The lived travel experience to North Korea

ABSTRACT

Tourism in North Korea is limited by entry bans, visa restrictions, and stringently controlled itineraries. As a consequence, the experience of visiting the country is still poorly understood by academics and practitioners alike. In order to fill this research void, this study aims to describe the essence of the lived experience of travelling to North Korea, following an approach embedded in the philosophical underpinnings of transcendental phenomenology. Based on eight narratives by tourists who have visited the country, the essence of the lived North Korea travel experience is identified as comprising dimensions of trepidation, self-regulation, doubt, and catharsis. Discussing the findings through a tourism lens, suggestions for further research are made and theoretical as well as methodological contributions are highlighted.

Keywords: North Korea; phenomenology; transcendental; lived experience

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of tourism on the Korean peninsula is one of the most intriguing phenomena at the beginning of this century (Henderson, 2002; Kim, Prideaux, & Prideaux, 2007). In the south, the capitalist Republic of Korea (ROK) attracts a wide range of tourist segments (Choi, Lee, & Kim, 2015; Kim, Kim, Agrusa, & Lee, 2012). The isolated, totalitarian Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the north, on the other hand, is still judged by most to be dangerous, secretive, and unique (Buda & Shim, 2015b). At best, the DPRK can be considered an "unusual" destination when its historical and/or political context is taken into account (Connell, 2017).

As a consequence, tourism in the DPRK is currently a minor but exotic form of economic activity (Yu & Ko, 2012; Li & Ryan, 2015) with a relatively recent history.

Although early signs of tourism development have emerged as early as the 1980s, persisting with its closure from the outside world and pursuing a policy of self-reliance (Cumings, 2013), the country has only opened up gradually, during the last decade, for wider tourism purposes (Connell, 2017). According to Connell (2017), it is believed that the main reason for this is the need for foreign currencies, such as the Chinese Yuan, the American Dollar, and the Euro. However, tourism is considered to be still far from developed.

With the exception of Chinese day trippers crossing into the DPRK via land for mostly business purposes (Buda & Shim, 2015a, 2014b; Reilly, 2014a, 2014b), most travelers from the west, as well as non-Chinese Asians, fly into the capital, Pyongyang. A few licensed and specialized tour operators assist and guide tourists within an itinerary that is narrowly defined, officially approved, and under strict surveillance, usually lasting for approximately a week (Connell, 2017; Buda & Shim, 2015a).

Estimates highlight that the current regime of the DPRK aims at increasing inbound tourist numbers from approximately 100,000 in 2014 to 2 million by 2020 (Winsor, 2015). Accordingly, substantial efforts have been undertaken to rebrand the country, with the inauguration of a newly built luxury ski resort and continuous investment in its long coastline. However, diversification of the tourism product still seems to be far off, as the DPRK is currently not considered particularly attractive for tourists "seeking beach resorts, theme parks, self-drive exploring or time to relax" (Codrington, 2013, p. 413).

As such, recently scholars have discussed what motivates tourists to visit the country. Buda and Shim (2015a, 2015b) suggested that they might be looking for "darkness", while other studies suggest that it could be understood as a form of serious political tourism (Isaac, 2010; Connell, 2017), embedded in the propaganda of a totalitarian regime (Zuo, Huang, & Liu, 2015). This study follows another line of research and is not concerned with the antecedents and evaluation of a trip, which is commonly considered to be part of the tourist experience (Ryan, 1997; 2010). Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to phenomenologically

describe the "essence" of the experience of travelling to the country; Whereas essence denotes iconic building blocks which make a certain type of lived experience special (Dowling, 2007; Moran, 2000; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). The essence is then investigated through a tourism lens by relating it to previous theory.

For this purpose, this study adopts a qualitative research method embedded in the philosophical assumptions of transcendental phenomenology, which in itself is interlinked with the study of essences (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010). In particular, it follows the practical approach of the phenomenologist Amedeo Giorgi (2009) through a phenomenological reduction of eight collected tourist narratives. All of the narrators had visited the country on organized tours within the year immediately before the start of the study.

The findings of this study offer a stepping stone towards a better understanding of what constitutes the overall tourist experience to the DPRK by focusing on the lived travel experience, and aims at closing a persistent gap in our academic knowledge. It is also hoped that tour operators offering trips to the country, policymakers for related safety issues and tourism marketers can use this study to better understand the phenomenon of tourism to the DPRK.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. A Phenomenological Outlook on the Lived Travel Experience

The term phenomenology is derived from the Greek *phainomenon* (appearance) and *logos* (reason or word) (Stewart & Mickunas, 1974; Stewart, 1990). Phenomenology is commonly described as the study of essences (Merleau-Ponty, 1964) and phenomena are grounded within the realities of the people describing them (Moustakas, 1994; Pernecky, 2006). In other words, phenomenology is primarily concerned with discovering the essence of appearances (Stewart, 1990). As appearances are inherently related to human

consciousness, it can be said that anything appearing in one's consciousness can be a subject for study using phenomenology (Li, 2000).

Although not a qualitative method in the strict sense, phenomenology as a philosophical area has been widely used as a research guideline (van Manen, 2002). It has been mainly successful in studying the human experience in the humanist and social science disciplines (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010). Pernecky and Jamal (2010) highlight that in the context of tourism, phenomenology should nevertheless be used with care, as it is not a method in itself but rather only a guideline which can be based on diverse philosophical assumptions. This perspective has mostly been overlooked in tourism-related studies. A careful exploration of an appropriate ontological and epistemological perspective should therefore be the core of a phenomenological study (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010).

A distinction can be made between Edmund Husserl's "positivistic" or "transcendental" and Martin Heidegger's "existential" or "hermeneutic" phenomenology. Transcendental phenomenology has become more popular in tourism studies and is characterized by an attempt to isolate and identify a common essence of the studied phenomenon. The researcher oneself is "bracketed out," and is not an active shaper of knowledge. In other words, the investigator aims at a "restraining of one's pre-understanding in the form of personal beliefs, theories, and other assumptions that otherwise would mislead the understanding of meaning and thus limit the research openness" (Dahlberg, 2006, p. 16). Hermeneutic phenomenology, on the other hand, situates the researchers (and their possible biases) within the study. As such, the researcher and the participant co-create their own personal interpretation of an experience (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010).

