

Puzzling out “Toyrism”: Conceptualizing value co-creation in toy tourism

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses the value of “toyrism,” the emerging mobile and social play patterns in association with toys through the object-based, but technologically enhanced practices of toy tourism. The study combines the value dimensions of play value afforded in the toys with the value generated in the co-creative activity of toy tourism, involving artifacts, affects, and touristic playscapes. Based on literature reviews on toy play, tourism experiences, and souvenirs, a conceptual framework was created and empirically examined through interview data. According to the results, the value of toyrism manifests in the functional value of making toys mobile and the emotional value of creative and visual documentation of toys’ journeys. Furthermore, the value of toyrism is co-created through playful encounters between the player and the toy while traveling and in the process of playing: enabling experiences, documenting, and sharing the toy travels for others to enjoy through social media platforms.

1. Introduction

I had traveled to the city, a UNESCO heritage site, with my two Uglydoll figurines, the Ice-Bats, or “travel companions,” as I call them. I wanted to photograph them in front of the canal, the landmark of the city. As I carefully placed the Ice-Bat figures next to each other on top of a stone pole, one suddenly fell. Horrified, I watched the toy plunge down from the top of the pole, continuing to roll, just moments away from falling into the dark water. Would I dive after my toy if it dropped into the canal?

This article explores a novel area of research, namely adult toy play in the context of imaginative, mobile, and virtual tourist practices, with a special focus on the various notions of value associated with the activity of toy tourism. Tourism experiences are designed for tourists who, by all definitions, are considered to be human beings. However, Ivanov (2019) has argued that the tourism industry and researchers need to reconsider who the travelers are and how they are involved in tourism activities, as the market for nonhuman tourism already exists. The current study focuses on toy tourism—toyrism—as a form of nonhuman tourism (see Fig. 1.). Toyrism is a general term developed to conceptualize the phenomenon of traveling toys, who visit touristic sites known from human tourism. There are alternative ways of mobilizing the toy (i. e., the toyrist). First, the toy can be taken on travels with its owner (i. e., the player/tourist). Second, the toy is sent to another human player, who

functions as a “host” for the toy, providing it with non-professional toyrism experiences as part of a player-generated toy-hosting program. Third, the toy can participate in professionally organized toyrism through a travel agency providing services to nonhuman travelers, such as toys.

In toyrism, depicting and documenting the toy’s travel experiences become a major focus for the traveling or toy-hosting human player: The player invests time and creativity in not only making the toy mobile within the physical environment but also in aiming to provide the toy with rich and multifaceted tourism experiences, which may be captured and shared through “photoplay.” In this way, the centrality of the toy is the key driver in mobilizing the human player physically as well as imaginatively.

Toys cannot make decisions on where to travel and what services to use, pay for their trips, or, as far as we know, feel emotional experiences (Ivanov, 2019). This leads to the obvious conclusion that in toyrism, the cognitive and emotional tourism experiences are experienced by someone other than the toy itself, leading to questions such as “What is the value of toyrism?” and “How and by whom it is created?”

Tourism has been frequently compared to play, and tourists have been viewed as players within liminal playscapes of tourism and leisure consumption (Cohen, 1985; Heynders & van Nuenen, 2014; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). In this article, the notion of play extends beyond the conception of the human tourist as a player by shifting the focus to

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activities carried out with toys in the context of tourism. Toys are commercial and romanticized objects that promote solitary play among children (Sutton-Smith, 1997) but also adults (Heljakka, 2013). Here, we focus on adult toy play, which has become more perceivable than ever through the employment of new technologies and social media platforms. Mature audiences now actively perform and document play in physical environments, then share their photoplay (i.e., toy photography or videography; also see Heljakka, 2012) in the changing media of digital playscapes such as Flickr, Instagram, YouTube, or Facebook. A significant part of the photoplay by adult toy players illustrates either traveling with toys or the travel of toys. According to Williams (2019, p. 72), “People take objects, such as Funko Pop! Vinyl dolls or soft toys, to related touristic sites or a general range of travel locations,” and the “fannish” use of these material objects allows for a playful fan-led extension of their story worlds.

Toyism entails the mobilizing of physical playthings, such as dolls, action figures, and soft toys, as well as the creative cultivation of these objects, which manifests in practices related to movement, customization, and narrative enhancement of the traveling toys (Heljakka, 2013; Heljakka & Ihamäki, 2021). In toyism, the ownership and digitally distributed storytelling with artifacts intertwine with the affective dimensions of tourism.

Additionally, toyism practices are becoming increasingly social and more mobile as toys are set out to travel not only with their owners but also through specialized toy hosting programs and professional toy travel agencies (Heljakka, 2013; Ivanov, 2019). These activities are driven by playful adults as services of both amateur and professional practitioners for the owners of the toys.

In previous studies, the exploration of traveling toys has focused on non-corporeal elements of toy-related travel experiences—for example, on experimental tourism involving vicarious (or, “done for another”) traveling with toys as “mascots” (Robinson, 2014). The focus of the current study is to investigate value co-creation in toyism by exploring emerging types of mobile and social play patterns with toys through the object-based, but technologically enhanced, practices of toyism. Our theoretical investigation of the emergent phenomena of traveling toys and toyism is guided by an interest in the value experienced by mature toy players. In this way, our study represents a player-centric approach, focusing on adult players.

The current study contributes to the understanding of value co-creation in toyism, which has not been comprehensively addressed in previous research. It also provides managerial implications for toyism operators but also to tourism businesses in a wider sense by uncovering a phenomenon that is still poorly understood within the tourism industry. Some may question the point of researching toyism and other forms of nonhuman tourism altogether. Nevertheless, in the current world, where international tourism is nearly nonexistent due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the idea of nonhuman tourism may not sound as irrational as before. Still, with this research, we aim to prove the skeptics wrong by arguing that a deeper knowledge of value co-creation in toyism not only enhances understanding of COVID-19-era tourist behavior but also sheds light on future tourist behavior in a wider sense. Furthermore, it has the potential to provide various business opportunities to those who dare to have an open mind for tourism beyond humans.

