The **extraordinariness** of **ordinariness** in tourism research

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Abstract | This theoretical paper discusses extraordinariness and peak experiences as a dominant discourse in tourist studies and points to ordinariness as an equally important, albeit under-researched, dimension of holidaying. Drawing in issues such as multiple dwellings, connected worlds, thick sociality, *vacability* and mundane holidays, the paper questions the viability and relevance of the dominant research discourse and asks whether it is perhaps time to introduce ordinariness as a complementary discourse that could be of benefit to future tourist studies.

Keywords | Extraordinary experiences, mundane holidays, banal holidays, ordinariness, *vacability*.

Resumo | Este trabalho conceptual discute o extraordinário e as experiências culminantes como um discurso dominante em estudos na área do turismo, apontando para o 'comum' como uma dimensão de férias igualmente importante, embora pouco pesquisada. Envolvendo questões como residências secundárias, mundos conectados, *thick sociality*, *vacability* e férias mundanas, o artigo questiona a viabilidade e relevância do discurso dominante na investigação e questiona se não será altura de introduzir o comum e o banal como um discurso complementar que poderá ser benéfico para estudos futuros na área do turismo.

Palavras-chave | Experiências extraordinárias, férias mundanas, férias banais, 'comum', *vacability*.

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1. Introduction

The idea that the tourist gaze (Urry, 2002) centers around extraordinary experiences and is constructed in contrast to home has been widely acknowledged, accepted and adopted by tourism researchers. Consequently, time and again, tourism researchers point to people going away on holiday in order to have extraordinary, meaningful and memorable experiences (MacCannell, 1999; McCabe, 2002), thus more or less implicitly suggesting that home relates to that which is ordinary and away to extraordinary/ peak experiences. This state of affairs in tourism research led Hall (2004, p. 2) to propose that "tourism is often portrayed as being something which exists out of the realm of everyday life rather than a part of the contemporary lifestyle of the wealthy and highly mobile". Furthermore, Larsen (2008, p. 27) argues that "tourism is traditionally treated as an escape from everyday life and tourism theory is concerned with extraordinary places" and that "tourism and everyday life are conceptualized as belonging to different ontological worlds". In the same vein, Quan and Wang (2004, p. 297) conclude that "the tourist experience has for a long time been one-sidedly understood as either the peak experience or the consumer experience". To, one-sidedly, investigate tourist experiences that relate to extraordinary peak experiences does make much sense; after all, such investigations have led to the identification of reasons to go, different sets of motivations and needs for extraordinary experiences on the demand-side. On the supply-side, it has led to development of valuable experience offers, strong destination brands and unique selling propositions. However, this paper questions the basic rationale that "everyone must go somewhere else" (MacCannell, 1999, p. x) and that tourists wish to escape the ordinary ordeal labeled everyday life during the holidays, and through this move experience the extraordinary. As such, the paper questions extraordinariness as a dominant discourse in tourism research and discusses a series of anomalies in contemporary tourism research that

point to extraordinariness being but one dimension of tourism. The dominant experience-oriented discourse, we argue, has led tourism researchers to emphasize extraordinariness in holidaying, thus neglecting ordinariness as an important dimension of holidaying. Drawing in a series of newer findings, the paper questions the dominant research discourse and opines that it is perhaps time to introduce ordinariness as a complementary, but equally important, discourse that could benefit future tourism research.

2. Theoretical foundations

Although the thoughts and ideas presented in this paper draw on the authors' on-going empirical studies (e.g. Blichfeldt & Mikkelsen, 2013, 2014), this paper is not a traditional empirical paper. Instead, although supported by fieldwork, this paper is theoretical in nature and is based on more analytical reflections and theoretical contemplations about the nature and position of both extraordinariness and ordinariness in contemporary tourism research. Therefore, the paper's structure differs from the traditional format used for more empirical papers, as it is not divided into neat methodology, literature, results and discussion sections. Instead, the present section introduces a series of issues and studies dealing with ordinariness as an integral part of the touristic experience and hereby sets the stage for the discussions and conclusions offered in the closing sections.

