

Working out who you are

Identity formation among fitness tourists

Tina Jørgensen

M.A. in tourism, functions as teaching assistant at Aalborg University. Focus of her research is consumer studies with a special focus on motivation, experiences and identity formation. Fitness and sports tourism are her special interests.

Anette Therkelsen

Ph.D., is associate professor at Aalborg University. Her research centers on tourists' decision-making, experiences, image creation and identity formation. Destination branding, both communicative strategies and stakeholder relations, also forms part of her research.

Abstract

For several years, fitness has been a popular form of leisure activity due to people's concern for their health and for displaying a healthy image. Recently, fitness activities have also started to permeate holidays. With point of departure in theories on consumption and identity and the increasing dedifferentiation of holiday activities, this study shows that fitness tourists use holidays mainly as an extension of their everyday lives. Certain differences between every-day and holiday consumption, however, also appear, as experimenting with new fitness activities as well as bonding with friends and getting acquainted with strangers appear to be defining aspects of fitness tourism. This underscores the usefulness of understanding identity formation in a fitness tourism context within a continuum of differentiation-dedifferentiation.

Keywords Fitness tourism, consumption, differentiation, de-differentiation, identity formation

Introduction

The present paper focuses on commercial forms of fitness which include equipment-based individual training, group-based training, and relaxation/wellness (Steen-Johnsen & Kirkegaard, 2010). The motivational factors behind and outcome of fitness have been under scrutiny for the past decade (Kierkegaard, 2011; Laub, 2011; Larsen, 2004) and studies show that its flexible organisation as well as its health and body enhancing qualities are appreciated among consumers. Commercialised and individualised types of fitness increasingly challenge the Scandinavian non-profit, voluntary sports sector (Steen-Johnsen & Kirkegaard, 2010) as they seem to fit into people's busy time schedules as well as individual life projects of staying young and fit. It is therefore not surprising that fitness activities have also started to extend into holidays, however, close to nothing is known about fitness tourism experiences, and questions like why tourists undertake fitness activities, and whether the experience is identical with or different from everyday fitness beg to be answered. The ongoing debate among tourism scholars about the differentiated versus de-differentiated nature of tourist experiences (Cohen, 1979; Larsen, 2008; Uriely, 2005; Urry, 1990) is relevant to bring to the fore in this context, as it facilitates a discussion of extraordinary vs. ordinary traits of tourist experiences. Placing this discussion within the framework of the 'before', 'during' and 'after' of the tourist experience (Ek *et al.*, 2008) makes it possible to bring forward the dialectic relationship between every-day and holiday consumption. Such discussions link up closely with issues of identity formation, which is argued to be a central part of fitness consumption at home (Storm and Brandt, 2008), and whether this is also the case of fitness consumption away is interesting to scrutinize. And even if this is the case, identity formation may unfold in a different manner in at tourism context than in an every-day context. To get to grips with these issues, Holt's (1995) framework on the structure and purpose of consumption lends itself useful.

Based on qualitative interviews with Danish fitness tourists, the aim of the study is thus to gain insight into fitness experiences of tourists and how these feed into identity formation processes. It is acknowledged that to understand issues of identity formation in a tourism context, every-day consumption patterns have to be considered to be able to gain a nuanced understanding of such processes.

Theoretical Framework

Everyday fitness and sport tourism experiences

Among scholars, the tourist experience has within the past 25 years developed from being predominantly understood as something extra-ordinary, an escape from obligations and routines (e.g. Cohen, 1979; Urry, 1990), to being conceptualised as part of every-day life and consumption (e.g. Larsen, 2008; Uriely, 2005). Siding with the latter perspective, this means that breaks from as well as continuations of every-day consumption practices may exist within holidays. Furthermore, to understand the nature of the fitness tourism experience, a three-pronged framework consisting of a 'before', 'during' and 'after' experience (Ek *et al.*, 2008, Mossberg, 2005) has been deemed useful, as it seems to tally with the notion that every-day and holiday consumption relate to one another on a continuum from differentiated to dedifferentiated.