2. Objects, forms, and practices of toyism

The motivation for toyism stems from the allure, fascination, and narrative affordances of objects that may function as artifacts that convey comfort but also as physical and psychological extensions of identities. In the 21st century, toys not only belong to the material culture of childhood: for example, a survey carried out by Travelodge in Britain revealed that 25% of male survey respondents took their teddy bears along on their travels as a reminder of home (The Telegraph, August 16, 2010).

Adult toy players become involved in toyism through their own playthings or as “hosts” to traveling toys sent to them by others in the name of amateur toyism. Both the tourism and toy industries have acknowledged and begun to capitalize on toyism. Some companies now offer professional toyism services, such as tours for teddy bears. Among these toy travel agencies, which first emerged in the early 2010s, the Barcelona Toy Travel agency and a Prague-based agency do not operate anymore, but Japan’s Unagi Toy Travel - “A Travel Agency for Stuffed Animals” (2018) still offers tours and also promises to “document the trip with photos” ToyVoyagers (2020), in turn, has a website where you can register a toy and post it to a host and/or host toys yourself. In the toy industry, different toy lines promote the idea of traveling toys. The Beary Sweet Plush toy series, for example, encourages toy owners to take

Taisto, a traveling toy



Note. Taisto engaged in bus travel. Photograph by HanneleK (2010).

Fig. 1. Taisto, a traveling toy.

Note. Taisto engaged in bus travel. Photograph by HanneleK (2010).

their toys traveling and to share their adventures on social media platforms for others to follow and join the play (each bear is numbered so their journeys may be followed individually). Mud Pie's Travel Fox, in turn, is a small textile character toy, which has its own cardboard suitcase for traveling, and comes with the following message:

There's a great big huge world of fun to explore, from grandma's house to camping, planes, trains, boats, and more... And it's always more exciting to adventure with a friend, so meet Travel Fox, with whom time you can spend. (Travel Fox, Mud Pie)

Toyrism demonstrates a socially shared play practice involving both amateur and professional hosts and tour operators as entertainment providers. Consequently, as a play activity, toyrism is related to both the free-form creative play of the amateur hosts and the more organized, gamified, or goal-driven intent of the professional service providers of toyrism.

At the core of the phenomenon of the traveling toy is the performative play-act of the photographing and photo-spectating subject, who we understand as a player. As witnessed on social media photo-sharing applications, toys are becoming increasingly mobile as a result of the imagination of players who engage in mobile object play. One key dimension of this play activity, largely driven by players who have reached adult age, is the imaginative storytelling developed for and through the toys (for an example, see Fig. 2.). [Lean et al. \(2014, p. 14\)](#) stated that "a critical domain of imagination is the image [...] a mental visualization of some kind." Here, we suggest that in toyrism this visualization namely materializes in photographic storytelling or photoplay.

[Heynders and van Nuenen \(2014\)](#) have argued that travel may be the inspiration of fiction. The mobility of fictional characters is well recognized as a literary trope: "It is a literary and popular convention, for instance, for characters to prove they have been to another time and place by producing an object from it" ([Gordon, 1986, p. 136](#)). Indeed, the pictorial image is the most common type of contemporary souvenir ([Gordon, 1986, p. 140](#)). Visual and textual toy narratives involving traveling toys circulate on social media applications and travel blogs to communicate the adventures experienced by toys and their players. Moreover, toyrism involving photoplay ([Heljakka, 2012](#), and [Figs. 1–3, 5](#) in this paper) is always performative, as it happens in public places

that are considered culturally or geographically relevant.

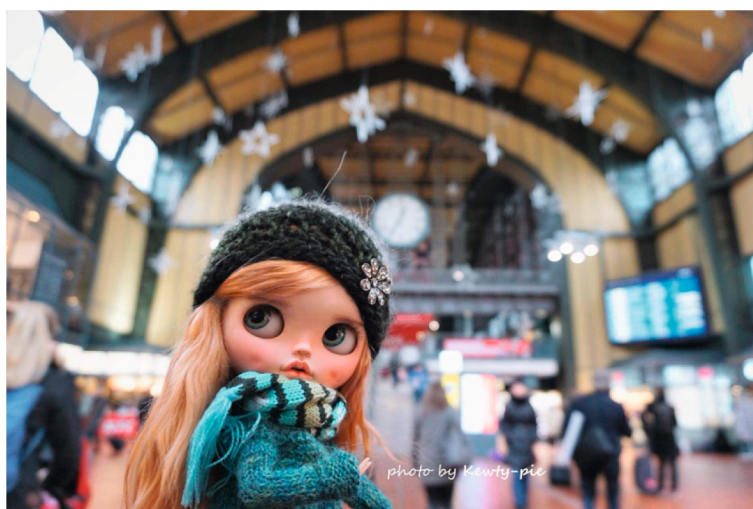
As witnessed on social media photo-sharing applications, toys as three-dimensional bearers of narratives are becoming increasingly mobile. The performative aspects of toy mobility relate to the toys' *portability*. To become mobile, toys require social networks of players willing to transport and produce memorable and shareable experiences for the toys and to document and share their adventures on social media platforms.

