourism field to choose the most critical cases (best practices) (Patton 1990). Evaluation criteria included the emotionality and overall quality of the websites. A focus on extremely positive cases was desired as it was expected that these would reveal more facets of ODEs and the presumed influential factor of a negative technology experience (Zhang et al. 2018) should be kept at a minimum. From the six best ODWs according to the experts' evaluations, three were assigned to each participant depending on their previous travel experiences, which they had reported during the recruiting process. The selected ODWs and the number of participants exposed to each website are shown in Table 1. The order of the websites shown was randomised.

Table 1 Selected ODWs and number of participants exposed

Destination	ODW URL	Number of participants exposed
Bern (Switzerland)	www.bern.com/de	6
British Columbia (Canada)	www.hellobc.de	8
Graubünden (Switzerland)	www.graubuenden.ch/de	5
La Réunion (France)	www.insel-la-reunion.com	12
Rovaniemi (Finland)	www.visitrovaniemi.fi/de/	11
Slovenia	www.slovenia.info/de	3

Data collection took place in a computer laboratory from mid December 2019 through mid February 2020. A multi-method approach comprising a questionnaire, eye-tracking, retrospective think-aloud (RTA) protocols, semi-structured interviews and video observation was applied to gain a holistic understanding of ODEs on ODWs. The sequential multi-method approach is visualised in Figure 1.

Participants were informed that the study was about their feelings, thoughts and expectations about a travel destination that were triggered by ODWs. First, they were asked to complete a short questionnaire which included items measuring their socio-demographic information (for example, age, sex, family status), travel behaviour (frequency of travel and preferred holiday types) and an estimation of their current mood based on a five-point rating scale.

An explorative eye-tracking study was initiated in a second research phase. Participants were invited to freely explore the ascribed ODWs one at a time. They were asked to imagine that they were seeking inspiration for their next holiday trip and to explore what the holiday experience in each destination would be like. To make the website experience as realistic as possible, no time limit was set. Participants stayed on the three websites for between 15 and 60 minutes in total. While participants explored the websites, their eye movements were tracked using the Tobii X2-30 eye tracker (rate: 30 Hz) with a webcam, resulting in gaze plots and videos of participants' faces during navigation.

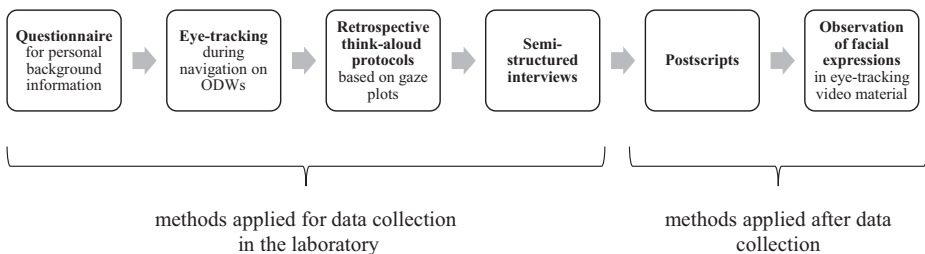


Figure 1 Sequence of applied multi-methods

Upon website exploration, the gaze plots were analysed and commented on with each participant. Video and audio records were made of these RTA protocols (Guan et al. 2006). The RTA was further extended to semi-structured qualitative interviews in which each participant's thoughts on ODWs based on their previous real-life experiences were explored (for example, expectations of content, past experiences). After data collection, notes on important observations (postscripts) were made by the researcher. Video material from eye-tracking was used as additional observational material to ensure that affective reactions that were not self-reported were also captured. Verbatim transcripts of the RTA protocols and semi-structured interviews were gradually made during data collection.

MAXQDA 2018 software was used for qualitative directed content analysis (Mayring 2000). An abductive approach was followed, meaning that to further develop existing theories, inductively discovered aspects from the data were connected to existing theoretical ideas (Gehman et al. 2018). Based on recent works on the ODBE (Jiménez-Barreto et al. 2019b; 2020a), the sensory, affective, intellectual, behavioural, social and interactive dimensions were used as a basis for coding data. The coding of the verbal material was supplemented by coding the video material from eye-tracking with regard to observable facial expressions.