The 'before' consists of the expectations of the holiday that the individual has, which are formed by every-day and prior holiday experiences as well as more unspecific images and ideas. As we have limited our research to people who are also fitness consumers at home, it is important to characterise this type of sport. Its individually organised nature and with that its flexibility time-wise are identified as some of the most important reasons for the year-long popularity of fitness (Larsen, 2004; Laub, 2011). The main motivational reasons for undertaking fitness are identified as health-related, a drive to excel and aesthetics i.e. shaping your body according to certain ideals (Kierkegaard, 2011). Hence the fitness experience is highly individual and involves both internal health and skill dimensions and a dimension of external self-representation. The latter is confirmed by Storm and Brandt (2008): *'the consumption [of fitness] contains a number of signals and transmits values to the surrounding world [...] an active and healthy leisure life with a surplus capacity both physically, mentally and economically'* (own translation). The degree to which these characteristics are identical with or different from the 'during' experience determines where on the differentiation-dedifferentiation continuum the fitness experience may be placed.

The 'during' experience is that which takes place at the tourism destination and to gain insight into this, we need to consult the broader sport tourism literature, as fitness is only mentioned sporadically as a sub-category of sport tourism. Defining characteris-

tics of sports tourism like health enhancement, improving existing skills and being independent (Cook, 2008; Gibson, 1998; Hall, 2011) overlap with everyday fitness, however, certain differences also materialise. Sport tourism is mainly related to out-door not indoor recreation (Cook, 2008; Hall, 2011), improving both existing skills and trying out and learning something new (Gibson, 1998) appear significant, and being independent but at the same time being together with others is central to sport tourism. Though the opposing characteristics may be a consequence of a highly diversified group of tourists, they may also signify that both differentiation and dedifferentiation between home and away is taking place among sports tourists in general.

The 'after' experience is constituted by the memories (Mossberg, 2005), including evaluation, of the holiday and may feed into prospective holidays as expectations just as it may influence home-based fitness activities. Improved skills may influence every-day fitness activities, just as it is feasible that new and extra-ordinary activities undertaken during the holiday turn ordinary as they are incorporated into every-day leisure activities.

Identity formation in a fitness tourism context

Consumption is one of the ways in which we construct identity, and fitness is argued above to have the qualities of contributing to identity formation both in terms of understanding yourself and communicating to the world who you are (Askegaard and Firat, 1996; Belk, 1988). Having established the relationship between fitness at home and away through the three-pronged experience framework above (Ek *et al.*, 2008), the question is not whether but how fitness tourism contributes to the identity of the active fitness person. To approach an understanding of this, Holt's (1995) framework on the structure and purpose of consumption lends itself useful. The structure of consumption may be understood as engagement with consumption objects (object actions) as well as engagement with other people through consumption objects (interpersonal actions). The purpose of consumption relates both to consuming objects for the experience they provide (end), and consuming objects as a means to certain benefits (means). Building on these two dimensions, four types of consumption relations are identified. *Consumption as experience* in a fitness tourism context signifies engagement with fitness activities

in their own right – the sense stimulation and feelings of pleasure they provide. Developing existing skills and acquiring new ones also form part of this consumption experience. *Consumption as integration* relates to the way in which fitness activities are used as a means of realising certain traits about oneself – a ‘personal self-project’ (Jantzen *et al.*, 2011). *Consumption as play* is concerned with ways in which fitness is used as a frame for interacting with others. Maintaining and strengthening the interpersonal relations of the traveling party has been termed ‘thick sociability’ (Obrador, 2012), but may also extend to new acquaintances made during a holiday. Finally, *consumption as classification* signifies that fitness activities are used for identifying oneself in view of others. Building affiliations and enhancing distinction (Holt, 1995:10) through communication to one’s surroundings is central here, and not least social media are instrumental towards this end.

Data and Method

A qualitative approach has been deemed appropriate in this study, as it is useful when investigating motives, behaviour and social life (Kvale, 1996). Qualitative interviews have been carried out in a Danish context with five consumers practicing fitness at home and on holidays. Apart from sharing the trait of undertaking fitness activities both at home and on holidays, the respondents represent a fairly diverse group in terms of age (ranging from 20-60 years) and gender (three males, two females). This potentially facilitates a variety of perspectives on fitness tourism, which is useful when studying a field on which little knowledge exists. All interviews were conducted in person by one of the authors and lasted between 25-55 minutes. They were recorded, transcribed and quotes were translated into English. In terms of data analysis, meaning condensation (Kvale, 1996) was utilized, which entailed identification of theoretically inspired themes and openness to unforeseen thematic structures.