When photoplayed in tourism locations, toys are anthropomorphized. [Robinson \(2014\)](#) identified three photographic trends in depicting traveling toys: (a) anthropomorphizing the toys, (b) making them visit famous landmarks, and (c) displaying the photographer's capability and creativity, concentrating on the artistic aesthetic rather than the environment. Furthermore, [Robinson \(2014\)](#) brought up the strategy of seeing the world through toys' eyes. The development of a "mini-eye" is familiar to anyone with a passion for decorating dollhouses or staging toy photography in both indoor and outdoor environments. Moreover, many toy characters from the LEGO series, for example, come equipped with miniature cameras. It is then not only the human player who is interested in travel photography but also, apparently, the toy companions themselves, which are depicted as engaged in their own touristic practices, such as visiting famous landmarks, landscapes, and architectural installations.

One key aspect of any play situation is the human capacity to imagine. This article does not pay specific attention to fan studies but acknowledges recent work conducted by, for example, [Williams \(2019, p. 70\)](#) who, in her autoethnography on traveling with a Funko Hannibal Lecter character in Florence, explored the ludic use of paratextual objects in a specific place or location by stating that "whilst fans themselves cannot 'enter' the narrative world, the use of relevant fannish artifacts allows play with the borders between text, self, and object."

When employed as characters in socially shared imaginative scenarios, adults' toy relations, indeed, resemble other fannish relationships. Toyism stands for both location-based and mobile play: the toy players are simultaneously traveling within a geographical playscape and traveling imaginatively in a transmediascape, meaning that the playthings employed in toyrism are associated with various media narratives related to backstories ([Heljakka, 2013](#)) and entertainment

Blythe



Note. A customized Blythe doll engaged in toy tourism at Hamburg's main railway station.

Photograph by Kewty-pie (2016).

Fig. 2. Blythe.

Note. A customized Blythe doll engaged in toy tourism at Hamburg's main railway station. Photograph by [Kewty-pie \(2016\)](#).

Bambi Toy Figure

Note. Bambi on the way to surf at Turtle Beach, North Shore Hawaii. Photograph by Author (2019).

Fig. 3. Bambi toy figure.

Note. Bambi on the way to surf at Turtle Beach, North Shore Hawaii. Photograph by Heljakka (2019).

brands known from popular culture, such as comics, movies, literature, games, and fashion (Williams, 2019). What differentiates them from most fan relations, however, is the starting point for the fantasies—most likely a toy personality, which may not originate as a spin-off of another media product (or paratext) of the *supersystem of play* (Heljakka, 2013) but is almost always creatively cultivated by the adult player's (or players') imaginings. Furthermore, the places visited in toyism are not only related to "cult geographies" (Geraghty, 2014) but also represent sites for human tourism. The toys' tourism destinations range from global cityscapes to trips in the nearby woods.

A further dimension of toyism is the traveling toys' relationship to material culture; not only are the toys physical objects related to the origins and history of the souvenir industry but they are also interconnected to the world of, for example, miniature objects collected by players for the toys. Souvenirs are often thought of as miniature, toy-like objects that invite playful behavior. The idea that many souvenirs are childish or childlike parallels Gordon's (2004, pp. 138, 140) observation that touristic photographs often emphasize leisure and playfulness. Interestingly, toys considered as *souvenirs* in their pre-industrial manifestation and picked up by Europeans on pilgrimages in Central Europe (e.g., Nelson & Svensson, 2005) are now fantasized as themselves having a desire to travel (and to collect souvenirs; for reference, see Fig. 3 in which the toy's surfboard is a souvenir itself). Indeed, in toyism, traveling toys sometimes bring home "souvenirs" or mementos that can be used in future play.

When playing with a toy, any physical space, even space as demonstrated by the Baby Yoda toy taken along to spacecraft by SpaceX astronauts (CNN, 2020), can become a playground (Heljakka, 2013). Mobile object play, here understood as toyism, also intermixes with the practice of playing games: in some cases, toy play in the context of travel becomes playful interactivity, where the playing has goal-oriented or *ludic* elements, in contrast to open-ended, or *paidic* play (Caillois, 1961), which is not usually linked to competition, goals, and related motivations.

3. Literature reviews on the value of play, tourism experiences, and souvenirs

3.1. The value of play in adult object play

The dimensions of the toy experience entail physical, functional (e.g., mechanical and technological), fictional, and affective dimensions. The physicality refers to the material affordances of the toy (e.g., size and texture), the functionality to the playability aspect of the toy (e.g., its "huggability" and poseability), the fictionality to the narrative affordances of the toy (e.g., its backstory/toy brand), and finally, the affective dimensions of the toy experience refer to the affordances of the toy that invite players to emotional engagement with it, as a result, for example, of the cuteness and "vulnerability" of the toy.

The *play value* can be experienced in relation to (a) the toy, (b) the locations traveled to, and (c) fellow players as hosts for the traveling toys. First of all, value seems to be embedded in the design of toys. In previous research, the play value of toys, concerning children's use of toys, in particular, has been discussed in terms of fun, enjoyment, and re-playability value: "A toy is a tool for play, and it must be a useful tool!" (Gielen, 2010). Previous literature suggests that play value may result from the following dimensions: aesthetics, simplicity, versatility, pleasurable fun/amusement, educational potential, safety, durability, age appropriateness, ergonomics of use, and sustainability (Heljakka, 2013). The play value is built on these factors and, further, the dimensions of the toy experience as explained earlier. Moreover, the play value manifests in the use of the toy, alongside the relationship the player builds up with the toy. Furthermore, play value, as the name implies, is co-created in combination with the affordances given to the toy by its designer and the manipulation and meaning contributed by the player. As attention turns to mature toy players, the value of the playthings may be perceived in somewhat more complex ways. For instance, to be photoplayed, a toy needs to be sufficiently poseable, dressable, and photogenic, so that interesting visual documentation may be produced.

Second, when toys are made mobile, the evaluation of play value seems to extend beyond the toy—and onto the notion of space. In line

with Unt's (2012) idea that "space can be compared to a plaything, a toy" (p. 145), space is here understood as an element that can be actively played with. Through play virtually any environment may be transformed to make it more stimulating, enjoyable and entertaining (Barnett, 2007, p. 949). Accordingly, when playing with a toy, any physical space can become a playground (Heljakka, 2013).