Data material and codes were reviewed and refined in several rounds, comparing this study's findings with previous literature. To validate findings, participants' verbal descriptions were compared with the actual gaze plots and facial expressions. Intermediate results were discussed with other experts on the research team. Overall, the multi-method approach and the use of distinct ODWs of different destination scales delivered information-rich verbal and observational material.

## 4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Sample description

The questionnaire that participants completed in the first step of data collection provided information about their socio-demographic characteristics, travel behaviour and mood. The sample of 15 German millennials can be described as follows:

- Age: 25 to 38 years old ( $M = 29.5$ ;  $SD = 4.33$ )
- Sex: 8 male, 7 female
- Family status: 6 single, 6 partnered, 3 married
- Children: 3 with 1–3 young children in the household, 12 without children
- Educational level: 5 high school graduates (Abitur), 9 university degrees, 1 PhD
- Travel behaviour: 1 to 6 holiday trips per year ( $M = 2.9$ ;  $SD = 1.34$ )

Participants' interest in holiday types varied, and all participants reported that they were in a good or very good mood on the day of the interview.

### 4.2 ODEs on ODWs in the pre-travel phase

Findings of this research show that the sensory, affective, intellectual, social and behavioural dimensions are central to ODEs. This is in agreement with previous research (Jiménez-Barreto et al. 2019b; 2020a). The comparison of verbal and video material showed that self-reported emotions were consistent with observed facial

expressions. However, some additional affective reactions beyond self-reported emotions were identified through video material. The data also allowed for in-depth specifications of positive and negative ODEs. Moreover, findings of this research demonstrate a previously unexplored dimension: the 'spatio-temporal ODE dimension'. Tourist experiences are already linked to tourist movements in space and time in the pre-travel phase. At this stage, tourists develop expectations for the spatio-temporal experience they will have at a travel destination. Consistent with Jiménez-Barreto et al. (2019b), 'interactive' experiences (that is, the perceived ability of users to change, create or interact with the content on a platform) were not found for ODWs. Although participants frequently mentioned aspects of interactivity, these comments were linked to the technology or usability experience (for example, comments on filter functions). Participants did not expect an interactive exchange with the DMO or other users, nor was such an experience important for their destination experience.

Furthermore, it was found that the perception of the ODE unfolds successively. The ODE process starts by recording the stimulus (that is, the ODW) via the senses, followed by an activation (attention) leading to affective and cognitive information processing and finally behavioural intentions. This is in line with consumer behaviour and previous research (Jiménez-Barreto et al. 2019a; Kroeber-Riel/Gröppel-Klein 2013). With the dual process model in mind (Holbrook/Hirschman 1982), affective ODEs can result both from affective (spontaneous emotional reactions) and cognitive information processing (affective forecasting) (Wilson/Gilbert 2005), while intellectual, spatio-temporal and social experiences are based solely on cognitive information processing. These dimensions can appear either together or individually. Previous research has proposed that cognitive reactions to ODWs (platform experiences) have an effect on affective (emotions) and conative (behavioural intentions) reactions (Zhang et al. 2018). After all, existing theories in cognitive psychology are inconsistent with regard to the sequence of affective and cognitive information processing (Jantzen 2013; Scuttari/Pechlaner 2017). Neither sequence could be supported in this research.

#### 4.2.1 *Sensory ODEs*

Based on the number of total codes per dimension, the findings of this research support the outstanding role of the sensory dimension found in previous research (Agapito 2020; Agapito et al. 2013; Jiménez-Barreto et al. 2019a). All participants commented on visual sensations, and all but one of the participants found some pictures on the websites 'appealing', 'beautiful' or 'cool'. For example, one participant said, 'Beautiful! So that was my first thought. Beautiful landscapes' (BL191219). Another frequently-mentioned visual sensation was that the destination looked 'impressive', 'fascinating' or 'special'.

Although participants mainly reported positive visual aspects, a few negative visual reactions were expressed as well. For example, three participants said that the selected pictures looked unreal. Although previous research indicates that users' trust in ODWs is greater than in other sources (Choi et al. 2016; Jiménez-Barreto et al. 2020b), the majority of participants expressed sceptical attitudes towards ODWs or at least towards some of the visual content embedded in the websites. This observation fits with millennials' general scepticism towards internet advertising (Tanyel et al. 2013). At the same time, approximately half of participants stated that ODWs were more objective than other sources.