2.1. Connected worlds and multiple dwellings

In the past, sharp distinctions between 'home' and 'away' may have made more sense than in today's connected world and in 2006, McIntyre, Williams and McHugh's seminal anthology convincingly showed that, nowadays, frequent moves between home(s) and destinations are facts of life for a significant majority of people. As a consequence hereof,

McIntyre (2006, p. 6) pointed to 'multiple dwelling' as a concept that could explain and describe how people increasingly combine mobility and dwelling to maintain a sense of security and tradition in a mobile world. Whereas Urry (2000, p. 131) defined dwelling as "to reside or stay, to dwell at peace, to be content or at home in a place", McIntyre (2006, p. 8) finds that dwelling does not relate to home in any set way, but relates to various places, settings and contexts and therefore "multiple dwelling in the sense of 'home' and 'away' is an increasingly common phenomenon in modern societies".

Research on multiple dwelling has long-standing and strong traditions within the second home literature (e.g. Hall & Müller, 2004) – although the term 'second home' may not pay due respect to this phenomenon as there may not be anything secondary about such homes at all. However, research on second homes only takes into consideration some of the manifestations, meanings and materiality of multiple dwelling and neglects other types of dwellings. As an example of such neglected dwellings, at present the authors are doing fieldwork at Danish caravan sites and one preliminary finding (Blichfeldt & Mikkelsen, 2014) is that during such holidays the caravan, the tent, the cabin and the recreational vehicle qualify as home and provide the kind of dwelling mentioned by Urry (2000) as well as the stability, tradition and security of home mentioned by McIntyre (2006). Taken together, research on second homes, caravanning etc. points to home – whether it is a second home in a traditional sense or a mobile home – being physically venues that facilitate dwelling, stability, security and domesticity during the holidays.

Multiple dwelling not only exists when tourists' home is physically with them on holiday, but also when home is virtually present during the holidays. As an example of research on such virtual presence, in 2007, White and White looked at the meanings of 'home' and 'away' take on for tourists in light of the regular contact with friends and family members back home that cell phones and internet access

allow for. Their key finding was that the easy and frequent contact with friends and family members back home made tourists feel simultaneously at home and part of pre-existing social networks, while also being away. In the same vein, Blichfeldt and Marabese (2014) account for a piece of *netnography* aiming to understand *flashpacking* and conclude that *flashpackers* (i.e. contemporary backpackers) use information and communication technology to establish virtual presence and interact in online communities with people elsewhere to such extents that they feel simultaneously at home and away, potentially fusing these two states of mind into one entity.

As exemplified above, during the holidays tourists may not only bring with them home in very physical forms, but they also bring with them home through virtual presence and on-going communication with those back home. Previously, apart from those we actually travel with, tourists left their home-based social relations behind while travelling and only shared their experiences after the holidays; typically when the traditional holiday post-card turned up in people's mailbox weeks later or when they shared their pictures as Saturday night home entertainment. However, today photos and travel updates are often shared through social media while on being on holiday, thus forming meaningful bonds between the holiday person and home contexts during the holidays (Hjalager & Jensen, 2012).

2.2. Domesticity, thick sociality and sociability

Traditional distinctions between 'home' and 'away' are not only challenged by tourists' active uses of information and communication technologies, but also by researchers calling for research that embraces the roles family and domesticity play during the holidays. For example, Obrador (2012, p. 406) argues that "the very notion of the family, whose place is the home is contradictory to dominant understandings of tourism" and he further suggests that tourism researchers should pay more

attention to the fact that families 'do' home, family, domesticity and thick sociality during the holidays. As another example, Blichfeldt (2007) drew in the works of Berger and Luckmann (1966) in order to show how tourists institutionalize and *habitualize* holidaying. What is especially interesting is that when families travel together, they bring with them practices, habits, roles, forms of interaction and routines established at home or in the context of other dwellings, thus making the touristic experience something that includes both the ordinariness of everyday life and the extraordinariness of being in, constructing and performing a new place. A piece of research that attempts to shed light on both the extraordinariness and ordinariness of touristic practices is Quan and Wang's (2004) structural model of the tourist experience. In this seminal article, Quan and Wang (2004) point to various touristic practices (e.g. eating, sleeping, transportation) potentially qualifying as both peak (and thus indeed, extraordinary) touristic experiences and as more mundane extensions of daily life, which support the consumer experience.