Third, as presented, toy players travel literally in geographical landscapes and imaginatively in a player-generated story world or transmediascape. Toy mobility in the ludic age resembles fannish movements, as fan studies have acknowledged the practice of pilgrimages to famous filming locations. According to Brooker (2007), "pilgrimage can be an act of creation, performance, disguise, and carnival that symbolically transforms the location in question, temporarily inverting social structures and making the city into a liberating, playful space" (p. 423). Toy play patterns, such as pilgrimages and world-building, mimic familiar settings from specific film and television episodes that are of interest to adult fans (Heljakka, 2018). By acknowledging locations familiar from objects of fandom, such as TV series, and transporting one's toys to these places, players accumulate fan cultural capital through shared instances of play, such as toy photography. Instead of selfies, toy players take "toyfies"—or let their toys depict themselves as avatars (Heljakka, 2013). Moreover, the setting for play—the locations visited—must be culturally relevant either due to their historical meanings or their cultural significance as represented in fiction and fannish cultures (see, e.g., Williams, 2019).

Finally, digital and social networks are utterly important for toyism to function—the play value that makes toyism possible stems from bonds created, strengthened, and maintained between the human owners of the traveling toys and either the amateur or professional hosts responsible for "entertaining" and physically transporting the toys in the name of toyism. To summarize, the key components of toyism are mobile object relations, which emerge in material, digital and imaginative ways, and play practices, both solitary and social. What is considered valuable in the traveling toys, are (a) the play value of the toys as playthings (portability, playability, or photogenicity), (b) the play value of the play space suitable for the toys to "roam" in a culturally relevant playscape, and (c) the play value in relation to the networks of players (active involvement through shared "entertaining" and storytelling).

3.2. Co-creating experience value in tourism

The notion of *experience value* links toyism to wider discussions on emotional tourism experiences and the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), in which human play and playfulness also play a part. During the past years, discussions of experience management and experiential marketing have focused either on adding value to existing products and services by staging experiences (Chaney, Renaud, & Mencarelli, 2018; Pine & Gilmore, 1999) or value co-creation, accentuating the active role of consumers in creating meaningful experiences for themselves (e.g., Prebensen, 2014).

Traditionally, value has been understood as a trade-off between quality and price or benefits and costs/sacrifices (Cravens, Holland, Lamb Jr, & Moncrief III, 1988; Zeithaml & Zeithaml, 1988), yet in the context of tourism, spending time and money on experiences can hardly be considered as a mere cost or sacrifice (Prebensen, Woo, Chen, & Uysal, 2013). Discussions on the value of tourism have often been based on the ideas of either Holbrook (1999) or Woodruff (1997) that have been adapted to the context of tourism (e.g., Gallarza & Saura, 2006; Komppula, 2005; Sánchez-Fernández, Iniesta-Bonillo, & Holbrook, 2009). The idea of experience value emerged in tourism literature about a decade ago when Komppula and Gartner (2013) suggested that "experienced value" is the multidimensional outcome that tourists construct after returning home, while Prebensen et al. (2013) argued that "the value of the destination experience" is formed when tourists receive, select, organize, and interpret information on the various

experiences at their destination.

In mainstream marketing, value co-creation has been widely discussed within the established paradigm of service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), which has also gained recognition in the context of tourism (e.g., Cabiddu, Lui, & Piccoli, 2013; Zhang, Gordon, Buhalis, & Ding, 2018), even though tourism literature has, by tradition, centered around customer experiences (Shaw, Bailey, & Williams, 2011). In line with this trend, Prebensen (2014) argued that "experiential value" comes through co-creation, referring to the idea that value is created and experienced through use in a specific context, in which consumers are not passive value receivers but active value co-creators.

The process of co-creation tied to toyism involves both nonhuman and human agents—the toy and its player. When traveling together with the toy, its physiognomy, poseability and aesthetics offer possibilities for producing interesting photoplay (travel photography), while its owner takes responsibility for transporting the toy and documenting it in interesting locations suitable for creative photography. In this process, the nonhuman and human travelers are positioned in active engagement with touristic environments.

Further, as highly worthy tourism experiences occur by being present in the moment and enjoying the involvement in producing the experience, Prebensen (2014) highlighted the distinct nature of experiential value by adding epistemic/novelty value to Sweeney and Soutar's (2001) value scale that consists of functional, emotional, and social value. This epistemic/novelty value refers to the propensity of experiences to arouse curiosity, provide novelty, and satisfy a desire for knowledge (Prebensen, 2014). Antón, Camarero, and Laguna-García (2017), in turn, suggested that experiential value consists of escapism and fantasy, which highlight the emotional impressions of getting away or diving into the imagination, and attainment and learning, which refer to the cognitive perception that an experience has proved enriching and instructive. The previous discussions on experience value provide useful avenues for addressing value co-creation in toyism. However, the active participation, involvement, and engagement of tourists in the value co-creation process are frequently highlighted, challenging the conceptualization of experience value in the context of toyism and other forms of tourism beyond humans (cf. Ivanov, 2019; Ivanov & Webster, 2019).

3.3. The value of souvenirs: From containers of memories to objects of play?

According to Haldrup and Larsen (2006), "tourism and leisure life is not a flight from the world of things" (p. 278, 286), as tourists become involved in things or engage with material cultures because they find them useful. An important category of the material culture of tourism is souvenirs, which are considered as physical, tangible reminders of tourism experiences and destinations that may also symbolize tourists' travel experience (Paraskevaidis & Andriotis, 2015; Trinh, Ryan, & Cave, 2014). Souvenirs have existed as long as traveling itself and historically these objects and artifacts have taken many forms, ranging from marble statues to postcards to the current digital photographs (Trinh et al., 2014).