The following quote reflects the impact that scepticism towards ODWs can have on a sensory experience:

So I took a little look at the pictures. Well, it doesn't look bad. But, for example, with pictures like this or where you see the skyline and it's just completely saturated with colour, you can see that it probably won't look like that in real life. (HW200211)

Sound was included in some of the videos embedded in the websites, leading to some auditory sense reactions as well. Participants' reactions to auditory stimuli were mostly negative. Three participants were scared by sounds that appeared without warning and disliked that they had no control over the sound of the video. Additionally, some participants commented on further sensory bodily reactions. For example, pictures of tropical landscapes triggered thoughts about the temperature of the destination.

The described sensory experiences led to further affective and cognitive information processing and, consequently, additional ODE dimensions.

#### 4.2.2 *Affective ODEs*

Affective ODEs describe stimulus-induced emotions and feelings with reference to the destination. All but one participant reported on and demonstrated emotions and feelings during website navigation. Thereby this research is in agreement with previous studies (Jiménez-Barreto et al. 2019b). However, the number of affective reactions varied significantly between participants. While most affective reactions occurred spontaneously during navigation, some participants also reflected on future-oriented feelings they expected to have during their visit to the destination. Such affective forecasts play a pivotal role in decision-making (Wilson/Gilbert 2005).

'Happiness' and 'fun' were the most common spontaneous affective reactions among participants during navigation. For example, one individual commented on the video on the British Columbia ODW's homepage showing a polar bear and skiers on a downhill run: 'Yes, I got stuck with the pictures right away [laughs]. Actually, because I found the polar bear so cool [laughs]. And I'm a skier, and I thought that was really cool, too' (AM200109). Another participant was amused by the text on the Rovaniemi website, stating: 'And here, "the party goes on forever", right, I thought that was very funny' (BL191219). Other positive feelings included 'wanderlust', 'impressed' or 'surprised'. Feelings of being 'impressed' and 'surprised' were also frequently observed in participants' facial expressions during the video analysis. With regard to future-oriented affective reactions, some participants expressed expectations of feeling relaxed or safe during the trip.

While most affective reactions were positive, some negative emotions and feelings occurred during navigation as well. Some participants were disappointed by the information provided. For example, one participant who was looking for information on the history of La Réunion was reminded of previous disappointing travel experiences in Asia:

... that's when I was a bit disappointed. Because that's when I looked for the history and then: coffee and cane sugar. And there I have a bit of an inner dislike. Because in Asia, it was always such a rip-off, when you look at something like that. It was all about selling. So I didn't want to look at it. (JH200214)

Furthermore, some users felt irritation in response to the website content during navigation. Some participants also reported viewing content that deterred them. Feelings of shock or fear were mainly caused by content about the volcano on La Réunion, but also by pictures provoking fear of heights.

#### 4.2.3 *Intellectual ODEs*

All participants commented on intellectual experiences mainly guided by personal motivations and travel interests. For example, one participant reported on his interest in the northern lights in Rovaniemi, stating:

Yeah, then I saw the northern lights. Which of course suited me as I am planning a trip to the northern lights, but in Norway anyway. In any case, this has very much awakened my interest again. At first I read very intensively and was only fixated on the northern lights. (TK 200215)

Other content prompted the opposite reaction, a lack of interest.

Many participants also reported on aspects that engendered curiosity. One participant even entered a flow state, as this quote exemplifies:

Because on the site I somehow always discovered something where I thought: okay, click on that or look again here, maybe you can look again. The thing actually became more and more interesting. I had the feeling that you can discover something here, right? Well, that triggered a little bit of an urge to explore, or this Wikipedia phenomenon that you often have, when you read an article and then there are 12 links in it and you click first on one, then the next, and suddenly three hours are gone. (ND200203)

This finding is in line with past research that proposed that intellectual ODEs arouse interest or curiosity with regard to the destination (Jiménez-Barreto et al. 2019b).