Drawing in the different authors mentioned above, eating breakfast, posting photos on Facebook or nursing the children are activities and practices that people are likely to do both at home and when away. Under certain holiday circumstances, these practices may qualify as extraordinary experiences (e.g. when having a champagne brunch, nursing the kids while having a good time at the beach, or posting the picture of one's first sky-dive). However, under other circumstances such practices may be nothing out-of-the ordinary, but may very well be performed in much the same way as they are at home. Accordingly, holidays can both act as a venue for extraordinary experiences and enable people to enjoy the ordinariness of family bonding and practices – although often more intensively than during hectic everyday lives. As an example hereof, when we interview families, time and again, they point to holidays as a unique chance to sit down and enjoy something as simple as a shared breakfast. However,

the only extraordinary thing about these breakfasts is that the families, while on holiday, have time to do this. The key point is not to discredit the joyful extraordinary breakfasts tourists might have during the holidays. Instead, the point here is to put ordinary practices such as simply having a shared family breakfast on the touristic research agenda.

2.3. Mundane and banal holidays

Whereas the section above focused on ordinary and extraordinary experiences as moments during the holidays, in recent years, a number of tourism researchers have called for research on more mundane and banal holidays. For example, Binnie, Edensor and Holloway (2007) criticize the emphasis on the notable in travelling and call for research on more mundane and banal travelling as this may induce a comfortable sense of being in and knowing a place. Binnie et al. (2007, p. 166) further argue that the mundane may *routinize* life-worlds and generate reliable rhythms, habits and repetitions, thus providing tourists with "certainty, security and comfortable degrees of predictability and comfort". However, the discourse emphasizing the extraordinariness of touristic experiences in the form of thrill, newness, flow etc. neglects that tourists may (also) look for the pleasantness of that which is ordinary, well-known, predictable and safe. Larsen, Urry and Axhausen (2006, p. 245) advocate that "tourism involves connections with, rather than escape from, social relations", Blichfeldt and Mikkelsen (2013) point to *vacability* (i.e. the wish and ability to do nothing during the holidays) as a central drive for some tourists, and Edensor (2007, p. 203) opines that it is vital to acknowledge tourists' "desire to relax in an unchallenging environment, in being extremely comfortable and 'switching off' from the usual demands". What these researchers have in common is that they call for research on the more mundane, banal and ordinary practices that all tourists engage in (although to different degrees)

during the holidays as emphasis on the notable in, and extraordinariness of, holidaying only uncover some dimensions of what actually goes on when people go on holiday.

Mundane holidays and the ordinariness herein have not played pivotal roles within tourism research in the past. Perhaps the two most mundane types of holidays that exist are *staycationing* (vacationing at home) and visiting friends and family (VFF). Although these types of holidaying certainly account for a significant portion of holidays, disproportionally little research focuses on these types of holidays. Obviously, if the aim of tourism research is to increase sales by improving market communication and product development for specific destinations, then there is not much reason to do research on *staycationing* or VFF holidays. However, if the aim of tourist studies is to seek to fully understand the phenomenon of holidaying – in all its forms – then we argue that more research focusing on issues such as VFF and *staycationing* is indeed needed. Especially *staycationing* (and the closely related phenomenon *nearcationing*) seem to be characterized far more by ordinariness than extraordinariness and yet, research still has to uncover why some people, at least sometimes, choose to spend the holidays either at home or physically and psychologically close to home.