Not many studies have examined the value dimensions of souvenirs as research has mainly focused on their identity as material objects examined from the perspective of consumer behavior (Paraskevaidis & Andriotis, 2015; Trinh et al., 2014). However, Paraskevaidis and Andriotis (2015) discussed the value dimensions of souvenirs through the lens of Marx's (1976) use-value, referring to the dual functionality of souvenirs as reminders of the tourism experience and as products used in daily life, and exchange-value, highlighting the amount of money spent on souvenirs, as well as Baudrillard's (1981) sign-value linked to souvenirs as tourists' most valued possessions that are often luxurious and prestigious souvenirs, even unique collector-items. According to the study by Paraskevaidis and Andriotis (2015), tourists considered souvenirs mainly as cheap and banal commodities that were purchased to remember the destination and less for utilitarian usage, emphasizing the

use-value and exchange-value of souvenirs. Prestige and social status, in turn, were not sought by tourists and thus sign-value was not identified, but instead, spiritual-value (cf. Kaell, 2012; Moufahim, 2013) was identified and revealed the way tourists attributed superhuman powers to material commodities through religious belief (Paraskevaidis & Andriotis, 2015).

The relationship between souvenirs, object relations, and object mobility is central in forming an understanding of the motivation for players to dedicate time, physical mobility, and creative endeavors for the sake of creating experiences for their toys, as well as other players as the virtually networked followers of toys. The toy itself may be a souvenir that is returned to the sphere of travel experiences through toyism, but it is more common for adult toy players involved in toyism to purchase miniature souvenirs for the toys while traveling together. These artifacts are often useful for employment in future photoplay as props (see Fig. 3 of a Bambi character toy carrying a miniature surfboard, which is a souvenir object) and as decoration for the toys' domestic environments, for example, in the context of doll houses, dioramas or room boxes.

Even though the toy itself might be a souvenir—a memento purchased at a specific location—a more relevant question here is how the toy travels around as a souvenir returned to the material sphere of travel consumption, yet now as an active agent and generator of experiences for others to consume. The toy's personality used in the practices of toyism may be self-crafted, which adds another layer of meaning onto the artifact. While transmedia toys, such as the Funko Pop! Vinyl character toys, as paratexts (Gray, 2010) are usually connected to their original story worlds through fannish devotion and thus provide possibilities for what Williams (2019) called paratextual-spatio-play, it is important to recognize how many players superimpose their own original narratives and meanings on the traveling toy, which might not be related to their backstory as the original text. In other words, as objects paralleling souvenirs, or in some instances actual souvenirs, character toys, such as the traveling dolls, action figures, and soft toys depicted in this article (see images 1–3, 5), represent objects that accumulate value, a certain “glow” as they are played within physical locations. This argument is linked to Williams's (2019, p. 85) observation about her Hannibal toy, which became “imbued with memories of the trip, evoking remembrances and reflections in the same way as a bought object,” just as one would assume a souvenir would do. This process is similar to the co-creation of experience value generated by the social networks of adult toy players responsible for the mechanical and fictional functions of toyism.

4. Methodology

Our research adopts a qualitative approach to examining the value of toyism. The design of the study employs a combination of a review of previous literature, the development of a conceptual model, and the use of empirical data sets to evaluate the applicability of the framework to the context of toyism. In the conceptual part of the study, we have created a deeper understanding of the principles and practices of toyism in general and addressed value co-creation in toyism through reviewing the previous literature related to object play, tourism experience management, focusing on experience value, and souvenirs as material objects of tourism. In the following part of the article, these different perspectives are synthesized into a conceptual model presenting the various dimensions of value of toyism and then combining these dimensions with not only the assumed play value afforded in the playthings themselves, but also with the co-creative nature of toyism activities related to assemblages of artifacts, affects, and touristic playscapes.

To explore the applicability of the framework, we bring in the voices of players/tourists by utilizing qualitative empirical data sets collected through interviews about adult engagement in toyism to exemplify the mechanisms of value co-creation. The data were collected through

personal and online interviews and the gathering of results of photoplay (or toy photography). Moreover, the qualitative data set was complemented with autoethnography, as the first author employed her own toyism experiences through photoplay and written reflections on the subject, such as the first vignette at the beginning of the article. The interviewees are presented in Table 1.

The first data collection during 2017–2018 consisted of seven in-depth interviews conducted face-to-face and via e-mail with participants from Finland, the United Kingdom, and Singapore (see ‘Table 1. Data collection through interviews’ and Attachment 1.). The goal was to understand the motivations of the adult players and to explore how toyism plays out. The interviews addressed imaginative, creative, and social toy play practices and the physical aspects of toy mobility—the journeys and personal histories of the traveling toys, the relationships between the toys and their owners, and the practice of hosting toys sent on travels by their owners. Along with verbal interviews, the interviewees were also requested to send examples of photoplay conducted while they were traveling with their toys.

The second data collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic in July 2020 and focused on five interviewees' toy playing practices during the lockdown in March and April 2020 (see ‘Table 1. Data collection through interviews’ and Attachment 1.). Again, the interviews were supplemented with visual examples of photoplay. Notably, during this time neither the interviewees nor their toys were internationally mobile, yet there was still a need to take the toys outdoors. Thus, toy play experiences in both Europe and Asia concentrated on excursions in destinations within or close to interviewees' everyday environments.

The third data set consists of documentations of ‘autoplay,’ or autoethnographic play, by the first author, who during her career as a researcher has been traveling with her toys regularly and extensively (for reference, see photoplay presented in Figs. 3 and 5). Results of verbal reflections and instances of photoplay by the author were used to supplement the first two data sets. In the current study, all these data sets were analyzed through the lenses of value co-creation employing content analysis as a method. The analysis aimed to find evidence for the existence and significance of various value dimensions that emerged from the literature reviews.