Three participants reported opposite reactions, explicitly stating that they did not want to explore too much before the trip in order to limit their expectations. One participant said: ‘I’m not interested in videos. Well, I would like to see pictures, but not so much information at once. ... Because I like to be surprised. So, if I know that it fits roughly, then I don’t look much further’ (LD200211).

The desire to be surprised on-site can be related to tourists’ novelty-seeking behaviour (Lee/Crompton 1992), which is particularly pronounced among millennials (Cavagnaro et al. 2018). Participants also mentioned that they wanted to limit the amount of information obtained before the trip to reduce the risk of disappointment. These statements are consistent with the idea that satisfaction in the context of holidays is a result of comparing the perceived quality of holidays with one’s expectations (Oliver 1980).

#### 4.2.4 *Spatio-temporal ODEs*

Findings reveal one supplementary, destination-specific experience dimension: the spatio-temporal ODE. Participants’ thoughts while navigating ODWs in the pre-travel phase reflected geographic aspects linked to the destination. All but one participant commented on their reflections regarding the accessibility of the destination or certain attractions at the destination. With regard to spatial accessibility (distance), one participant commented: ‘And Finland is not so far away from here. Well, also not close, but ... if you fly then maybe not so far. If you go by car, it’s a long ride’ (LR200217). In the pre-travel phase, the perception of geographic distance from a

tourist's home to their destination can be perceived as a barrier to the experience, a phenomenon known as the principle of distance decay (McKercher 2008). Another participant reported thinking about the temporal accessibility of experiencing the northern lights: 'And I find the northern lights in general super interesting, and I would like to see them, too. So I took a closer look at it, when exactly that is' (AM200109).

Furthermore, reflections on the distribution of attractions at the destination and options for combining these experiences (experience density) were common. For example, one participant stated:

So it's hard to judge at first glance: how far apart is everything now? Do I have to decide now whether I want to go there, or can I look at the lakes or the sea and the mountains at the same time? (CL191219)

Tourists are looking for a diverse array of experiences during their holidays, which is reinforced by the fact that members of the same travel group might have different needs. Therefore, tourists prefer areas with multiple attractions and thus seek options for inter- or intra-destination movements (Caldeira/Kastenholz 2015; Hunt/Crompton 2008).

#### 4.2.5 *Social ODEs*

Jiménez-Barreto et al. (2019b) referred to the social dimension in their ODBE approach with regard to communication experiences on social media channels. A more destination-specific perspective emerged from the data related to the social ODE dimension in particular.

Many participants mentioned thoughts related to on-site destination experiences which are co-created by encounters with the destination's inhabitants, other tourists and travel companions (Pearce 2010). This shows that such reflections already start in the pre-travel phase. For example, with regard to the destination's residents, one participant explained that he prefers pictures with real-life situations and people:

When you look at an old town or something like that, you just get a feeling for it, because that's what people are like. The people who live there are also part of the whole experience and not only the houses standing there. (AM200109)

Participants with children especially reflected on what the experience of visiting the destination together with their families would be like.

Tourists can have multiple positive and negative perspectives on other tourists (Pearce 2010). However, remarkably, nine participants in this study commented on situations where they had negative thoughts about crowded places with regard to encounters with other tourists. For example, one participant commented on the Christmas village in Rovaniemi:

It even said how many people were there – 500 000 people a year or something like that. ... they come there to experience this Santa Claus, this Santa's house, this village. So, it's always gonna be bustling there. It's a little more like a Disneyland production to me. (CR200217)

This negative view might be related to the fact that the selected destinations predominantly focused on nature-oriented holidays. Previous research has shown that satisfaction in wilderness and natural settings declines with the number of visitors present

(Pearce 2010). Moreover, Jacobsen et al. (2019) found that younger tourists were particularly intolerant of crowding. Another reason might be the high number of media reports on the topic of over-tourism in recent years (Pasquinelli/Trunfio 2020), which may have sensitised participants to this topic.

Five participants reflected on the individuality of the on-site destination experience and its related potential to distinguish them from others. One participant said: 'I'm just someone who likes to drive to places where not everybody has been, and I would have felt more like I had a more interesting and exclusive holiday experience. ... Not everybody has been there' (BL191219). These thoughts about the potential ability of the destination to differentiate oneself from others through travelling can be referred to as prestige motivations for travelling, where the uniqueness of the destination is considered an important factor (Correia/Moital 2009).

