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## **Meaningful leisure and tourism experiences as catalysts of well-being**

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# Meaningful leisure and tourism experiences as catalysts of well-being



Inaugural address, spoken by  
Prof. Dr. Marcel Bastiaansen

**Prof. Dr. Marcel Bastiaansen** obtained a MSc in Theoretical and Experimental Psychology (1996), and a PhD in Cognitive Neuroscience (cum laude) in 2000, both from Tilburg University. He then moved to Nijmegen, where he held research positions at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, and at Radboud University's Donders Institute for Cognitive Neuroscience, from 2000-2013. During these years he studied the temporal neuronal dynamics of language comprehension with EEG, MEG and fMRI techniques.

In 2013 Marcel joined Breda University of Applied Sciences (BUas), and refocused his research agenda on Leisure and Tourism. At BUas he co-founded, and is currently directing BUas' Experience Lab, which houses electrophysiological and neuroscientific tools to study leisure and tourism experiences. Under his leadership, the Experience Lab does both fundamental and applied research on the role of emotions in leisure and tourism experiences, and addresses how leisure and tourism experiences relate to well-being and quality of life, amongst others.

Marcel teaches Psychology of Leisure, Experience Research and Design, and Quantitative Research Methods courses in the BSc and MSc programs of Leisure and Tourism at BUas, and supervises BSc, MSc and PhD thesis students in Leisure and Tourism, and in Cognitive Neuroscience at BUas and at Tilburg University.

Since 2016, Marcel is also a member of the Cognitive Neuropsychology department at Tilburg University. In 2018 he joined the Management Team of the Academy for Leisure and Events at BUas, and became responsible for the scientific education and scientific research of the Academy. His chair in Leisure and Tourism Studies at Tilburg University is shared with Breda University of Applied Sciences.

# Meaningful leisure and tourism experiences as catalysts of well-being

Prof. Dr. Marcel Bastiaansen

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# Meaningful leisure and tourism experiences as catalysts of well-being

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# I Introduction

Mijnheer de Rector Magnificus,  
Dear colleagues, friends, family, dear audience,

I have the pleasure today to address topics everyone in the audience is familiar with. Leisure and tourism. The good things in life. Things that are valuable, and important to all of us. However, also things that are not always being taken very seriously in academia. Over the past months, whenever I was talking about my professorship to people outside of my immediate academic environment, I have quite consistently been met with a mixture of disbelief and mild irony when announcing that I had recently become a professor in Leisure and Tourism Studies. Admittedly, it easily makes for a light conversation during drinks, cocktail parties and family reunions, and easy jokes are within reach, such as “yeah, I am just very good at thinking deeply about doing nothing”. In that sense I now have an easier time talking about my professional life at such events compared to when I was actively studying cognitive neuroscience as a postdoc. Clearly, talking about the meaningfulness of leisure and tourism is much easier than having to explain to someone why it is interesting to study the temporal dynamics of oscillatory neuronal activity that are observed during the processing of syntactic violations and semantic anomalies in a sentence context.



## 2 What is leisure?

Back to leisure and tourism. The question is whether they are really just fun, and funny to talk about, or whether we should perceive of these domains as truly academic fields of study. However, before I do so, let me explain briefly what I mean when I say leisure. What is leisure, exactly? It has been argued that leisure is best perceived as time - for example, as the time that is free from obligations such as work and caring for others, and from tasks that are necessary for simply existing (like eating and sleeping). Thus, leisure may be considered residual time, time that is simply left over. However, this may not be the best possible definition of leisure. Consider yourself sitting on your couch on a Friday evening, exhausted after a long week of working, caring for your children, and doing the housekeeping. You spend the evening on that couch watching something indefinite on TV, too tired to engage in any activity, too tired for being inspired, too tired for doing anything at all. That clearly would not qualify as leisure for most of us. Instead of defining leisure as free time then, leisure is perhaps better defined as activities that people engage in during their free time: Doing sports, eating out, attending a concert, vacationing... This, however, begs the question of which activities qualify as leisure and which don't. Eating out in a restaurant may often be a leisure activity, but eating out in a restaurant with your boss and that one unpleasant colleague may not feel as leisure if it is perceived as an obligation. It may therefore be the particular state of mind one is in during a particular activity that defines leisure, with a key role for concepts such as perceived freedom, intrinsic motivation and positive affect (Rojek, 2010). In essence then, whether activities qualify as leisure critically hinges on how they are experienced. I will come back to the notion of experience extensively in a moment. As a side note, it should be obvious from the preceding argument that leisure covers many different activity types: sports, media consumption, events, cultural consumption, etc. Importantly, tourism, i.e. traveling for leisure, would also fall under this definition of leisure. Therefore, whenever I speak about leisure throughout this speech, I mean to refer to both leisure and tourism.

Now that we have agreed on a definition of leisure, let's return to the question whether tourism and leisure are really just fun, and funny to talk about, or whether we should perceive of these domains as truly academic fields of study. There are quite a few strong arguments why we should do the latter. For one, taken together, economically speaking leisure and tourism form the second largest industrial sector worldwide, so larger than, for instance, the oil and petrol industry. Second, leisure and tourism have societal costs, such as pollution,

overcrowding and a big carbon footprint, and benefits, such as increased well-being, social bonding and inclusion. Third, and more importantly for the context of my professorship, is the realisation that it is what people do in their free time that mostly defines them as individual human beings: the choices that people make for specific leisure activities, the different roles that people assume across the different leisure contexts that these activities involve, and the different experiences that result from these leisure activities, all build up and converge onto an individual narrative that forms one's personal and social identity. Furthermore, the positive experiences and positive emotions that are often associated with leisure activities clearly relate to well-being, and overall quality of life. In sum, it seems that leisure and tourism are something worth thinking about strategically, from the perspective of a multitude of scientific disciplines: economics, sociology, geography, anthropology and psychology. As you will see in the remainder of this speech, my work mostly focuses on the psychological aspects of leisure, and as I go along I will gladly invite different subdisciplines of psychology, such as positive psychology, cognitive psychology, and cognitive and affective neuroscience to the table, in order to better understand the societal function of leisure and tourism.