The second author, in turn, has not participated in data collection and analysis, nor has previous experience in toyism. Instead, her more objective viewpoint and expertise in tourism and experience management have proved to be equally important in the processes of writing this article. In a way, the co-authorship has resembled a game in which the players collaboratively puzzle out a mosaic of knowledge, connecting the previously independent areas of contemporary toy research and tourism experience management.

5. Findings of the study: Value dimensions of toyism

Based on these theoretical discussions we have created a framework of the various value dimensions of toyism, conceptualized here as toyism and presented in Fig. 4. In toyism, the physical and functional dimensions of value are related to the use, exchange, attainment, and

Table 1
Data collection through interviews.

Interviewee (pseudonym)	Gender	Year of birth	Country	Data collection in 2017–2018	Data collection in 2020
Les	female	1975	U.K.	x	x
Kewty-pie	female	1961	Singapore	x	x
Nancy	female	1982	Finland	x	–
HanneleK	female	1965	Finland	x	x
Pinkkisfun	female	1975	Finland	x	x
Heidi	female	1982	Finland	x	x
Sandy	female	1974	Finland	x	–

The value dimensions of toy tourism

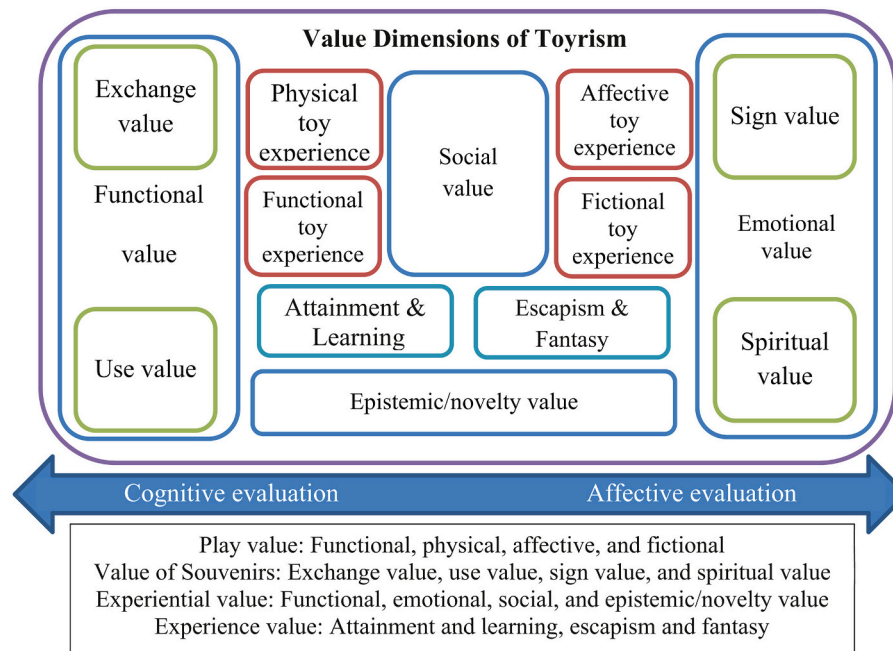


Fig. 4. The value dimensions of toy tourism.

learning that is actualized in the playing with toys. We understand these dimensions as part of the play value afforded by the toys themselves, the play space, and the functions of the networks that make toyism possible. The emotional and spiritual dimensions of value, in turn, are connected to the affection felt while practicing toyism, the escapism, fantasy, and fiction it provides, or something else experienced by traveling with the toys, or by providing toyism experiences to others—toys and humans.

Next, we augment the theoretical ideas on the value dimensions of tourism by bringing in the voice of player/tourist in order to further evaluate whether it applies to actual experiences or indicate whether it needs to be further developed. Toyism has both functional and emotional value for adult toy players. Character toys, such as dolls, action figures, and soft toys, convey functional value, as they enable the activity of toyism—making use of the toys by making them travel. For example, portability is, an essential aspect of toyist; as Les (b. 1975) explained: “Murphy is a bit bulky to carry, but he is easy to pose.” In this way, the use-value of traveling toys depends on their portability and poseability and also on their photogenicity.

Toyism may also be understood from the perspective of emotional value. The toys that are made mobile through toyism are valuable to their owners as companions and “vicarious explorers,” which, through their accumulation, documentation, and sharing of travel experiences, enable their owners and other followers possibilities for escapism and fantasizing. The emotional value of toyism is grounded in the realities of the places the toyists’ visit, but also in their travel narratives, which build up as a form of cultural capital and add on to the “afterglow” of the toy, once it gains recognition and followers through exposure on social media platforms.

The epistemic and novelty dimension of toyism value relates to the experiencing of something special and new, which manifests either as cognitive or affective experience: “Some places I go only because I think the toy would enjoy it or if I think the toy could create a fun story about it” (Nancy, b. 1982). Through toyism, players/tourists may learn something about the surrounding world that could not have emerged in their lives without the traveling toy. They may also discover something new about themselves when, for example, seeing the world through the

toy’s eyes: “I think that my imagination with toys is more of creative expression. Like a writer or an artist, it is escapism but also allows me to engage with the world around me differently” (Les, b. 1975). Kewty-pie (b. 1961), in turn, explained how “Toys take my place in my travel pictures. They are like my picture journal of what I did during my travels.” In an interview during the COVID-19 pandemic, Kewty-pie stated: “My toy pictures are like my personal journal of what’s going on in my life during the time the pictures are taken, so yes, many of the pictures during this time do reflect these exceptional times.” The quote demonstrates how the current realities of human life may be projected on toy playing practices. What determines the traveling toy’s story is its relation to the real world experienced by the player him/herself: “It depends on the traveling toy, but I try to keep the toys grounded in some way. In a way, I try to imitate reality with the toys” (Pinkkisfun, b. 1975). However, for Nancy (b. 1982) the play value of the toy is also in its capacity to function as an extension of the player; Nancy’s toy Juuso “has even been in the cockpit of a passenger plane—in the pilot’s seat!”