Whether or not a researcher follows the principles of transcendental or hermeneutic phenomenology should largely be based on the goal of the respective research. According to Reiners (2012), transcendental phenomenological stances are typically adopted when the researcher aims at describing a phenomenon under investigation, bracketing out personal

4

biases in the process. Hermeneutic phenomenology, on the other hand, aids studies which aim at understanding the meaning of a certain phenomenon without bracketing the investigator's related prior engagement and biases. Given the research goal of this study, namely to describe the "essence" of the experience of travelling to the DPRK, a transcendental phenomenological approach is more appropriate. Considering the limited information available about tourism in the country (Buda & Shim, 2015b), it is furthermore believed that an objective description of the lived related tourist experience can offer a first important milestone for a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. However, in order to adhere to the principles of the transcendental phenomenology, a careful choice of ontological and epistemological stances is recommended (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010).

In terms of ontology, transcendental phenomenology should not be confused with an assumption that consciousness creates the world, but rather highlights the adopted ontological view that phenomena can be apprehended and known through pure consciousness. According to Husserl, the world can be divided into concrete (real) objects which are investigated through the exact sciences, and experiential phenomena which fall in the realm of phenomenology (Giorgi, 2009). Entities outside of experience are thus considered meaningless in transcendental phenomenology (Moran, 2000).

Epistemologically, a claim is made that the universal can be understood through the intuition of pure consciousness, rather than through a traditionally positivist empiricism. The latter is believed to overlook the importance of human experience (Moran, 2000). Moran (2000) explains that phenomenology challenges traditional notions of epistemology, oscillating between rationalism and empiricism. Accordingly, it offers a holistic approach encompassing objectivity and consciousness, denoting the human body as merely a mediator in the process of true experience. In other words, the core idea of phenomenology is that the subjective domain cannot be split from the natural world (Moran, 2000), a division which is traditionally assumed in positivism.

Although the seemingly positivistic characteristics of transcendental phenomenology, an understanding of Husserl's notion of "intersubjectivity" is necessary to fully grasp the study of essences. Originally understood as shared and mutual understanding, intersubjectivity in a phenomenological sense can be interpreted as a shared life-world, where subjects find themselves coordinated around a particular phenomenon (Duranti, 2010). In other words, subjective human consciousness is believed not to wholly deduce the perceived world from itself, but to be embedded in a shared context which offers sense to the world – essences which partially transcend human subjectivity (Petrescu, 2013). In light of the apparent attempt to "objectivize" an experience, it is crucial to mention that transcendental phenomenology does not make claims to generalize experiences shared by all humans over time, culture, gender or other circumstances. In other words, essences aim at covering the most essential parts of the phenomenon under investigation, acknowledging nonetheless that they are "open, infinite, and expandable and they are never finally completely explored and described" (Dahlberg, 2006, p.16). Husserl himself (as cited in Giorgi, 2009, p.197) stated that contrary to "formal essences" like squares, circles or rectangles, experiential "morphological essences" commonly found in psychology tend to be less exact in principle, possibly due to a higher degree of subjective and intersubjective interplay.

Phenomenological studies can also be situated in different research paradigms (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010), ranging from the strictly positivist (such as Brentano) to the deconstructivist (such as Derrida). Langdrigde (2007) states that most phenomenological studies are descriptive or interpretive, corresponding to the principles of transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenology, respectively. Within the tourism field, transcendental phenomenology has dominated the recent research.

Curtin (2006) seeks to understand the experience of swimming with dolphins, drawing on Moustakas (1994) and van Manen (2010). Husserlian phenomenology was followed as the methodological guideline in Li (2000), Ingram (2002), and Pernecky (2006),

in studies investigating geographical consciousness, motivations of farm hosts and guests, and "New Age" tourism respectively. In a more recent study, Kirillova, Lehto and Cai (2016) follow Giorgi's (2009) steps to phenomenological data analysis to investigate the essence of a transformative tourist experience. Nine experiential themes were identified and chronologically ordered into a phenomenological essence, with existential concerns found to be prevailing. Kirillova et al. (2016) are the first researchers to follow Giorgi's (2009) method in a tourism-related study and confirm its applicability to the field.

Most of this work has shown success in applying phenomenological principles to gain some degree of insight into the lived travel experience (Willson et al., 2013). However, when looking at tourists' experiences in general, one must recognize the limitations of a particular chosen paradigmatic, ontological and epistemological lens to investigate them (Ryan, 2010).

Reviewing the extensive body of knowledge on tourist experiences, Chris Ryan (1995; 2010) envisages the constructs of experience as "antecedents" (e.g. personality, motivation, and marketing), "holidays" (e.g. travel experience, interaction with fellow tourists, comparison between expectation and reality) and "evaluation" (e.g. original expectations fulfilled, satisfaction, or dissatisfaction). However, transcendental phenomenology aims at describing the essence of a phenomenon focusing on a lived experience. Giorgi (2009, p. 90) highlights that transcendental phenomenology is interested in a perceived phenomenon from a perspective of "generalized, pure consciousness", rather than in who is perceiving it. On the same line, Dahlberg (2006) states that through phenomenological attitude we can aim to distinguish a particular phenomenon from its context, but also to distinguish ourselves from the phenomenon.

The chosen method based on transcendental phenomenology does not allow to investigate the essence of the overall tourist experience related to the DPRK, but rather what Ryan (2010, p.41) calls the "actual travel experience", in this study, based on a transcendental phenomenological conceptualization, defined as the temporary bound, lived experience of

visiting the country. In this case, the phenomenon under investigation is the travel experience to the DPRK, investigated through the experiences of people who have lived it. In other words, the attempt of this study is to describe the essence of the lived experience of undertaking a travel to the DPRK, rather than the understanding of its antecedents, behavioral outcomes and evaluation, which in turn are commonly considered as a part of the overall tourist experience.