#### 4.2.6 Behavioural/intentional ODEs

All participants mentioned thoughts about and activation of motivations towards the physical destination experience on-site. Based on the data, participants' behavioural reflections can be described on three levels.

On the first level, participants want to receive an overview of the offer in place and consider whether the presented activities fit their interests and needs. One participant said, for example: 'I thought: okay, perhaps it is a destination which is rather for more active vacationers. Lots of sports, lots of exercise, lots of nature' (LF200109).

On the second level, participants' desires to visit the destination were awakened. For example, one participant said: 'Now that I'm on this website, I definitely get a taste for hiking and nature. As I said, I'd probably go there [laughs]' (JH200214).

On the third level, some participants felt deeply immersed in the destination: 'And here also is a picture of the [city] centre, or some people partying, and I actually imagined exactly what it would be like if I was there now' (BL191219). This third level can be referred to as a high level of imagery elaboration (Le et al. 2019) or, more specifically, the concept of telepresence (Choi et al. 2007; Shih 1998).

These findings are also in line with past research (Jiménez-Barreto et al. 2019b), yet show a more detailed description of the evoked behavioural/intentional thoughts.

In addition to these positive behavioural reflections, some participants had critical thoughts as well. Apart from motivation, the ability to travel to a destination is an important prerequisite for demand (Lohmann/Beer 2013). Most participants reflected on the personal financial constraints hindering them from engaging in travel experiences. Furthermore, seven participants reflected very critically on the probability of experiencing in reality what was shown on the website, for example in the case of Rovaniemi: '... it all seemed very nice and somehow everything looked very unreal to me. I don't know, maybe it's the same on site. Possibly, but it didn't seem that way to me at first' (LF200109).

This again demonstrates website users' scepticism and the influence of a user's attitude towards ODWs (that is, its trustworthiness) on their perception of its content.

### 4.3 Factors of influence and responses

A comparison of participants' self-reports and observed surfing behaviour and emotions with their questionnaire data showed the expected subjectivity of ODEs (Jantzen 2013; Karayilan/Cetin 2016; Knobloch et al. 2017), which are strongly influenced by personal factors, that is, psychological aspects (especially motivation as

reflected in interest in holiday activities) and demographic aspects (especially having children). As shown during the interviews, personal memories, prior experiences with and attitude towards ODWs (trustworthiness) as well as general attitude towards the destination also influenced ODEs. Moreover, it is suggested that involvement and mood influence ODEs as well (Jantzen 2013; Karayilan/Cetin 2016; Kroeber-Riel/Gröppel-Klein 2013). However, due to the study design, which required high involvement and the reported positive mood of all participants, these influential factors could not be proven in this research. Despite the subjectivity of the individual experience, the six derived ODE dimensions were identified between all participants, albeit with different characteristics.