### 3 Shifting perspectives in studying leisure

Originally, the academic study of leisure branched off from sociology. At the turn of the 20th century, the industrial revolution led to the emergence of urban working classes and middle classes, both economically and culturally. In order to protect working classes, public policies emerged in the 1920s and 1930s around the 40-hour work week and around paid leave (Cross, 2005). The associated public debate led to a demand, from public policy makers, for research on how the different social classes spent their free time. According to prof. Hans Mommaas, my predecessor, “Central was the aim of securing a time freed from work, and of using that time for civilisation purposes (useful leisure, rational recreation, workers’ emancipation)” (Mommaas, 1997, p. 245). After World War II, the study of leisure further developed into encompassing work-leisure relationships and leisure stratification, again with a strong focus on the public and social policy perspective. However, postmodern thinking in the 80s incited a drastic increase in the diversity of topics addressed under the heading of Leisure Studies - the study of leisure consumption, the commodification of leisure, leisure participation in a society in which social class, ethnicity and gender relations became dynamic and fluid, and the related shifting dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion. Added to that, the study of leisure in the United States (usually referred to as Leisure Sciences rather than as Leisure Studies) took a different focus, addressing predominantly psychological aspects of leisure, such as perceived freedom, or therapeutic recreation, or concepts such as peak experiences and flow. Altogether, by the turn of the millennium, the study of leisure as an academic field had become so extremely diversified in terms of study topics that leisure scholars felt that the very identity of Leisure Studies was at stake. The “centrifugal pluralization of its research domain”, as Hans Mommaas almost poetically described it (Mommaas, 1997, p.252) resulted in a common perception, around the turn of the millennium, that the field of Leisure Studies was in an identity crisis (Blackshaw, 2014).

This identity crisis urged the need for Leisure Studies to reorganise itself around new areas of interest. A common unifying theme that was proposed independently by a number of influential scholars, such as Fred Coalter, Karla Henderson, and Tony Blackshaw (reviewed in Bouwer & van Leeuwen, 2013), be it in slightly different wordings, was to study the (individual, social and cultural) meaning of leisure, and to attribute a central role to the lived experience (Coalter, 1997) or ‘bodily experience’ (Blackshaw, 2010) of individuals. Interestingly, these insights coincided in time with the emergence and rapid development of a new

branch of psychology, referred to as positive psychology, which is the scientific study of happiness. In positive psychology, meaning and (individual) experience also play key roles – more specifically, the positive psychology notions of hedonic experiences (which refers to seeking experiences only for pleasure) and eudaemonic experiences (which additionally entail self-development, personal growth and a sense of societal adequacy or cultural consonance) resonate some of the discussions in Leisure Studies about the meaning of leisure, and the related Aristotelian notions of Eudaimonia (living a virtuous life) and Skholé (self-development through leisure). I will come back to the relation between meaning, experience and well-being later in this speech.





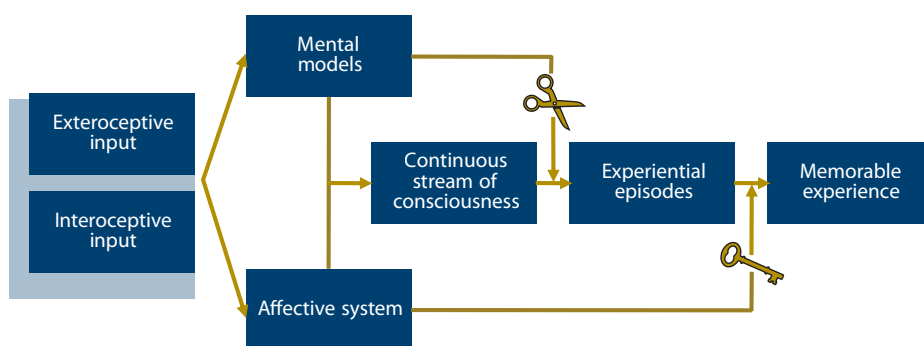
## 4 Leisure and tourism experiences

As the focus on meaning, and on experiences (or lived experience) is increasing, it is time to turn to the notion of experience more explicitly and to try and dissect it. Clearly, experience is the stuff that leisure and tourism is made of. Tourists and leisure participants are willing to spend massive amounts of time and money in the pursuit of memorable, meaningful, and even transformative experiences; not surprisingly, at the supply side there is a huge leisure and tourism industry that aims at designing (for) leisure and tourism experiences. It seems that experiences are what it's all about in leisure and tourism, but at the same time, there has been only little effort at understanding, within the academic disciplines of Leisure Studies and Tourism Studies, what exactly an experience is.