2.2. Tourism in North Korea

Arguably, one of the most mysterious tourist destinations, given the almost total absence of empirical research, is the DPRK (Connell, 2017). Access to or contact with the local population in the DPRK is restricted and any kind of data collection prohibited. Researchers or journalists are routinely denied visas and discouraged from visiting. Insights into its tourism are also constrained by restrictions on access, exposure, and mobility once within the country (Buda & Shim, 2015b).

Existing studies on North Korean tourism focus mainly on the analysis of tourism, travel in relation to tourism policies, and political ideologies (Hall, 1990; Kim & Crompton, 1990; Kim & Prideaux, 2003). Another series of contributions discusses how tourism can be used to promote peace on the Korean peninsula, in terms of periodically easing the tensions between the DPRK and the international community (Cho, 2007; Lee, Bendle, Yoon, & Kim, 2012; Kim & Prideaux, 2003, 2006; Kim et al., 2007; Shin, 2010).

However, very little attention has been given to the experience of travelling to the DPRK. The exceptions are the analysis by Kim, Timothy, and Han (2007) of domestic tourism, based on the accounts of North Korean defectors living in South Korea, and a recent paper by Li and Ryan (2015) discussing the motivations and satisfaction of Chinese tourists visiting the country.

Surveying North Koreans who had recently arrived in the south, Kim et al. (2007) found domestic tourism in the DPRK mainly to be family-related or politically motivated. Accordingly, the regime was found to use organized domestic trips to reinforce socialist ideologies and enhance the loyalty to the leaders of the country. However, strict travel restrictions for the domestic population and an outdated transport system were found to limit domestic tourist activities significantly (Kim et al., 2007).

Li and Ryan (2015) interviewed 23 Chinese tourists who had recently visited the DPRK in order to understand their travel motivations and trip satisfaction. Motivations for their visit were found to be rooted in curiosity of getting to know the country, but also in needs for relaxation. Specifically to the Chinese market, a sense of nostalgia was found to be a significant pull factor for visiting the country. As such, "*Chinese tourists possess an interest in North Korea as reflecting a scenario that was once, or might have been a reflection of China's present if it were not for the reforms of the "Open Door" policy*" (Li & Ryan, 2015, p. 1327). A majority of Chinese tourists were found to be satisfied with their trip, although complaints were made on freedom of movement and schedule, limited tourist attractions, high prices and a low standard of food.

Recently, more scholars have shown interest in tourism in the DPRK. Buda and Shim (2015a, 2015b) and Connell (2017) have started a discussion on the importance of "dark" motivations to visit the country. Based on interviews with western university graduates, Connell (2017, p. 6) claims that tourists are not primarily seeking out darkness when visiting the country, but wish "to shed as much light as possible on a country and political regime that is very poorly known, but widely perceived in negative terms, and which they believe must have some positive characteristics and sense of normalcy".

As such, he argues that visiting the country consists of interaction, reflection, empathy, compassion, and detachment from "ordinary" Koreans. A trip to the DPRK is labeled as a "serious undertaking, a form of moral political tourism, with some limited

parallels in Belfast, Palestine, and elsewhere" (Connell, 2017, p. 6). In a recent contribution, Buda and Shim (2015a) argue that for tourists an "authentic" DPRK is impossible to find, know, and represent, even if they could escape the pre-planned itineraries. Based on an earlier study by Buda and McIntosh (2013), Buda and Shim (2015a) suggest instead that psychoanalytic concepts such as drive, fantasy, *jouissance,* and voyeurism may lie at the basis of the motivations to visit the DPRK. However, empirical information and proof for these assertions are missing.

In order to shed more light on the overall tourist experience of visiting the DPRK, this paper sets out to phenomenologically describe the essence of the lived travel experience to the country. As such, this research is based on the analysis of the travel narratives of tourists who have recently visited the DPRK, and embedded in the philosophical assumptions of transcendental phenomenology and related methodological guidelines offered by Giorgi (2009).

3. METHODOLOGY

A useful practical guide for researchers basing their method on the philosophical assumptions of transcendental phenomenology is offered by Giorgi (2009). It comprises four steps, namely (1) reading for the sense of the whole, (2) determination of meaning units, (3) transforming a participant's everyday expressions into phenomenologically sensitive expressions, and (4) transforming meaning units into a consistent statement which is descriptive of the structure of a certain phenomenon. The research method adopted in this study largely follows this framework, although phenomenological studies should always allow space for flexibility (van Manen, 1990).

In this study, data was collected in the form of narratives. After consent for participation was given, respondents were contacted with brief guidelines for the narrative. One central question was asked, namely "how did you experience your trip to North Korea?"

and participants were asked to focus on their feelings experienced during the trip and to provide as many related details as possible. In order to give respondents the necessary freedom to recall their experience, no deadline or word limit was given.

Narratives were chosen over traditional interviews following Giorgi (2009, p. 96). Accordingly, written descriptions of experiences are suitable for a transcendental phenomenological analysis and that "situations to be described are selected by the participants themselves and what is sought is simply a description that is as faithful as possible to the actual lived-through event". While these descriptions are written with a normal attitude, it is the researchers' task to analyze them from a phenomenological standpoint. As such, initially a "sense of the whole" needs to be gained. As the researcher does not need to be present when the statements are made (Giorgi, 2009, 2012), he/she must first read through all the data obtained in order to gain a holistic overview.

The criterion for choosing respondents was that they had to have visited the DPRK on a tour within the year preceding the data collection, in order to guarantee a contemporary picture of the investigated phenomenon. As most tours to the country follow a strict and homogeneous pattern, and have to be pre-approved by the government (Shearlaw, 2014), this design achieves the homogeneity of experience necessary for a phenomenological study.