3. Extraordinariness of ordinariness in tourism research

At present tourism research is characterized by a discourse, in which extraordinary experiences and touristic practices are set in contrast to everyday life. Therefore, the current state of tourism research can best be characterized as extraordinariness of ordinariness – meaning that little research deals with those aspects of touristic experiences and practices that are not in sharp contrast to everyday life, but resemble life as lived at home. As shown time and time again by tourism researchers, extraordinariness is an

important element of tourism, but this does not – per se – imply that ordinariness is not an equally important element of touristic life, performances and practices. As an example, the family that enjoys sitting down to eat breakfast together during the holidays may also profoundly enjoy to go and see something spectacular and extraordinary. But as researchers, do we have the right to emphasize some elements of this family's holidays while neglecting others? Could it perhaps be that the family's enjoyment of the extraordinary elements of the holiday cannot be fully understood unless we also understand the mechanisms that make the family enjoy the ordinariness of other elements of the holiday? Can not the ordinariness of some touristic practices (such as a simple breakfast) and the extraordinariness of others (such as a visit to Disney, the pyramids or a local market) be mutually reinforcing? And can tourists not sometimes wish for holidays that allow them to experience nothing out of the ordinary?

Shurmer-Smith and Hannam (1994, p. 32) define homes as "key places of experience and identity". Although the kind of experiences provided for by home may differ from the extraordinary experiences many tourism researchers focus on, if it is true that multiple dwelling characterizes many (or even the majority of) people in today's connected world, then tourists increasingly bring home with them when they are away holidaying. This may not only be the case for second-home owners or people who bring with them a physical home in the form of a caravan or recreational vehicle. It may also be the case when families (and other close-knit travel units) bring with them thick sociality and domesticity regardless of how they travel the world. As such, home – both as more physical manifestations in the form of second homes, recreational vehicles, caravans etc. and as everyday practices, habits and routines – enables tourists to "travel the world without leaving home" (Williams & van Patten, 2006, p. 32). And yet, the dominant discourse in tourist studies largely ignores the everyday life practices, habits and routines that people bring with them on holiday. However, if

we look at what tourists (and especially families) actually do while they are on holiday, much time is devoted to what seems to be quite ordinary ordeals. Furthermore, some tourists stay very loyal to the same destinations – in extreme cases they even revisit the exact same cottage for the same period of time every year – year after year after year. One of the authors once came across a female tourist, who had visited the same island more than eighty times. Obviously, if this woman truly wished to experience something extraordinary, she could have gone elsewhere and had experiences very different from what that specific island has to offer. But perhaps being in and knowing another place than home is the extraordinary ordinariness that she is looking for? Perhaps contemporary tourists experience assimilation of 'home' and 'away' into one experience that includes both extraordinariness and ordinariness? Hall (2004, p. 4) argues that tourism is traditionally seen "as being an occurrence outside that of the routine, a perspective which continues to the present day in much tourism writing". However, when a tourist chooses to visit the same destination for the 82nd time, one would expect this journey to be part of the person's routine activities.

4. Conclusion

As stated in the call for this conference, "when we travel, we fabricate new societies". Unfortunately, the dominant discourse within tourist studies gives dominance to that which is truly new and extraordinary in touristic practices and meaning constructions. But the point we wish to make with this paper is to suggest that all is not new when we go on holiday. Instead, as tourists, we bring home with us – sometimes physically, often virtually and always mentally. This is especially the case, when we go on holiday with family or friends, thus bringing with us not only our beloved ones, but also sociality and thick domesticity as well as everyday

life habits, routines and practices. Therefore, if we wish to better understand the assimilated (or full) experience of today's and tomorrow's tourists, we have to do research, not only on extraordinariness, but also on the ordinariness of touristic experience. Consequently, we propose that tourism research should not one-sidedly focus on the extraordinariness inherent in holidaying, but should also embrace the ordinariness inherent in tourists' being away as well as at home in a variety of tourist contexts and across destinations – regardless of the extraordinary qualities of the places, spaces, contexts and destinations tourists inhabit during the holidays. To embrace ordinariness as part of the touristic experience would, we argue, enable tourist researchers not only to better understand the holiday as a whole, but would also add to the understanding of what it more precisely is that motivates tourists to, sometimes, search for extraordinariness during the holidays. In recent years, much has been written and said about the 'performative turn', the 'mobilities turn', actor network theory and multiple dwelling as relevant ontologies for tourism studies. However, if tourism researchers wish to embrace these new ontologies, we need to truly 'walk the talk' and do research that embraces touristic practices and performances in all the forms they take and this would mean to also study all that tourists do that is trivial, mundane, banal and not at all extraordinary.

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