The souvenirs collected by the toys during their travels may have both functional and emotional value; they may be used in future play but also function as containers of memories. As Sandy (b. 1974) stated: “Pinkie accumulated stuff. A musical instrument from Scotland, a baby, a camera-thingsy. Small props.” But the things brought back might equally be tiny treasures found in nature: “Yewlee likes tiny pebbles, shells, and interesting bits of bark and sticks” (Les, b. 1975). Interestingly, the spiritual value seems more relevant for traveling toys than their actual monetary value as character toys, such as plush animals become superimposed with magical powers: “For a long time I always flew with a soft toy named ‘Jacques Rockstar,’ who kept the plane in the air” (Pinkkisfun, b. 1975). On the other hand, toys may also possess use-value as the same interviewee described: “When needed, it functioned as a pillow.” Although these quotes do not point to religious beliefs projected to objects, as one would assume a religious figure or mascot would do (cf. Paraskevaidis & Andriotis, 2015), they illustrate how toys made mobile by their owners may be playfully trusted to maintain their well-being. Another example showed how toys may require attention and provision of entertainment by their owners. As Pinkkisfun (b. 1975) explained, one of her toys, Molly, had completely consumed the player’s

attention during the travel: “I nearly used all time to photograph Molly’s story. Partly, the trip kept me from having a travel experience for myself as Molly had so much going on all of the time.” In any case, the value of toyism connects to the souvenir value of the traveling toys themselves, which engage in toyism. The storytelling created as part of their travel narratives, as in photoplay (photographs, videos) functions as souvenir objects do: as a reminder or memento; as something that fulfills the urge of accumulation and collecting; and as a gift that, through social sharing, becomes visual culture enjoyed by both children as well as adults.

Interestingly, the social dimension of toyism value connects closely to the human social networks of players (alone versus together, with family, friends, tribes), without whose willingness to engage with the toys in situ, in the imaginative terrains or the virtual world, toyism would be impossible. Accordingly, the value of social interaction and experiences shared with the network of players is the key both for the individual players and, in broader terms, for the whole existence of the phenomenon of toyism. Based on empirical data, we suggest that the various value dimensions addressed in the article play a part in co-creating toyism experiences. Concerning the question of by whom value is created, the current study indicates mainly by the owner of the toy and the owner’s social network of other players. Interestingly, however, the players/tourists seemed to reason that the traveling toys themselves also gain travel experiences and a certain “afterglow” while traveling, indicating that some sort of experience value could be gained by nonhuman tourists as well. According to the current study, this value manifests as physical marks of wear and tear on the toys themselves, but more importantly, in the experience value that is accumulated in the socially shared travel narratives of the toy owners and their followers. In any case, our study mounts a challenge to extend the traditional approaches to experience value in the context of tourism.

6. Discussion and conclusions

6.1. Scientific contribution

Toy tourism, i.e. toyism, involves networks of human players, toys and souvenirs, mobile technologies, geographical locations, travel narratives, and playfulness mediated through actions on the social web, all of which interconnect and act as agents in co-creation processes in multifaceted ways. The vivid imaginations of human minds set these object mobilities (Bærenholdt, Haldrup, Larsen, & Urry, 2004) in action, often doing so with mimetic intentions. Toyism is, thus, foregrounded by recognized play patterns or platforms—how others have played in the public sites of tourism and virtual spheres of social media platforms before.

As illustrated, in amateur forms of toyism, the traveling of the toy either parallels the geospatial movement and the actual and imagined touristic practices of its owner or is provided as a service on behalf of other players through toy hosting programs or by the service providers of toyism. Functioning as vehicles for creative tourism practices, toys visit popular touristic sites and become “immortalized” there through photoplay, for reasons that relate either to interpersonal storytelling (paidic/creative play) or to intrapersonal sharing of stories (ludic/goal-oriented play).

The play value of toyism can be experienced in relation to the toy, the locations traveled to, and fellow players. Again, the values related to play can be understood from the perspectives of functional value and emotional value, as discussed in tourism studies. Based on these discussions, we present a theoretical model which synthesizes the various dimensions of experiential value and combines them with not only to the assumed play value afforded in the playthings themselves but also with the co-creative nature of toyism activities interested in the assemblages of artifacts, affects, and touristic playscapes. We highlight the dimensions of the experience value of toyism through empirical examples of player-generated mobility and narrativization of character toys (see Heljakka & Ihamäki, 2021). Besides specific value dimensions, this

article discusses toyism through the topical theme of value co-creation.

Value co-creation in toyism is dependent on multiple human parties: the owners of the toys that set them out to travel and the service providers of toyism, meaning the amateur and professional hosts who cater to the needs of the toys to gather tourism experiences. Moreover, there are the audiences for toyism, who, for example, consume the travel narratives shared on social media through photoplay and take part in the co-creation of experience by joining in the elaboration (admiration) of the toys’ travels by commenting on the photoplay.

We suggest that in toyism, experience value—both epistemic and fantastical—is co-created through playful encounters between the player/tourist and the toy while traveling, or in the process of playing, documenting, and sharing one’s play for others through social media platforms. Furthermore, we argue that the experience value of toyism results from the combination of the functional dimensions of making toys mobile together along with the creative and visual documentation of the journeys (see Fig. 5.), which is primarily enjoyed by the players themselves and secondly by the spectators of their toy play.

Through photoplay, the memories related to toyism live on in the post-travel phases. These visual and often verbalized fragments of travel narratives add to the value of the toy itself and allow the human player to reminisce about travel experiences from a different perspective. In the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is possible to speculate a future rise in interest in making toys mobile through toyism when human travel is more limited.