Respondents were chosen through snowball sampling and interaction with the biggest operator offering tours to the DPRK. Members of two tour groups were contacted by email, and out of a total of 25 invitations, eight tourists agreed to participate in the research on the conditions to maintain anonymity. Transcendental phenomenology assumes a "neutral, pure consciousness" and is not concerned with the identity of the perceiver, while Giorgi (2000) suggests to "neutralize" meaning units in order not to be deceived by the identity of the respondent (e.g. gender). The respondents' request of maintaining anonymity has thus been accepted without limiting the research outcomes. Regarding the number of respondents, the sample size in phenomenology is not based on a "how many" question (Englander, 2012), but

rather on a stagnation of information, which was felt to be obtained through the eight narratives. The number of participants which a phenomenological study should include has been a wide point of discussion. While Vagle (2014) recounts a number between one and 14 participants, it is generally accepted that the number of respondents depends on the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation (Dahlberg, Dahlberg, & Nystrom, 2008). In the case of this study, it was preferred to gain a larger amount of data from fewer participants, rather than less data from a higher number of informants. This choice was also aided by the fact that contacting travelers who had recently visited the country on similar tours was problematic due to the informant's privacy concerns and pre-trip agreements of not participating in any related research projects.

The needed amount of data was determined by the saturation of the obtained information, which is a common approach in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2010). The access to only a limited number of people who had travelled recently to the DPRK was thus also not perceived as a major limitation for the validity and reliability of the findings.

All of the eight respondents had visited the DPRK for a minimum of five days, to a maximum of one week. All tours have been booked through the same tour operator based in Beijing, which requires tourists to meet in advance for a "briefing session", explaining the rules for the upcoming trip and provides a Western tour guide in addition to the North Korean one in order to accompany the group during the travel. Destinations visited in the DPRK include Pyongyang, Wonsan, Sinuiju, and Kaesong. The country was always accessed through flying the national Koryo Airlines directly from Beijing to Pyongyang.

In order to assure reliability and validity, the study adopts the common phenomenological technique of "bracketing" (Chan et al., 2013; Pernecky & Jamal, 2010), a term which largely corresponds to Heidegger's notion of *epoch*é. According to Carpenter (2007), bracketing refers to the researcher purposely putting aside his or her personal beliefs and background knowledge about the investigated phenomenon before and during the

investigation. Hamill and Sinclair (2010) suggest that an effective way of bracketing is to delay the review of the literature until the end of the data analysis in order not to bias one's understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. This coincides with the original idea of transcendental phenomenology that "we should not assume any philosophical or scientific theory, and furthermore most avoid deductive reasoning" (Moran, 2000, p. 126).

For this study, the literature review and data analysis were thus carried out by the different authors simultaneously, and only when both were completed were the results of both enquiry related to one another. Although it is now widely recognized that it is not possible to bracket a researcher out of a phenomenological research entirely, this method is believed to limit and minimize subjective influence on the research findings (Chan et al., 2013)

A total of eight narratives were thus collected from tourists who had visited the DPRK. The sample for phenomenological studies is usually not based on representativeness, but rather on the question "Do you have the experience that I am looking for?" (Englander, 2012). In this case, the experience was a tour to the DPRK which had been completed within the year before the start of this study. As respondents were encouraged to provide a narrative without precise restrictions on format and words, the length of the obtained data varied from a minimum of 1389 to a maximum of 3630 words per narrative.

A second step, as proposed by Giorgi (2009), is the determination of meaning units from the text. There are subtle differences between this and the traditional coding used in other forms of qualitative research. Phenomenological meaning units are extracted bearing in mind the specific phenomenon under investigation; namely, tourists' travel experience in the DPRK. Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004) label this process as the extraction of significant statements. In this study, meaning units were not integrated into the structure of the experienced phenomenon at this stage, but only extracted as mere descriptive units, following Giorgi (2009). The extraction of meaning units was carried out using the qualitative research software Nvivo.

The third step requires transforming the raw data into phenomenologically and psychologically sensitive expressions (Giorgi, 2009). Accordingly, the meaning units are changed into second-order descriptions. In these, the researcher usually looks for a certain level of invariance in the units; this is not in order to show complete universality but to identify a level of generalizability which adequately describes an experience (Giorgi, 2009). One should also not focus solely on the written content of the statements previously extracted, as they might additionally reflect implicit background meanings which are not explicitly stated.

Holroyd (2001) suggests that in this phase the researcher looks for interpretive themes, based on the meaning of the experience in relation to the investigated phenomena. In other words, the researcher looks at the extracted descriptions in order to understand what it means for the subject to have expressed him- or herself in this way (Giorgi, 2009). This is believed to correspond to Husserl's notion of the conceptual and linguistic "fixing" of truths (as cited in Moran, 2000), as in this stage meaning units should be transformed from first- to third-person accounts. This enables the researcher to express a statement in a general way and to avoid being empathic with a certain respondent (Giorgi, 2009). In this study, Nvivo was used again to group the meaning units extracted previously into third-person, intersubjective expressions of the lived experience of travel to the DPRK.

The units of meaning were used as the final basis for charting the essence of the tourists' experience, based on Husserl's notion that phenomenology must isolate what is essential to experiences of a certain kind (Moran, 2000). Giorgi (2009) suggests scrutinizing the meaning units for invariation. In other words, we must ask if the structure of an experience would collapse if a certain unit were to be removed. If not, this means that a certain constituent is not essential and thus can be eliminated from the essence. These units should never be presented as the only possible ones, but rather like a measure of central

tendency in statistics (Giorgi, 2009). In other words, phenomenologists must acknowledge that the essence of a phenomenon is always open for expansion in further studies.

This process, although descriptive in nature and based of grouping meaning units, is also based on the intuition of the researcher(s) during the process of producing an in-depth picture of the participants' experience of the phenomena under investigation. In other words, it can be said that the whole of the phenomena is shown as more than the sum of its parts (Sokolowski, 2008). Giorgi (2009) states that it is particularly tricky to determine which experiences are part of the phenomenon, and which belong to the individuals only. Although transcendental phenomenology is mostly descriptive in nature, the researcher thus carries out interpretations in order to understand the investigated phenomena, which can then be related to existing theory (Giorgi, 2012; Wertz, 2011).

In this study, once invariant meaning units were determined following the aforementioned steps, the identified essential themes were named. Naming was undertaken first as separate among the researchers, and later as a group in order to find accordance among the identified terms. This was done by adhering to the precise expressions used in the narratives, re-reading of the full data, scrutiny for synonyms and finally the help of dictionaries and native English speakers. After two separate and one group session, agreement on the terminology for the identified themes has been reached. The findings of this research are therefore presented as follows.