Analysis and Findings

‘Before’ experiences - fitness practices at home

Fitness appears to be a serious leisure (Stebbins, 2007) to the respondents, as they all visit a fitness center at least three times a week and have done so for several years. For them fitness at home

is characterised by a combination of individual training and fitness classes, which offers the possibility of independent exercise as well as skilled coaching. Independence is highly valued by the respondents, as one respondent says: *'During the first many years I worked out on my own. I preferred that because I did not like the part that people would talk all the time'*. When fitness classes are attended the social aspect is not important, rather focus is directed at the same features driving individual exercise: improving health, bodily aesthetics and skills (Kierkegaard, 2011). Of these the latter is a means to achieving the former two. When attending classes, the fitness instructor becomes a helping force in achieving one's goals, in other words: *'it matters that they [fitness instructors] are committed and have expertise'*, but fitness consumers mainly want to be left to their own devices to achieve their goals.

A healthy lifestyle and living up to present-day bodily ideals are hence significant driving forces behind the respondents' fitness practices at home. Counteracting overweight and the physical challenges of growing older are mentioned repeatedly and reflect prevailing debates in society: *'You need to do something to avoid bad shape and becoming fat [...] If I do not work out I feel bad and then I think it will start to go downhill'*. Efforts and emotions are clearly invested in shaping your body according to current health standards, and being skinny is not among these: *'It is not in to be thin any longer, now you have to be well-trained'*. Building oneself physically points towards fitness being an integrated part of the respondents' self-project. Holt's (1995) notion of consumption as *integration* seems to be at stake here in that fitness is used as a means towards understanding oneself and with that forming one's self-perception.

Simultaneously, Holt's metaphor of *classification* may help explain that the identity formation of the respondents is not just a matter of internal relations between the fitness product and the consumer, but that other fitness consumers play a significant role in this process. Even though shaping their own body is a significant part of their fitness exercise, the respondents are annoyed by the attention other fitness consumers give to their own and not least others' bodies. Words like *'egocentrism'*, *'flexing guys'* and *'narcissistic dating portal'* go to show that the respondents try to differentiate themselves from other ostensibly less serious fitness consumers. Hence understand-

ing yourself in opposition to others is a characteristic that underscores their identity projects.

Seriousness and duty to their body seem to characterise the respondents' relationship to fitness and hence an absence of having fun is striking in their narratives about fitness at home. These traits are also found in fitness on holidays, however, additional aspects enter the picture, which are demonstrated below.

The 'during' experience - fitness practices on holiday

Having an abundance of time for their sport, is one of the main motives for going on fitness holidays. As the respondents prolong their active lifestyle into their holidays and thereby continuously work on their health, there are clear overlaps between the 'before' and 'during' experiences. As one of the respondents says: *'I could not imagine going on holiday and then just laze around on a beach - that would bore me to death. I would become totally restless'*. Hence dedifferentiation (Larsen, 2008; Uriely, 2005) appears to be a fundamental characteristic of the respondents' activities, as fitness is an integral part of their lives at home and away. Obligation also characterises accounts of holiday fitness experiences, which underscores their dedifferentiated nature. For instance: *'I think now I have a whole week where I don't do anything. But I can't do that, then I get a bad conscience, and that doesn't happen if it [fitness] is part of the holiday'*. Consumption as *integration* (Holt, 1995) seems apparent from their choice of words and repetition of the same points, and so fitness is an integral part of these consumers' identity also on holidays. As formulated very poignantly by one of the respondents: *'It [fitness tourism] just confirms me being me and what I have always considered myself as being'*.