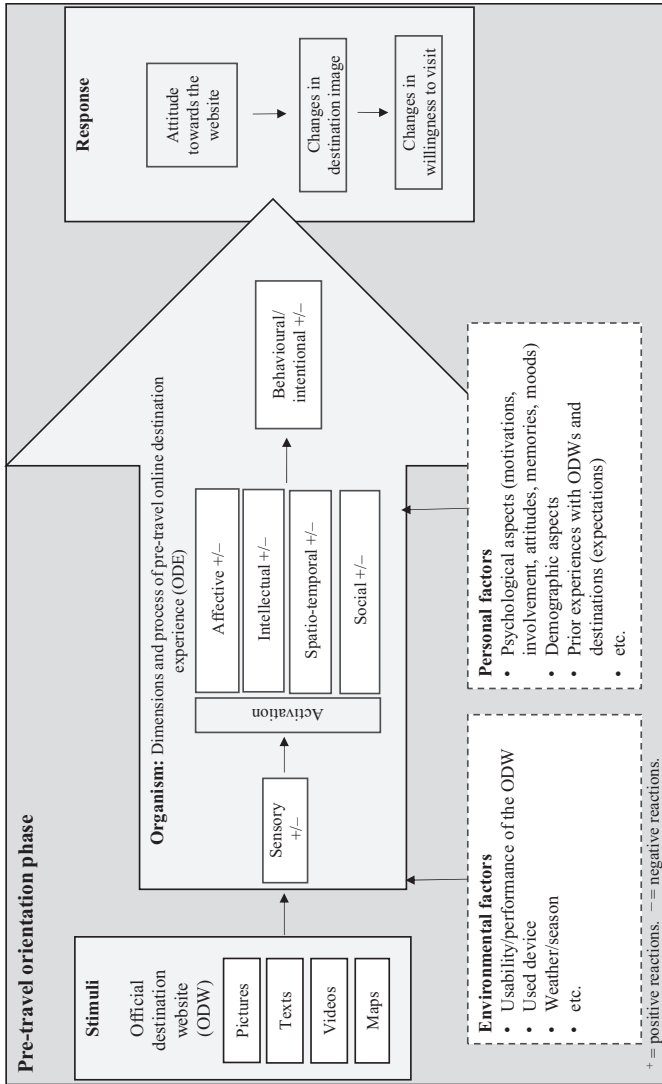
Besides, environmental factors influenced participants' perceptions of experiential stimuli. Usability, or the technology-based performance of the website (for example, ease of use, interactivity), had a halo effect (Kroeber-Riel/Gröppel-Klein 2013) on the ODE. Although it was intended to include only positive usability examples in this study in order to avoid this anticipated influence, it was notable in the interviews that poor performance with regard to website speed or the clarity of the presented information sometimes led to frustration, negatively influencing the ODE. Further environmental aspects such as the used device and the season were stable in the course of this study and the possible impact kept to a minimum. A general impact of the destination scale represented on the ODW (country, region, island or city) on the ODE dimensions as reported in previous research (Jiménez-Barreto et al. 2019b) was not observed.

Participants' narratives suggest that positive ODEs lead to positive attitudes towards the websites as well as image improvement and willingness to visit the destination. Negative ODEs impact these responses in reverse. For example, ODWs that triggered many affective reactions, such as the Rovaniemi site, resulted in willingness to visit the destination even if participants were completely unaware of the destination beforehand. As such, this study supports previous research on responses to ODWs (Jeong et al. 2012; Jiménez-Barreto et al. 2020b; Molinillo et al. 2018).

All presented findings are summarised in a conceptual framework based on the SOR model (Mehrabian/Russell 1974; see Figure 2). In the pre-travel phase, ODWs and their content elements represent the stimulus (S) that triggers a process of positive and negative ODEs on the six dimensions (see Section 4.2), described as the individual's internal state within the organism (O). ODEs lead to the aforementioned attitudinal or behavioural responses (R). The conceptual framework also includes the aforementioned personal and environmental factors influencing ODEs.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Mental and emotional perceptions of destinations play an important role in tourists' travel decisions (Lohmann 2008; Tung/Ritchie 2011). As ODWs are the most relevant DMO-controlled source of information in the pre-travel phase, DMOs that manage to support the creation of positive pre-travel ODEs through their websites can gain competitive advantages. In light of COVID-19-related travel restrictions, experience-oriented website content has received a further boost. However, so far an understanding of the nature of ODEs on ODWs from a demand-side perspective has fallen short.



Note: The conceptual framework summarises findings based on the SOR model. ODWs (S) stimulate positive and negative ODEs on six dimensions (O) that influence responses (R) towards the ODW and the destination. Several environmental and personal factors have an impact on ODEs.