4. FINDINGS

As the researchers had previously visited the DPRK, all preconceived notions about the phenomenon at hand were initially bracketed out through self-awareness, as well as the division between literature review and data analysis. Following Giorgi (2009), meaning units were identified from a psychological perspective, keeping the phenomenon under

investigation in mind. An example of the extraction of meaning units (demarcated by /) for respondent P2's description is presented as follows:

/We got a chance to visit the Pyongyang underground on our third day. We went down the longest and half-dark tunnel before reaching the bottom. / The whole interior of the underground reminded me of the Moscow subway … with similar type of lighting, socialist ceramic arts displayed on the wall, and huge but pretty dim chandeliers. / I had expected that the people in Pyongyang's facial expressions would be grim and indifferent, including the way they interacted with tourists, but surprisingly, many of them were friendly and smiling. I was sitting next to a local North Korean guy on the subway we took to the next station, and even though we could not understand each other, he smiled and nodded back at me when I smiled to him, and I felt the same to people whom I encountered along the street. / Actually, Mr. Lee allowed us to do many things that we did not expect we could do, like getting on the subway carriage to the next station, and we got to walk in the city for half an hour. We were very lucky to have him as a tour guide./

As no length for the descriptions was suggested to the respondents, the horizontalization process also varied across the narratives with different numbers of meaning units identified (from a minimum of 8 to a maximum of 56 per narrative in Nvivo).

Next, the extracted meaning units were transformed into third-person, intersubjective, phenomenologically and psychologically sensitive expressions of the lived experience of travel to North Korea (see Tables 1, 2, 3, 4). This process can be seen as establishing a second order to the original narrative and the meaning units identified. Giorgi (2009) suggests unfolding the sense of the meaning units in columns, using imaginative variation and eliminating phenomenologically insignificant or redundant meaning units. The transformation of meaning units forms the basis for the general essential structure of the experience.

Although there are no universal guidelines for identifying the structure of a phenomenon, clustering invariant units across the data into themes is an effective method (Berdychevsky & Gibson, 2015). Experiences are generally believed to be a mostly subjective phenomenon (Jackson & Marsh, 1996), but there was nonetheless a high level of congruence among the themes identified. Giorgi (2000) states that themes should be rigorously based on empirical evidence from the data, but if a number of respondents don't directly mention features (while the majority does) which the researchers perceive as being essential to the phenomenon under investigation, these should be included. The identified themes, comprising the essence of a lived travel experience to the DPRK, are presented as follows.

4.1. The dimension of trepidation

Trepidation was identified as a prevalent dimension by most of the respondents (n=6). It manifested in several forms of anxiety and fear. Respondents emphasized that in the early stages of the trip, these feelings were related to stories about the DPRK they had previously seen in the media, the strict rules set by the tour operator, the flight safety of the national Koryo Airlines, and the isolation of the country.

Table 1: Examples of meaning units related to trepidation

Meaning unit	Transformation	Phenomenologically sensitive expression
Upon arriving, there was the initial paranoia as to what is right and ok to do in our new surroundings. Figuring out what we could take pictures of, etc.	P1 states that on arrival there was initial paranoia about making mistakes regarding the ruleset	P1 reports initial paranoia about the rules when arriving in DPRK
Looking back upon the trip, I can say I always had in the back of my mind, "what if something happens"? I am here, I have no mobile phone, nobody knows where exactly I am.	P7 states that a feeling of threat persistent during the trip, expressed through the impossibility of outside contact.	P7 reports that isolation was among the factors which caused a feeling of discomfort during the whole trip
I tried to have no preconceptions of what I was to	P1 states that before leaving he tried to have an unbiased view	P1 reports that he felt worried at the beginning of the trip,

experience before arriving. However, listening to the news about nuclear weapons and other humanitarian concerns, I couldn't help but have those ideas in the back of my mind.	of the country but was anyhow worried about humanitarian concerns heard in the news	mainly due to previous knowledge about the country

As such, trepidation in the initial stages of the visit to the DPRK is an essential part of the travel experience. As the trip progresses, the feeling usually diminishes due to an increase in self-regulation. However, the extent of this relaxation differs from participant to participant, and certain triggers are likely to induce doubt, which then transforms into a further increase in trepidation.

4.2. The dimension of self-regulation

Self-regulation is a universal dimension, found in all of the eight participants. This takes various forms throughout the experience. Examples are looking for familiarity in the North Koreans one met (such as tour guides, flight attendants, children, and elderly people) and trying to assume their point of view; associating the travel experience with a personal and often childhood-related past (such as movies seen in childhood or the political past of familiar countries); finding commonalities between the familiar and the North Korean lifestyle (such as singing karaoke) and the facilities (such as the architecture, airport, and airplanes); and consciously dismissing negative feelings (for example, blaming the weather for the grey landscape).

Table 2: Examples of meaning units related to self-regulation

Meaning unit	Transformation	Phenomenologically sensitive expression
Many areas reminded me of the agricultural fields of my country. I saw people were out there planting and cultivating, some bicycles were parking along the fields and I spotted some farmers taking a rest and playing with their kids. This was a really normal and a very nice	P2 states that the country side reminded her of her own country due to the activities of farmers. This triggered a nice feeling	P2 states that the home-like view of the people living in the countryside caused feelings of familiarity and comfort

thing to see.		
But basically when I went to these three cities the tour was visiting, I felt more and more parallel to these experiences I had in eastern Berlin, which haven't been scary.	P3 reports a growing comfort throughout the trip as more and more parallels with his previous travel in Eastern Germany were drawn	P3 reports a growing feeling of comfort on the trip as his past positive experiences in Eastern Germany surfaced more and more
When we reached the city of Kaesong, there was not much electricity in the household and the scenery in front reminded me of the traditional Chinese drama dated back over a hundred years ago which I saw from the TV when I was young.	P4 reports that at arrival Kaesong was dark and reminded of Chinese dramas seen in the past	P4 expresses feelings of familiarity as Keasong reminded of movies seen in childhood

Self-regulation was an omnipresent phenomenon for the lived North Korea travel experience. However, the longevity of this experience and the success in suppressing doubt and trepidation varies among these individuals. Only one subject (P5) managed to keep a feeling of safety intact throughout most of the experience, without seriously succumbing to feelings of doubt or trepidation (although perceived).