Although in its infancy, scholarly contributions to the field of toyism-related play do exist (Heljakka, 2013; Heljakka & Ihamäki, 2021; Robinson, 2014). In the current study, we have noted how both the play and tourism industries have detected this trend and encourage players to increase their mobility through different strategies. The practices of toyism range from free-form object play motivated by curiosity and creative object play to the more goal-oriented play patterns (Heljakka & Ihamäki, 2021). What is of key importance for both modes of play, however, is their linkage to travel narratives of the toy, visual, textual, and socially shared in nature.

Our approach to toyism contextualized the phenomenon in current academic discussions on the co-creation of experience value related to tourism. To further continue and extend research on toyism, we suggest focusing more on the human side of toyism—to explore how the toys function as player extensions and mediators of experiences. Moreover, developing media and mobile technologies—such as virtual reality, augmented reality, means of transport (i.e., drones), and artificial intelligence—provide fruitful avenues for further studies. Therefore, the future research agenda includes the investigation of toyism practices as a transgenerational (or intergenerational) play activity, meaning that different generations share both playthings and play patterns as a part of social engagement with toys, and toy robots with a capacity to travel “by themselves.”

6.2. Limitations

As with any study, some limitations need to be addressed. This qualitative study is based on interviews with and photoplay of a small number of players/tourists, hence the results cannot be generalized. Even though the sample included interviewees from both Europe and Asia, a wider cultural range would likely bring interesting aspects to this discussion. Moreover, it needs to be noted that all interviewees were female; thus, we recommend extending the discussion on the value of toyism to males and different age groups.

Besides generalizability, reliability and validity of the study are challenged by the autoethnographic research approach. The first author is not just an experienced toy researcher but also an active player/tourist herself. Nevertheless, the second author, who has a more objective viewpoint and vast expertise in tourism experience management, has not participated in data collection nor has previous experience in toyism. The research process has included extensive debates between the

Ice-Bat Uglydolls

Note. The Uglydolls (kept safe and out of the water) on Robben Island, South Africa, with the Table Mountain in the background. Photograph by Author (2014).

Fig. 5. Ice-Bat Uglydolls.

Note. The Uglydolls (kept safe and out of the water) on Robben Island, South Africa, with the Table Mountain in the background. Photograph by Heljakka (2014).

authors on both theoretical and methodological issues. These discussions do not entirely erase the challenges related to reliability and validity yet prove that the issue has been acknowledged and addressed throughout the research process.

Another limitation of the study is related to the theoretical foundation of the current study. As previous literature on toy tourism is very limited, the current study is built on discussions of toys and play, tourism experience value co-creation, and souvenirs as material objects of tourism. This is slightly problematic as these discussions are not all-encompassing. Even though tourism has been contrasted with play, toy research has rarely addressed tourism. Value co-creation research highlights the interaction between tourists and service providers but, to our knowledge, has not been discussed in the context of tourism beyond humans. Research on tourism experiences, in turn, has addressed tourism beyond humans, but mainly in the context of customer service robots that, for example, handle information provision, housekeeping activities, and bookings and payments (Ivanov & Webster, 2019). Thus, previous literature offers a somewhat limited base for understanding value co-creation in toyism. Finally, research on souvenirs is also somewhat problematic, as we cannot draw a parallel between souvenirs and toys even though both represent material objects of tourism and some traveling toys are first obtained as souvenirs and later become toyists. Despite these challenges and limitations, we argue that it is important to pursue expanding academic understanding of value co-creation in tourism beyond humans.

6.3. Managerial implications

The managerial implications of the study are approached from two perspectives. First, it is clear that the market for toyism already exists. It is a niche market but has the potential to grow during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as in the post-COVID era of international tourism. Besides travel restrictions, the closer cooperation between the toy and tourism industries may also facilitate the growth of the market.

However, the potential of toyism needs also to be acknowledged in the traditional tourism sector, as there are several ways for tourism

companies to benefit from embedding elements of toyism in their tourism products. Naturally, children are keen on toys, but toys often bring happy memories to adults as well. As large tour operators' brand mascots have shown, toys and toy play can be successfully used in marketing (e.g., Malik & Gupta, 2014), and have the potential to contribute to the value co-creation of tourism experiences by creating affordances without excluding any customer segments. In terms of concrete actions, tourism and hospitality companies can, for example, sell toys as souvenirs, but may also sell souvenirs for toys, arrange settings and scenes for toy-related photoplay, and encourage tourists to create and share this photoplay as social media content. Furthermore, service providers can use toys in their own marketing endeavors beyond brand mascots. However, more research is needed to deepen understanding of the motivations and value perceptions of player/tourist segments and of the effectiveness of using toys and toy play in tourism marketing.

We wish to conclude by highlighting that not all players are the same. Even mature players are moved by different aspects of toyism, and there are different tastes in play regarding toy mobility. Toys gain meaning and cast an "afterglow" both during and after the completion of a journey, and there is a sentimental attachment to these objects depending on their type of travel. Whereas the mental investment in the stories of toys owned by different adult players may be similar, the emotional value of object relations may be more complex. Some risks come with the toy characters that express a tendency to wanderlust. Players who use the services of toy hosting programs or travel agencies may see their toys only in pictures after sending them out on their journeys, whereas players who travel with their toys would not stand the idea of parting ways with the "toyfriends" or losing them accidentally while adventuring, as reflected upon in the concluding quote as remembered by the first author:

To my utter relief, the poor Ice-Bat ceased rolling just in time. Facedown, my toy lay at the stone-covered brink of the canal, an inch or so from its edge. Destined to continue its adventures with me, the Uglydoll was safe. Should it have fallen in the water, I would have dived after it, for sure.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2021.100791>.

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