Figure 2 Conceptual framework of pre-travel ODEs on ODWs

This research qualitatively explored how users of ODWs experience unfamiliar tourist destinations in the pre-travel phase, taking a German demand-side perspective and the most frequent user group of ODWs in Germany (millennials) as an example. Other authors raised the need for innovative research methods to explore experiences holistically (Godovykh/Tasci 2020). Using a multi-method approach, comprehensive data from real-time observations (gaze plots and videos from eye-tracking) and self-reports (RTA and interviews) were obtained and analysed with an abductive approach. Overall, this research shows that ODEs have specific characteristics which go beyond the experiential modules of product brands (Brakus et al. 2009; Schmitt 1999). The spatio-temporal ODE plays an important role in the pre-travel phase. Thereby, this research expands previous ODE dimensions (sensory, affective, intellectual, behavioural and social) (Jiménez-Barreto et al. 2019a; 2019b). Furthermore, this research demonstrates the relevance of the sensory, affective, intellectual, behavioural and social dimensions for the ODE context. Yet the behavioural/intentional and social dimensions in particular have destination-specific characteristics that are better understood through the study. Alongside positive ODEs, some negative ODEs were found as well, for example, in connection with expectations of crowded places. As negative reactions were neglected in previous studies, these outcomes further contribute to an advanced understanding of ODEs. Findings are brought together in a conceptual framework of ODEs on ODWs based on a SOR model, hence taking the mental process of ODEs into account.

This research adds value to the still-young theoretical discussion of technology-mediated tourist experiences (Navío-Marco et al. 2018; Neuhofer et al. 2014). The conceptual framework derived from this research deepens the knowledge of the process and the dimensions of ODEs on ODWs in the pre-travel phase. The study also contributes to a better understanding of individual dimensions of the ODE. The complex methodological approach responds to the need for more innovative and multi-method research to explore complex topics in the context of tourist experiences. While the use of eye-tracking technology is still rare in tourism research (Scott et al. 2019), this research demonstrates that it can be a valuable method for qualitative explorations, particularly when combined with RTA. Going beyond dominant quantitative evaluation of the eye-tracking material, the recorded gaze-plot served as a stimulus to explore the participants' thoughts and feelings during website exploration (RTA). In addition, the videos of the test persons' faces recorded in parallel with the gaze plot were analysed to observe emotional reactions not mentioned by the test person and to associate them with specific triggers on the websites. The gaze plot was also used to validate whether the surfing behaviour reported in the interview corresponded to reality.

In addition, this study delivers valuable managerial implications for DMOs that focus on millennials as a target group. The awareness of the multiple thoughts and feelings during website navigation may help DMOs to tailor ODW content and enhance the likelihood of positive ODEs, leading to desired user responses. Experiential marketing should consider all six ODE dimensions while acknowledging the subjectivity of user perceptions. For example, managers should be aware of the central role of sensory ODEs and the negative impact that unrealistic pictures, or pictures of crowded people, as well as uncontrollable sound in videos, might have on millennials' ODEs. Moreover, the newly discovered spatio-temporal ODE dimension might be positively stimulated by interactive maps, for instance.

After all, this research comes with some limitations. This study purposefully focused on German millennials only. Analysing the same phenomenon among

different age groups and cultures would further expand the understanding of this subject. For example, the scepticism towards ODWs, often mentioned by the participants, might be less pronounced in other age groups. Besides, the study followed a best-practice approach with regard to the selection of the stimuli (ODWs). The destinations included mainly focused on nature-oriented holidays and were all exceptional in terms of the landscape and the local characteristics (for example, La Réunion as a volcanic island, the polar and Santa-Claus related Rovaniemi). Using less spectacular destination and ODW examples might lead to less pronounced user reactions. Furthermore, the usage of eye-tracking technology required data collection to take place in a laboratory. Although some participants mentioned in the interviews that they had forgotten that they were being observed during navigation, the artificial nature of this situation might have impacted their behaviour. Finally, for technical reasons, website surfing took place on a public computer. Using personal devices, such as smartphones or tablets, might also have an impact on website surfing behaviour and perceptions as users are more personally attached to them.

Given the infancy of the scientific discussion related to ODEs in a tourism context, there is also room for further research. This study's conceptual framework might be tested for generalisability with complementary quantitative studies. This could result in a measuring instrument for DMOs to examine the experience value of ODWs. For instance, moderating effects of the personal and environmental factors such as age or type of destination could be explored. The relationships between ODE dimensions could also be investigated. For the measurement of the sensory and affective ODE dimensions, further psychophysiological methods (for example, skin conductance, automatic facial expressions) could be applied. These have hardly been used in tourism research so far, but offer great potential for further exploring emotional reactions in real time (Fesenmaier/Xiang 2017; Godovykh/Tasci 2020). In addition, the effects of website content or design elements on ODEs should be further analysed to advance knowledge about the triggers of ODEs on ODWs.

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