So far, most leisure and tourism researchers have measured after the fact how experiences are being evaluated by tourists and/or leisure participants, for example with interviews or questionnaires. To do so, researchers typically attempt to identify which aspects, or dimensions, of specific experiences are most important. Such approaches have at least two major disadvantages. First, they do not allow for abstracting from the situatedness of experiences. Keeping up distinctions between theatre experiences, museum visitor experiences, tourist experiences, theme park experiences and restaurant experiences fails to yield insights that transcend these different leisure and tourism contexts. In my opinion such an approach is not going to advance our general understanding of what makes experiences valuable for tourists and for leisure participants. Second, existing approaches largely ignore the fact that experiences unfold over time, and therefore they fail to capture the temporal dynamics that are crucial in understanding experiences as they happen. In fact, traditional research into leisure and tourism experiences focus on what people remember from an experience, rather than how the experience was lived. The famous psychologist and Nobel prize winner Daniel Kahneman refers to these two things as the experiencing self (or lived experience) and the remembering self (or remembered experience; Kahneman & Riis, 2005) and has produced overwhelming evidence to demonstrate just how different they are.

# 5 A cognitive-psychological model of memorable experiences

At this point it is time to invite cognitive psychology to the table, the branch of psychology that studies mental processes related to perception, attention, reasoning, language, and memory. As a guest to the field of Leisure and Tourism, cognitive psychology may provide a few useful concepts that help to better understand lived experience – the experience itself. A few years ago, together with my research group I published a process-based model of leisure and tourism experiences that is grounded in cognitive psychology, and that identifies the main ingredients that shape experiences as they unfold over time. The model, which we proudly refer to as the ‘Breda model of experience’, is show in Figure 1.



*Figure 1 – The Breda Model of Experiences: A cognitive-psychological model of memorable experiences (modified and extended from Bastiaansen et al., 2019).*

From a cognitive psychological perspective, the notion of experiencing is strongly connected to conscious awareness, and to what is often called the stream of consciousness. This stream of consciousness is the continuous flow of what ‘fills our mind’ from the moment we wake up until the moment we fall asleep. There are basically two sources of input that fill our mind. One is the input that we get from our senses, the so-called exteroceptive input, which is everything we hear, see, feel, smell and taste. The other source of input to our stream of consciousness is interoceptive information, loosely defined as one’s sense of the internal state of the body. This includes, amongst others, information about our energy levels (how energetic, active, tired, or sleepy we are) ; visceral information about whether we are hungry, thirsty, or nauseated, and information about our current affective state, that is, whether we feel joyful or sad, elated to depressed.

Both sources of input activate stored information in our declarative memory system about what we know from the world based on previous experiences. Such stored information is often referred to as a mental model (Figure 1): a representation of external reality, hypothesized to play a major role in cognition, reasoning and decision-making (Johnson-Laird, 2010). In addition, interoceptive and exteroceptive input activate our affective system, subserving the emotional ‘colouring’ of the input (Barrett & Russell, 2014). Together, the activated mental models and affective system are integrated to constitute our stream of consciousness, that is, the constant flow of conscious and affectively coloured experiencing that I referred to before.

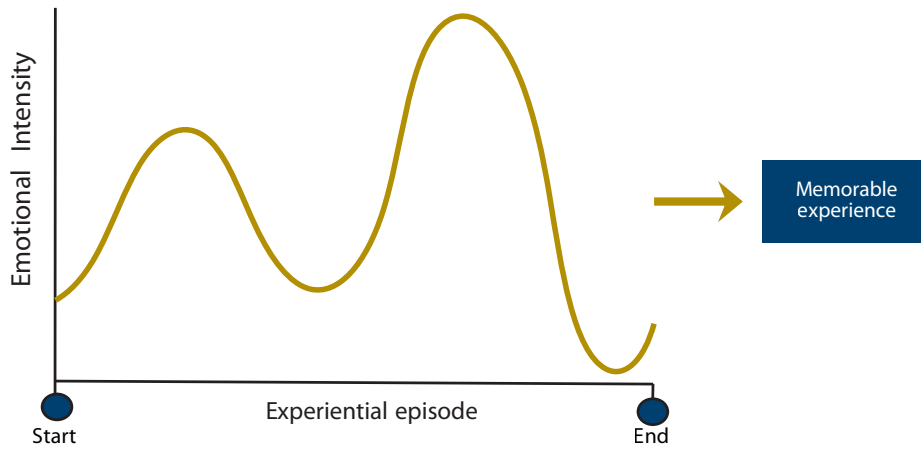
However, human beings do not typically experience a never-ending and temporally unstructured blur of experiencing. Rather, the mental models that we have of the world around us work to segment the stream of consciousness into identifiable episodes, such as ‘having breakfast’, or ‘traveling to Tilburg University’. In Figure 1, the segments that are thus identified in the stream of consciousness are referred to as experiential episodes. Note that even when we engage in novel situations, our existing knowledge of the world will generate predictions (a mental model) of what to expect. For example, those of you who have never attended an inaugural lecture before did have a more or less loosely defined idea of what the experience of ‘attending an inaugural speech’ would be like. Note also that experiential episodes can be as short as a few seconds (e.g. when experiencing the aesthetic value of a painting), they can span minutes (e.g. a ride in a roller coaster), hours (e.g. visiting a museum or a theatre show), days (e.g. visiting a theme park) or even weeks (e.g. taking a summer holiday). One can conceive of the longer episodes as consisting of multiple shorter episodes, leading to the notion of multi-episodic experiences, as my PhD student Wim Strijbosch has recently pointed out (Strijbosch et al., 2021b).

The succession in time of experiential episodes comes close to how most of us experience life in general. At the same time, not all experiential episodes are equally important to us. It is estimated that over 90% of all experiential episodes are so-called ‘ordinary experiences’, which are most of the time forgotten as soon as they have unfolded (Duerden et al., 2018). For example, do you remember how you commuted from home to work 3 days ago? Or two weeks ago? Probably not. I don’t. However, I do remember that one commute, a few months ago, which stood out from the others. The forest I drive through every day on my way to

the University was particularly beautiful, covered with frost, and the beauty of it touched me emotionally. Or that one time last year when I spotted a deer close to the road, which gave me a strong sense of joy. These commutes were memorable, because they triggered certain emotions. More generally, the argument I am trying to make is that when a given experiential episode is emotionally engaging, it will be stored in episodic memory and become what Leisure and Tourism researchers refer to as ‘a memorable experience’. In short, emotions make experiences memorable.