4.3. The dimension of doubt

Doubt manifests itself as a central dimension in the narratives of the travelers (n=8). It shows itself in their doubts about the information (historical and political) obtained during the tour (various forms of propaganda, historical "facts" displayed in museums, and comparisons with other countries); observation of staged phenomena (portraits of the Kim family members being lit when tourists passed by, and child performances); restrictions (photography not being allowed in certain situations); interactions with locals (perceived lack of emotion, "brainwashing," and rehearsed speeches); and sudden moments of self-awareness (perceived lack of freedom, a feeling of being deceived, interactions only with a government-chosen elite, and positive feelings being attributed to external factors such as it being summer).

Table 3: Examples of meaning units related to doubt

Meaning unit	Transformation	Phenomenologically sensitive expression
One evening at dinner time, one of our tour guides started to talk about reuniting the two Koreas… It was weird, until then he seemed kind of normal, but this seemed too much like a rehearsed speech. Nobody replied him of course.	P7 states that one evening a North Korean tour guide starting talking about politics, but go no reply from the tourists	P7 reports a feeling of increasing distrust when a tour guide started talking about politics
This is also clearly seen when we visited the children palace, where tons of brilliant and high ability kids were trained to perform to visitors. This is also the second place where I felt abhor.. Considering these kids were not older than 12 years old and were working and training real hard for such purpose, I find this is an example of extremely selfish society where the great talents would be wasted and diminished when they grow up from the limited opportunity being provided by the limited vision and resources of the nation.	P2 reports that the second feeling of discomfort and selfishness during the trip arose when kids in the children palace had to perform for visitors, which was perceived a waste of talent	P2 states that another crucial moment of discomfort was a kid's performance, which was perceived as being selfish and a waste of talent

All of these aspects of experience are ultimately linked to the mental dimension of catharsis as another part of the North Korea travel experience phenomenon.

4.4. The dimension of catharsis

In addition to trepidation, self-regulation and doubt, the dimension of catharsis was present in all of the respondents' narratives (n=8). Usually described as being an overwhelming feeling, catharsis is typically triggered by certain external situations such as physical and symbolic forms of leaving the DPRK, including crossing the river to China, seeing China across the border, looking back from China to the DPRK after leaving the country, receiving the

Chinese immigration stamp on one's passport, looking at tourism promotions for the DPRK, seeing media reports about the DPRK, and saying goodbye to the North Korean tour guides.

Table 4: Examples of meaning units related to catharsis

Meaning unit	Transformation	Phenomenologically sensitive expression
At the bottom line one thing was remaining, and it was suddenly lifted when I returned to China, that I felt more freedom coming back to China than in North Korea.	P6 states that he felt a sudden relief and feeling of freedom when crossing to China from North Korea	P6 reports a sudden feeling of relief and freedom when leaving North Korea
After we crossed the land border and into China though the reality of what I just experienced in North Korea sunk in. I felt a huge sense of freedom once I entered back in China and spent a few days in Dandong which overlooked Sinuijiu.	P1 states that when crossing back to China the experience sunk in and was followed by a feeling of freedom	P1 reports a feeling of freedom and reflection on the past experience when leaving the country
It was so surreal to be on the other side and looking at the very place I just visited. To be so close but to be so far apart in many senses was a very interesting yet disturbing feeling.	P3 states that looking back to North Korea the trip seemed surreal and the reflection was interesting and disturbing	P3 reports a feeling of interest and disturbance when reflecting on the geographical proximity but situational differences between North Korea and China

Thus, catharsis was found to be part of the North Korea travel experience and is usually experienced before, during, or shortly after leaving the country. Although the phenomenon varies across respondents, catharsis is commonly seen as a final conclusion to the previous dimensions of trepidation, self-regulation, and doubt.

5. DISCUSSION

The essence of a lived experience can be presented in various ways. Traditionally, an essence statement takes a written form (Giorgi, 2009). However, von Knorring-Giorgi (1998, as cited in Giorgi, 2009) highlights that in addition, diagrammatic representations of the essence can aid understanding of the roles played by different dimensions throughout the

experience. As such, this study offers both an essence statement and a visual representation of the lived experience (see Figure 1) of travelling to the DPRK:

The essence of the lived experience of travelling to the DPRK constitutes itself as an ongoing feeling of trepidation; being diminished and enhanced by self-regulation and doubt respectively. Trepidation is typically triggered by fear, insecurity, a feeling of isolation, safety concerns, or anxiety. For most tourists, trepidation is present at different levels throughout the whole experience. Self-regulation typically occurs in situations when external triggers are used to project a feeling of familiarity, such as affective reflection, familiarization, minimization, and nostalgia. The related feeling of comfort usually persists until a certain level of doubt appears. Typical situations include cognitive reflection, self-awareness, disempowerment, and a feeling of being deceived. The ongoing feeling of trepidation, mediated by self-regulation and doubt, disappears in a sudden sensation of catharsis, usually in the final stages of the experience. This catharsis triggers intense feelings; typically self-reflection, relief, a sense of freedom, safety, surrealism, happiness, suspicion, and disturbance.
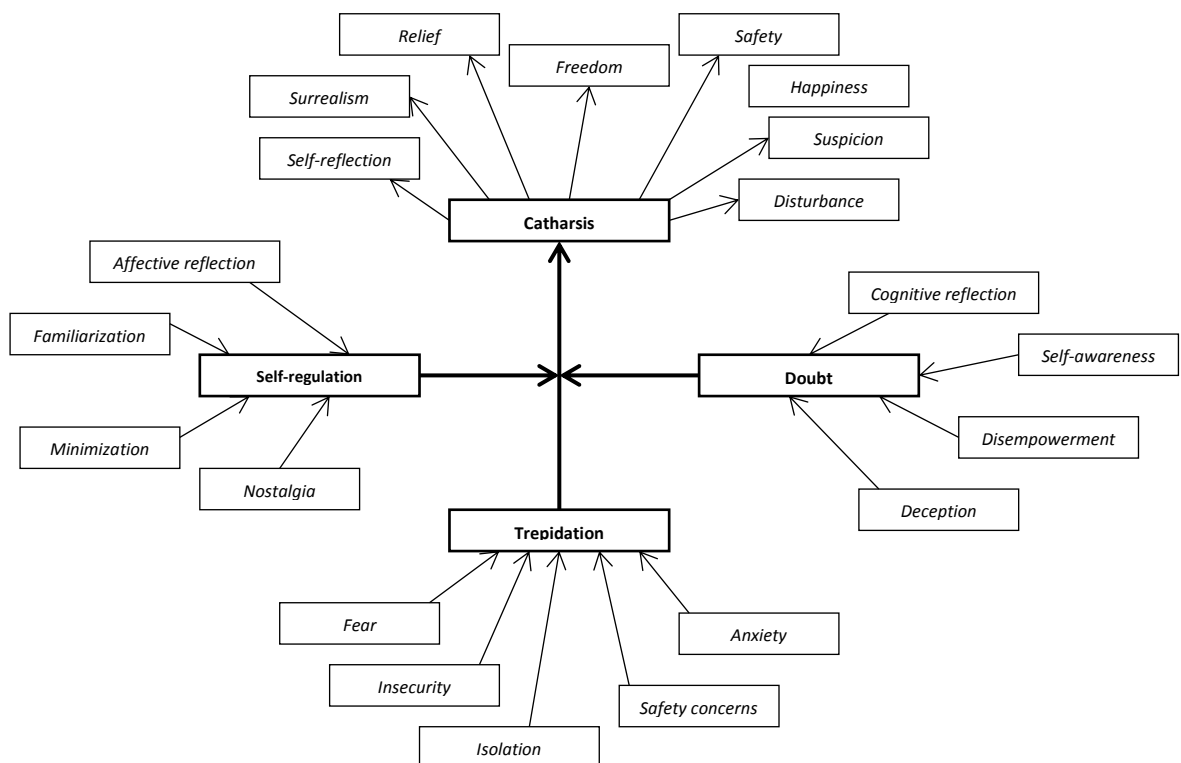
Figure 1: Visual representation of the essence of the North Korea travel experience

The visual representation of the essence statement (Figure 1) aids furthermore to highlight the interplay among the identified dimensions. Trepidation is present from the beginning of the experience and continues up to the final catharsis, represented by an arrow ($\rightarrow$). Two arrows lead from the dimensions of self-regulation and doubt onto the experiential journey from trepidation to catharsis, symbolizing their continuous presence throughout the lived experience. The four major dimensions are formed by several experiential manifestations found throughout the narratives, highlighted through smaller arrows connecting them.

In order to contextualize the findings of a descriptive phenomenological study and to use them for guiding practice and policies, they should be related to a relevant research field and theoretical issues (Wertz, 2011). The essence of the lived experience of travelling to the DPRK has been found to consist of four dimensions, namely trepidation, self-regulation, doubt, and catharsis. While the essential structure of the experience helps to unify the overall data, it is helpful to return to the raw data and make better sense of the variations contained within. Giorgi (2009, p.202) accordingly states that "the structure cannot present all of the data any more than a mean can present all of the numbers upon which it is based." Giorgi (2008) also highlights that the essence of a phenomenon is a merely philosophical matter, as long as the researcher does not investigate it through the lens of the relevant study field, in this case tourism. As such, each of the intersubjective essential dimensions identified will be looked at through a tourism lens in order to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

5.1. "…somehow scared how everything will develop": Trepidation

Buda (2015, p. 43) suggests that travelling to what is perceived as a dangerous place does not allude to seeking one's own death, but to a *confrontation* with one's own fear. Indeed, trepidation was found to be an essential of the phenomenon under investigation, present in one form or the other during different temporal phases of the experience.

Although respondents reported that trepidation generally diminished during the trip, mainly due to an increase in self-regulation, most found that their doubts returned and their negative feelings resurfaced. While trepidation in the initial stage of the experience was found to be common, not every subject experienced it on the same level as the phenomenon progressed. Typically, anxiety and fear returned when doubt overtook the feelings of comfort, typically induced by self-regulation.

The respondents mentioned various triggers for this. P2 explains trepidation was induced by nightfall, so that once "*darkness came, the positive and friendly feelings of the DPRK had faded away*." Also, "*on our last day in the DPRK, I had noticed the shift of my mood throughout the trip, from bright, excited, curious, and joyful on the first day turning to tired, slightly grim, stressed and happy to leave on the last day. If I had to compare my mood with colors - I arrived to DPRK with bright yellow and left with grayish blue.*

On the other hand, P1 highlights that, especially in the early stages of the experience, there was a certain degree of self-awareness that trepidation might have been induced by external forces. "*I tried to have no preconceptions of what I was to experience... However, listening to the news about nuclear weapons and other humanitarian concerns, I couldn't help but have those ideas in the back of my mind.*" This intersubjective dimension of trepidation manifested itself differently in the subjects' lived experience. Ranging from anxiety, insecurity and concerns about safety, respondents mentioned Kafkaesque feelings of isolation and, in its strongest form, fear.

5.2. "There were mixed feelings…": Self-regulation and Doubt

Self-regulation and doubt are found to be interplaying dimensions of the North Korea travel experience. Self-regulation manifested itself in subjective feelings of affective reflection, familiarization, minimization, and nostalgia. P3 reflected affectively on her background in Thailand when driving through the countryside: *"The road trip out of Pyongyang took us to the town called Kaesong city, which is regarded as an industrial area. Views along the road were pleasant although on some parts we encountered a strong bumpy ride. Many areas reminded me of the agricultural fields of my country. I saw people were out there planting and cultivating, some bicycles were parked along the fields, and I spotted some farmers taking a rest and playing with their kids. This was a really normal and a very nice thing to see ...*

Other times, North Korean locals were looked at with positive feelings of familiarity: *After we had finished all the chaotic processes inside the terminal, we got to meet our tour guides (Mr. Lee and Miss Kim) for the first time. They are the local DPRK residents. Their English was fluent and impressive. They were waiting to greet us at the open space to the car park. Both of them were very friendly and welcoming which helped ease out the tension I felt from my experience in the airport terminal.*