Simultaneously, it is important to notice that fitness on holidays is not considered as serious as in every-day life, as it is also characterised as *'cosy work out'*, *'fun'* and *'exciting'*. As one respondent says: *'[on holidays] there are totally new surroundings and you get away. It is like working out in a new way even though it is the same'*. Illouz (2009) argues that consumer practices are characterised by a lack of consistency as they are influenced by contradictory emotions that coexist in the individual. In this case, obligation and routine as well as fun and excitement are at play, which indicate that consumer practices on holidays are simultaneously dedifferentiated and differentiated from every-day fitness consumption. Different physical

surroundings contribute to the extra-ordinary aspect of fitness holidays: *'It is so cool that you can stand outside and work out... Amongst other things I went running which I normally do not like. The surroundings were exciting'*. Hence the place and what it offers in terms of good weather and beautiful scenery inspire the respondents to try out new activities as well as outdoor exercise. The easy access to a multitude of organised activities when holidaying at a fitness resort is also highlighted as decisive for trying out something new. Moreover, the physical change of scene to a more experimental and playful one seems to result in an increase in social contact both with instructors and other fitness tourists: *'It is great to experience instructors that are different from home. Also because people on holiday are more relaxed and dare to shout 'hurrah' in the middle of class. People at home would immediately exclude that person'*. Interpersonal relations add to the fitness experience and the social norms in terms of how to behave are more lenient than at home. The positive fitness holiday experience seems dependent on the opportunity to share one's experiences with others, both close-ones and more ephemeral communities bound together by shared interests, and being part of a community enhances the experience further. In Holt's (1995) terminology consumption becomes *play* when social bonding is at the core of the consumption activity, and in relation to accompanying friends and relatives this appears to be the case. One respondent for instance relates: *'It is so much fun to laugh at each other if you attend something you cannot do right'*. Fitness hence becomes much more of a social activity when on holiday than at home, which tallies with the point that sport tourism has a central social element, as well as Obrador's (2012) concept of 'thick sociability' that characterises holidays at large.

The 'after' experience - fitness practices at home, again

Memories and evaluation are defining characteristics of the 'after' experience (Ek *et al.*, 2008; Mossberg, 2005) and to varying degrees fitness holidays have an effect on home-based consumer practices. As all the respondents have positive memories of their fitness holidays, they sense an increased motivation for fitness on their return home as they wish to re-experiencing the positive feelings that holiday activities generated. Two respondents, who function as fitness instructors in their spare time, have found inspiration from their

holiday for their future teaching, which testifies to a clear effect of the holiday. Others feel inspired to embark upon new types of fitness which they tried out on their holiday: *'It [cross fit] was very fun so I need to figure out the practicalities and then I will begin attending such classes at home'*. This as well as other examples of new activities engaged in, involves a social aspect, as other people are a necessity for the activity to be undertaken. This indicates that the idea of fitness as an individual sport is challenged by holiday experiences and may affect future every-day practices. For some of the respondents motivation, however, decreases after a while and so the trivial feeling that fitness generates returns: *'I tried to keep up the motivation but it gradually faded [...] then it once more becomes a trivial daily activity you need to do'*. Despite the fading effect on everyday fitness practices, fitness holidays are used as an element in the respondents' identity projects: in staging themselves as active, health conscious and concerned with their bodily appearance even on holidays, which are conventionally associated with pleasure and relaxation. Thus fitness holidays seem to strengthen their self-perception as well as their image towards the surrounding world.

Conclusion

The aim of this study has been to gain insight into fitness experiences of tourists and how these feed into identity formation processes. As the extant knowledge of this area is close to non-existent, an explorative and with that qualitative research design has been deemed appropriate. The findings show that fitness is an integral part of the identity projects of the consumers studied. They use fitness as a means of both understanding who they are (i.e. integration) and positioning themselves in the world (i.e. classification). Fitness holidays are used as way of cementing their active and healthy lifestyle and hence dedifferentiation mainly characterises the relationship between the every-day and the holiday. Elements of differentiation are, however, also detectable as experimenting with new fitness activities as well as bonding with friends and getting acquainted with strangers (i.e. play) are defining aspects of fitness tourism. As holiday experiences appear to have a certain effect on subsequent every-day practices, this goes to showing that identity formation is an ongoing process during which we continuously redefine what we do and who we are.

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