From a cognitive psychology point of view, the proposed model of memorable experiences is a relatively obvious one. However, from the perspective of leisure and tourism research, the model emphasizes two aspects of experiences that have been largely overlooked so far. The first is that time, and temporal dynamics are an important dimension of experiences; the second is that emotions play a crucial role in shaping experiences. Together, these insights imply that a more thorough understanding of memorable experiences can be gained from tracking emotions over time, while an experiential episode is unfolding. Let me work that out in a bit more detail.

Experiential episodes, when segmented from the stream of consciousness through the activation of mental models, have a clear beginning and a clear end. The level of emotional engagement throughout such an episode is obviously not constant (Figure 2).



*Figure 2. The temporal dynamics of emotional engagement during an experiential episode largely determines the memorability of an experience, and how it is evaluated.*

The temporal dynamics of emotional engagement throughout an experiential episode likely affect both the memorability of an episode, and how that episode is being evaluated. Initial work on the temporal dynamics of emotions has led to proposing ‘peak-end theory’ (Fredrickson, 2000). This theory postulates that the emotional peak of an experiential episode, and the emotions that are felt at the end of the episode, largely determine whether and how the experience is being remembered (Fredrickson, 2000; Kahneman et al., 1993). However, the research by Fredrickson and Kahneman took place in settings that have little to do with leisure and tourism. They investigated, for example, the experiencing of pain during a colonoscopy, or while participants immersed their hand in ice-cold water. These are not typically activities that one would engage in during one’s free time, on a voluntary basis, based on intrinsic motivation. It is an open question whether peak-end theory would also apply to the richer, more heterogeneous, and more positive-emotions oriented experiences that people have in leisure and tourism. My PhD student Wim Strijbosch recently challenged the robustness of peak-end theory for leisure and tourism experiences, and the initial results suggest that one can conceive of better predictors of the memorability of an experience than peaks and endings (Strijbosch et al., 2019).

More generally, understanding how the temporal dynamics of emotional engagement affect experiences critically hinges on being able to measure how emotional engagement changes over time. In order to do so, we need research tools that go beyond the tools that are traditionally used in leisure and tourism research. Traditional, post-experience questionnaires and interviews bear little information on the temporal aspects of experiences. Let me therefore invite yet another guest to the table: the scientific discipline of cognitive and affective neuroscience (I realise that by now it's getting crowded at the table).



# 6 Measuring emotions during experiences

Measuring emotions is a tricky business, not in the least because researchers disagree about exactly what emotions are. Some emotion researchers, like Paul Ekman, say that emotions come in distinct categories, such as ‘anger’, sadness’, fear’, and ‘joy’ (Ekman, 1992). Others, such as Lisa Feldman Barrett, claim that emotions start with more indefinite affective feelings of positivity vs negativity, and arousal vs calmness. This so-called core affect is then transformed into an emotion category through a mostly cognitive process called emotion construction (Barrett, 2017). Regardless of this discussion, a commonly accepted definition of emotions is that they are short-lasting responses to (internal or external) stimuli that are seen as personally relevant. Emotional responses are expressed at three levels: (1) what people feel - the phenomenology, (2) how people behave, - body posture, tone of voice, etc. and (3) - the internal bodily processes associated with emotions - the physiology.

Until a few years ago, research on emotions during leisure and tourism only addressed the phenomenology, by asking people to self-report their emotions with questionnaires or interviews. As said, these measurements typically take place after the experiential episode ended, and therewith they do not contain information about the temporal evolution of emotions during the episode. In our research we have developed two ways of recovering the temporal dimension of emotional engagement during experiential episodes.

One is to devise temporally resolved self-reports. This is sometimes done by asking people at regular intervals during an experiential episode how they feel. A disadvantage of this so-called experience sampling is that asking these repetitive questions likely disrupts the experience itself. A preferred method for creating temporally resolved self-reports therefore is to reconstruct the emotional engagement during the episode, by asking people after the experiential episode ended to reconstruct it segment by segment, and to give emotion ratings for each segment. A second approach that we followed is to measure physiological signals while the experience unfolds. An advantage of physiological signals is that they can be recorded continuously, with sub-second precision. One very relevant physiological measure is skin conductance, which is related to the activity of the sweat glands. Given that these sweat glands are partly under control of the brain’s limbic system (the part of the brain that is mostly responsible for processing emotions), skin conductance is a well-established, reliable and valid measure of emotional arousal. It has the advantage of being quite easily measured, either in

the laboratory using standard recording equipment, or in real-life situations using wearable technology such as wrist bands. Another physiological measure that we have used to study emotions during experiences is the Electro-Encephalogram (EEG), a measure of electrical brain activity. EEG signals have the advantage of being very extensively studied in relation to emotional processing, but can be recorded and interpreted reliably only in a laboratory setting, which limits its use in leisure and tourism experience research to those experiences that can be brought inside the laboratory, such as for example virtual-reality, or gaming experiences. The development of the different emotion- and experience measurement tools is a challenging and time-consuming, yet exciting and rewarding endeavour. In this context it is good to note that the efforts that are being invested in the Experience Lab at Breda University of Applied Sciences are paralleled by the Tilburg Experience Sampling Centre (TESC) that has been initiated a few years ago at Tilburg University by the School of Social and Behavioural Sciences. I look much forward to playing a pivotal role between these two platforms and to join forces in our common endeavours.

To illustrate how the different measurement tools I just described can be used to understand leisure and tourism experiences, let me give a few examples of the type of studies that we conducted recently.

In one study (Bastiaansen et al., 2022), we measured participants' skin conductance responses while they were riding a roller coaster. We choose a particular type of roller coaster for this study, for which participants could choose to ride the coaster in a normal way, or with a VR headset, which immersed them in a computer-generated environment that moved synchronously with the movements of the roller coaster. The temporal profile of the skin conductance responses (Figure 3) clearly related to the events that occurred during the ride, and showed at which moments in time the VR ride was more exciting than the normal ride.

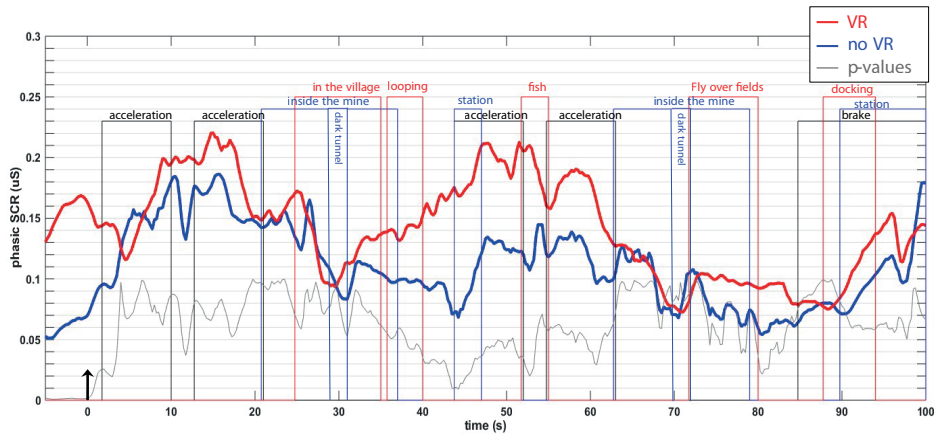
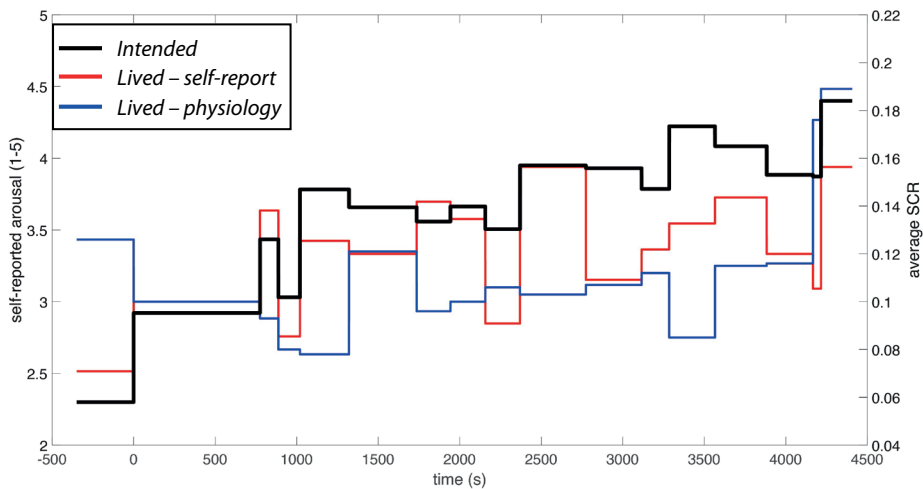


Figure 3: average skin conductance during a roller coaster ride with and without VR (modified from Bastiaansen et al., 2022).

Another study (Strijbosch et al., 2021a) focused on a musical theatre show that was running on a daily basis for a period of a few months in a theme park resort. We first invited the creative team behind the musical theatre show (two producers, the director, and the composer) for individual interviews, in which they were asked to draw a picture of how they intended visitors' emotional arousal to evolve over the time course of the show, dividing the show in each of its 17 scenes. This led to a construction of the intended experience (or better, the intended emotional engagement) over time (Figure 4)

We then invited participants to attend the show, and measured their skin conductance while they were doing so. Immediately after the show, we showed participants pictures that were representative of each of the scenes, and asked them to rate the scenes for emotional valence (how positive or negative they felt during that scene) and emotional arousal (how calm or excited they were during that scene). This allowed us to reconstruct the actually lived experience of the show for our participants based on self-report. Finally, we analysed the skin conductance responses (which are a physiological measure of emotional arousal) per scene, yielding a second measure of lived experience (Figure 4), this time based in physiology. Remarkably, we found that skin conductance as a measure of lived experience deviated strongly from the temporal profile of the intended experience, especially at the beginning of the show. Apparently, visitors

experienced the show differently from what the creative team that produced the show wanted them to experience. Specifically, the creative team substantially underestimated the excitement that visitors felt during the initial scenes of the show. The gap between intended and lived experience provides a solid evidence base for (re)designing the experience in order to reduce the observed gap. At the same time, the physiological measure of lived experience predicted which grade participants would give the show with greater precision than the self-report-based measure of lived experience, accounting for almost a third of the variance in grade (Strijbosch et al., 2021b). This indicates that lived experience can be accurately reconstructed through self-report and through physiological measures.



*Figure 4: intended experience, and lived experience based on self-report and on physiology, for each of the 17 scenes of a musical theatre show.*

Together, these studies, and other work from my research group, show that emotions during leisure and tourism experiences are adequately reflected in physiological measures, and in self-reported experience reconstruction measures. Our work also shows that these measures clearly predict the memorability of an experience, and how satisfied people are with it. At the same time, much work

needs to be done before we really understand exactly which temporal profiles of emotional engagement lead to optimal experiences.

It is also interesting to note that being able to measure experiences as they unfold over time provides an effective toolset for evaluating leisure and tourism experience design. In the leisure and tourism industry, experience design often takes place on the basis of expertise and gut feeling. In my opinion, the industry could greatly benefit from an evidence-based approach towards experience design, which iterates between designing for a particular experience, measuring whether the lived experience matches the intended experience, and where necessary adapting the experience design so as to match intended and actual experience more closely. The work I just presented in some detail is a small part of such an iterative process.

7 Meaningful leisure?  
Types of leisure and tourism  
experiences

As I said earlier in this speech, the proposed refocusing of the field of Leisure Studies that took place around the turn of the millennium entailed putting lived experience on the main stage. Developing empirical tools for measuring lived experience clearly contributes to strengthening the scientific basis of this endeavour. However, a second element in the strategic refocusing of Leisure Studies was to allocate a central position to understanding the meaning of leisure. Therefore, understanding what makes experiences memorable may be a necessary effort, it certainly is not a sufficient effort in studying the meaning of leisure. Instead, we should be able to get a grip on what makes experiences meaningful. The notion of ‘meaningful experiences’ clearly is a popular one in the scientific literature on leisure and tourism. A Google Scholar search performed on April 7th 2022, combining the search terms “meaningful experience” and “leisure” or “tourism” returned 9.440 hits. Let me emphasize this. This means that there are almost 10.000 scientific publications that contain a combination of the terms meaningful experience, leisure, and tourism. That is an overwhelming amount, which underlines the idea that identifying meaning in leisure and tourism really is central to our discipline. At the same time, a more detailed scrutiny of the literature shows that the term ‘meaningful experience’ is clearly subject to the so-called jingle-jangle fallacy - the erroneous assumptions that two different things are the same because they bear the same name (jingle fallacy) or that two identical or almost identical things are different because they are labelled differently (jangle fallacy). The term meaningful experience clearly suffers from the jingle fallacy – scholars mean a range of different things when using this term. The same arguably applies to the terms memorable experience and transformative experience. A major step forward out of the resulting confusion in the scientific literature on experiences is the recent effort of Mat Duerden and his research group to reach consensus about a typology of experience impact (Duerden et al., 2018; Lundberg et al., 2021). In this proposal experiences are memorable when they hold an individual’s attention and produce subjective reactions exhibited by strong emotions. Experiences are meaningful when they additionally lead to the discovery of significant and personally relevant insights. And experiences are transformative when they additionally lead to personal changes in values, beliefs, intentions, or self-perceptions. Such clear definitions are commendable as they allow for synergy in the research efforts on meaning in leisure and tourism.



Note that this experience impact typology includes a notion of hierarchy. Transformative experiences evolve from (a subset of) meaningful experiences, which in turn are based on (a subset of) memorable ones. Little is known at this point about how memorable experiences transform into meaningful experiences. Arguably, generating new insights is not something that usually happens while an experiential episode is unfolding. Therefore, immediately at the end of an experiential episode, an experience is memorable at best. Subsequently, it is likely that a process of savouring past experiences leads to new insights, rendering a (select subset of) past memorable experience meaningful as time elapses. Exactly how and when this savouring happens is something that needs to be further addressed in research. In turn, it is likely that with time, in some cases new insights lead to changes in values, beliefs, intentions and (self-)perceptions, rendering (a subset of) meaningful experiences transformative. The experience impact typology proposed by Mat Duerden and his colleagues may therefore be a hierarchy of experience impact that evolves over time. Again, the temporal dimension seems to be an important aspect here.

All of this is largely uncharted territory, both theoretically and empirically. However, I propose that understanding the processes that are involved in turning memorable experiences into meaningful and transformative ones should be a key focus of the academic study of leisure and tourism. It uncovers and emphasizes the potential of leisure and tourism experiences to serve as catalysts of meaning making in life, which relates to notions of well-being and quality of life. And it uncovers the potential of leisure and tourism experiences to contribute to social transformation. In the remainder of this speech I will explore how this proposal may translate into a framework for an empirical research agenda.



8 A conceptual framework  
for a research agenda:  
meaningful leisure and  
tourism experiences as  
catalysts for well-being and  
social transformation.

The focus on meaning and transformation as longer-term experience impacts shifts the focus from experiences themselves as an end goal for leisure and tourism research, towards a focus on experiences playing an instrumental role in achieving higher-order goals, such as individual well-being, and a better society. Where the formerly introduced Breda model of lived experience (Figure 1) ended with memorable experiences as the ultimate outcome, a broader conceptual framework is shown in Figure 5.



*Figure 5: A conceptual framework in which lived experience mediates between experience design and longer-term experience outcomes*

The quantitative researchers and statisticians amongst you will identify this framework as a classical mediation model, with lived experience, and experience impact, being the mechanisms that mediate between concrete, situated leisure and tourism experience design on the one hand, and long-term experience outcomes such as individual well-being and social transformation on the other hand. However, I want to emphasize here that the conceptual framework proposed in Figure 5 does not dictate the use of quantitative research methodologies. Combining the relative strengths of different quantitative and qualitative research methodologies should be an important element of the empirical research agenda which addresses this conceptual framework.

Let me now try to address how this conceptual framework could serve to delineate a future research agenda that addresses two themes: individual well-being and social transformation.

### *Social transformation*

In western societies, there is an increasing divide between different social groups, which is fuelled by the social encapsulation and the information bubbles created through social media (Castells, 2010). Leisure and tourism, being activity-

oriented, have a tremendous potential to bring different social groups together: leisure and tourism experiences bring people together at the same time, at the same place, and with shared content. This creates ideal platforms for different social groups to interact (Collins, 2004). These interactions can serve as a catalyst for enhancing mutual understanding and promoting social inclusion. The importance of intergroup interaction is well-established in social psychology, as expressed for example in intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). This theory states that social interaction between different groups fosters mutual understanding and can help reduce social fragmentation.

However, one prerequisite for leisure and tourism experiences to successfully serve as platforms for interactions between different social groups is that, within a specific situated experience design, experience impact (that is, whether the experience is memorable, meaningful, or even transformative) is comparable across different social groups. In recent study (van Bendegom et al., 2021) we took an initial step towards establishing a research approach for this issue. We measured the experience of attending a theatre show in young adults that very frequently attend the theatre and in young adults that never, or very rarely attended the theatre. Results showed that, although both groups differed in terms of perceived leisure constraints and pre-existing cultural socialization, the experience of both groups of the theatre show was quite similar in terms of emotional engagement. These results are informative for policy makers, for designers of cultural experiences (such as art directors and museum curators) and for marketers of cultural institutions, as it indicates that if they want to broaden cultural consumption amongst young people, efforts should be directed at improving accessibility of cultural activities rather than of adapting the contents of the cultural offerings to the needs of these infrequent visitors.

Next steps in this line of research should explicitly address whether the experience of joint attendance is (equally) meaningful for different groups of participants, and whether it promotes intergroup contact and mutual understanding across different social groups. It is important to stress here that the proposed approach of focusing on the meaningfulness of leisure and tourism experiences is not limited to any specific type of leisure activities, nor to any specific type of social group segmentation per se. Instead of focusing on frequent vs infrequent attendants of theatre shows, different groups can be defined, for example, such as tourists vs local residents. In that context, joint experiences

and intergroup contact should be aimed at improving the mutual understanding between residents and tourists, and as a result optimize the social impacts of tourism. More broadly, the approach of creating common platforms for different social groups by designing leisure and tourism activities, and of evaluating the meaningfulness of the experiences of the different groups, will likely provide relevant knowledge on how to use leisure and tourism experiences as catalysts for broadening societal participation, and for promoting social inclusion.

### *Individual well-being*

As I briefly touched upon earlier, the refocusing of the academic study of leisure and tourism around meaning, with a central role for lived experience, echoes theoretical and empirical efforts in the field of positive psychology – I promise that this is really the last guest that I invite to the table. This subfield of psychology focuses on understanding happiness, which is most often defined scientifically as subjective well-being. There is broad consensus amongst positive psychologists that subjective well-being is driven by frequently experiencing positive emotions, infrequently experiencing negative emotions, and being satisfied with life (Diener & Ryan, 2009). Put more simply, most positive psychologists understand happiness as feeling good and thinking life is going well. Others, such as Seligman (Seligman, 2002) also include notions from Aristotle’s concept of the good life, eudaimonia, such as self-development and personal growth. Admittedly, self-development and personal growth may be achieved in different life domains (developing an academic career most certainly is contributing to my own personal well-being), but it is obvious that the notions of positive affect, life satisfaction, meaning-making, self-development and personal growth very naturally connect to leisure and its defining properties of free will and intrinsic motivation. Understanding how memorable, meaningful and transformative leisure and tourism experiences relate to the ‘thriving’ of individuals, to individual well-being, and more broadly to quality of life, is a research agenda that I would like to pursue in the near future. In my opinion, this agenda very well fits a modern, psychologically inspired perspective on leisure and tourism studies, and has been underdeveloped to date.

# 9 Scientific versus applied research

I live in the picturesque village of Rijen, which lies right in between Breda and Tilburg. This geographical position is a beautiful metaphor for my position in academia, which is at the interface between the type of fundamental social and behavioural scientific research that is typical for the Tilburg School of Social and Behavioural Sciences (TSB) at Tilburg University, and the more applied, yet knowledge development-oriented research that is typical for the academies of Leisure and Events, and Tourism at Breda University of Applied Sciences (BUAs). I find particular reward and value in bridging the gap between these two environments, benefiting from the strong knowledge base I find in Tilburg, and the strong connection with the leisure and tourism work field I find in Breda. Although Tilburg University and Breda University of Applied Sciences have been entertaining an intimate relationship over the past decades, in my new position I hope to build even stronger bridges between these two institutes. Opportunities include, but are not limited to: Connecting BUAs' Experience Lab with the Tilburg Experience Sampling Centre, TESC, to share and develop research methodologies for experience measurement; connecting my group's research on the role that tourism plays in relationship quality, relationship satisfaction and family well-being to the relevant knowledge residing in TSB's department of Social Psychology; developing more and better tools for measuring the physiological basis of emotions, as my PhD student Hans Revers is currently doing, by further connecting TSB's department of Cognitive NeuroPsychology to BUAs' Experience lab; connecting Tilburg University's expertise on VR and AR, within the Tilburg School of Humanities and the broader Mindlabs network to better understanding how visitor experiences at events and festivals can be enhanced through digital innovations – the list of opportunities for strengthening the ties between TiU and BUAs is so long that I am afraid the main limitation will probably be my own time and energy. I feel grateful to be able to operate in such a rich and stimulating environment.



10 A word of thanks

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am almost reaching the end of my speech. I hope that in this short time frame I have been able to convince you that Leisure and Tourism are not just fun, and funny to talk about, but that these fields are truly interdisciplinary fields with high academic and societal relevance. I would like to end this speech by expressing my gratitude to the persons and institutions that have contributed to the fact that I am standing here today in front of you, in my new role as a professor for Leisure and Tourism Studies.

First, I wish to express my gratitude to the Rector Magnificus and the Executive Board of Tilburg University for appointing me to this Chair. I also thank the President, and the Executive Board of Breda University of Applied Sciences, for their efforts and support in making this Chair possible. I am honoured that you are trusting me with the legacy of over three decades of scientific research into Leisure and Tourism.

A special thanks also to Jantine Schuiten, who in her former role of dean of the School of Social and Behavioural Sciences, played an important role in the procedure leading to my appointment. Similarly, Wicher Meijer, and later Roland Kleve, as well as Jos van der Sterren, in their capacity as deans of the Academy for Leisure and Events, and the Academy for Tourism at Breda University of Applied Sciences have relentlessly sought to overcome all the organizational and administrative hurdles that came with my appointment.

There are two persons that have very strong influenced my scientific career. I often refer to them as my two scientific fathers, and I am eternally grateful to both of them for the inspiration they brought me, and for how they led me by example in my early stages as a researcher. My first scientific father is Kees Brunia, neurologist, psychophysiological, and professor emeritus of Physiological Psychology at Tilburg University. Kees transferred his endless passion for the human brain, and for scientific research more broadly, to me as a young undergraduate and graduate student, and was the driving force behind my PhD research. I owe him my passion for research.

My second scientific father is Peter Hagoort, professor of the Neurobiology of Language at Radboud University in Nijmegen and director of the Max Planck

Institute for Psycholinguistics. For over a decade he offered me a rich and stimulating research environment, and perhaps even more importantly, Peter showed me – by example – how to think strategically about scientific research, and how to successfully organise and stimulate teams of researchers. These lessons have been incredibly valuable to me in the past years, and will continue to be highly valuable in shaping my professorship in the years to come.

My gratitude goes to Jean Vroomen, professor and head of the Cognitive NeuroPsychology (CNP) department at TSB. CNP is the department where I did my PhD work, a long time ago, and Jean has played an important role in building the bridge between CNP and my current research group at BUAs, by being extremely hospitable, friendly, and by selflessly letting me use the CNP lab facilities during the period before I had the opportunity to build my own lab in Breda. Similarly, Jeroen Stekelenburg has been a huge help and support during that time, and we found out over the past 9 years that we have more in common than just the starting date of our PhD projects (back in the 20th century). I also want to thank the other members of the Cognitive NeuroPsychology department – Geert van Boxtel, Martijn Baart, Thijs van Laarhoven, Marion van den Heuvel, Hans Revers and many others – for wholeheartedly making me feel welcome (back) in Tilburg.

I owe a big thanks to Ondrej Mitas, for having been my intellectual soulmate and my friend at BUAs for all these years, and for joining forces with me in setting up the Experience Lab. His theoretical knowledge of leisure and tourism studies, and his relentless energy and drive for getting things done have been incredibly important to me. Also, a big thanks to the rest of the Experience lab crew - Wilco, Wim, Moji, Danny, Juriaan, Jörn, Elly, Gilmara, Pieter, Carolina, and to all the research and student assistants over the years for creating the stimulating intellectual climate that leads to high-quality scientific work. I am proud to be one of the Lab Rats!

Finally, I owe much to the Leisure Studies team at the academy for Leisure and Events. Bertine, Marisa, Moniek, Marco, Adriaan, Esther, Greg, Pieter, Margo, Moji, Ilja, Wim, Juriaan and Kristel, you have been my safe and secure home base at BUAs ever since I got there. With your enthusiasm, ambition, and passion for scientific education you are the true driving force behind the high-quality BSc and MSc education that we offer to our students.

I would like to finish my speech by expressing a few words of thanks to my family. I will switch to Dutch now in order to do so, with my apologies for the non-Dutch-speaking part of the audience.

Graag had ik op deze plaats, op dit moment het woord gericht tot mijn ouders. Helaas zijn ze beiden overleden. Mijn vader al enkele jaren geleden, en het spijt me dat hij er geen weet van heeft gehad dat zijn zoon hoogleraar zou worden. Hij zou wel ongelooflijk trots zijn geweest. Zelf was hij opgeklommen van 'handarbeider tot hoofdarbeider', zoals hij dat placht te zeggen, door een avondschoonhandelsrekenen te doen, en hij heeft mij altijd erg gestimuleerd het beste uit mezelf te halen. Mijn moeder is recent overleden, en heeft in ieder geval mijn hoogleraarschap nog mee kunnen maken. Zij was daar onbeschrijflijk trots op. Ik ben hen beiden dankbaar voor hun onvoorwaardelijke liefde en steun.

Dank aan: Jacqueline, dat je me destijds uit Frankrijk bent komen halen, en altijd een voorbeeld bent geweest; Pia, dat je vervolgens mijn leven op de rit hebt gezet; Johan en Martine, voor het warme gezinsleven, en de vele gitaaravondjes.

Mijn kinderen, de drie belangrijkste mensen op aarde: Lotte, voor je levenskracht en ontembare optimisme; Jonas, voor je rust en onverwoestbare zelfvertrouwen; en Levi, voor je scherpheid en peilloze diepgang.

Dotte en Flo, voor jullie gezelligheid, openheid, en warmte.

En tot slot, Chloë. Dankjewel dat jij jij bent. Het leven met jou is één grote transformatieve beleving. Ik hoop daar nog tot in lengte van dagen van te kunnen genieten.

*Ik heb gezegd.*

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