In general, self-regulation is a common tool for individuals to acquire the motivation to carry out ongoing practices by conserving their persistence, behavioral quality, and wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In a tourism context, Ellis, Jamal, and Jiang (2015, p.5) categorize self-regulation as a "slow thinking period" or a moment of reflection, evaluation, and self-consciousness experienced by the tourist. Moments of reflection are usually triggered when an experience is "situated," meaning it is co-created by "experience facilitators, such as tour guides, interpreters, curators, hospitality service providers, theme park operators" and others (Ellis et al., 2015, p. 2). The interaction among tourists and local people is widely acknowledged as a core feature of a tourist experience, allowing tourists to step outside of their "bubble" and be immersed in the real life of a destination (Harrison,

2003). In the case of the tourism to the DPRK, access to the local population is highly restricted and direct interaction outside the tour groups is rare (Connell, 2017). Interaction among tourists was not frequently mentioned by the respondents, possibly due to the limited time off sightseeing. The ongoing feelings of trepidation might also limit inter-group discussions of the lived experience while on tour.

The controlled nature of North Korean tours and the high pace of the strict itinerary generally favor "fast thinking" states, such as reactions which are rapid, automatic, frequent, emotional, stereotypical, and subconscious (Kahneman, 2011). However, slower moments allowed for reflection.

For example, watching from a bus window, P3 told us somewhat nostalgically that, *"I felt more and more parallels to these experiences I had in eastern Berlin, which weren't scary. So basically I was reminded about my childhood, and was reminded what to do and what not to do. Based on that I had a very comfortable feeling, because I didn't feel unsafe or threatened at all."* It is also in these instances where feelings of self-regulation are typically negotiated with feelings of doubt in the phenomenon under investigation.

Feelings of doubt were found to be in a constant power struggle with self-regulation during the experienced phenomenon. Respondents' manifestation of doubt varied subjectively. Cognitive reflection on past knowledge about the DPRK was typically expressed, on other occasions people got self-aware about their whereabouts, felt disempowered by the nature of the trip undertaken or simply deceived by the North Korean tour guides.

The outcome of this inner conflict varied subjectively among the respondents. After seeing a child performance in Pyongyang, P1 narrated that "*I could see how proud those kids were on the stage, but I had no doubt this is not a normal and a healthy way for kids to be raised. The authorities (ranging from teachers, school principals, or even government rulers) have trained each of these kids into some type of performer, and made them believe this is a*

privileged choice, that what they are doing is very important and can bring pride to themselves, their family, and to the nation … a mission for kids to achieve."

When being asked to stop taking pictures, P4 remembers a moment of awareness about the controlled nature of the trip "*Once we visited a university and I saw some workers doing repair work to a building in the campus. They all wore very poor clothes and were very thin. I took out my camera to take photos. The tour guide stopped me. She asked me not to take photos of these workers. She was very polite, but it was a signal that they only wanted us to record the good side of North Korea.*" P1 summed up the inner struggle between doubt and self-regulation as part of the experience by saying that "*there were mixed feelings as to the information that was given to us, which at times seemed quite absurd and impossible, but at the time I took it all in and tried to see it from their perspective.*"

5.3. *"… the reality of what I experienced in North Korea sunk in": Catharsis*

Catharsis has been seen since Aristotelian times as a strong emotional and psychological relief after witnessing a tragic event which facilitates change in an individual's relationships and purpose in life (Zahra & McIntosh, 2007). Blom (2000) affirms, based on concepts developed by Breuer and Freud, that catharsis induces a state of "inner purification" experienced by a subject. In the context of unusual experiences in tourism, Long and Palmer (2007) highlight that "we undergo a form of artificial purification or catharsis by allowing ourselves to approach the unknown and the frightening, without having to commit ourselves in any deeper sense since the real personal proximity to the "attraction" is relatively weak. At the same time, we satisfy our curiosity that has not infrequently been created by the media. (p. 154)"

In the case of the North Korean travel experience, catharsis manifests itself in subjective manifestations of self-reflection, surrealism, relief, freedom, safety, happiness, suspicion, and disturbance. These sudden moments of perceived inner purification are not

uncommon when negative feelings are present throughout an experience (Buda, 2015; Blom, 2000; Raine, 2013), in this case catharsis was usually expressed to terminate the ongoing feelings of trepidation.

As part of the phenomenon under investigation, catharsis was found to occur when the tourist is finally able to objectively reflect on what has been experienced, which is common also for other experiences (Ellis et al., 2015). As a consequence, the moment of leaving the country physically is typically found to be a major trigger for a cathartic moment. P3 explicitly stated that "*my tension lifted as soon as I got my stamp from the Chinese immigration officer into my passport*" and that "*it suddenly lifted when I returned to China.*" P1 also clearly remembered the moment of leaving the country, when "*I felt a huge sense of freedom once I entered China again and spent a few days in Dandong which overlooked Sinuiju.*" This does not come as a major surprise given that the aforementioned rapid pace of the tours to the DPRK, as well as the strict surveillance of the tour guides, promoting "fast-thinking" states of experience (Ellis et al., 2015).

Catharsis has here taken different forms for each of the respondents, but was commonly concerned with an intense feeling of relief and freedom, a feeling of having been manipulated by the media before the trip and by North Korean propaganda during it, a feeling of surrealism, a positive feeling of fulfillment, doubts about whether or not the trip was ethical, and a feeling of having learned something valuable.

For example, P2 said that when leaving the country, "*I had more appreciation of the human values attached to my born rights and duties, although in some aspects, my country still shares some similarities with the DPRK (e.g. the emphasis that the great leaders are the main essence of the country's success rather than its duty to provide opportunity to citizens to think and act in accord to their rights and abilities) … I find that as a tourist, there are clearly two stages that the DPRK wants us to see, the front stage and the back stage, and these two are clearly distinguished from each other. The front stage is those being controlled*

and selected to project to tourists ... On the other hand, the back stage is the real life of many people out there in the places where many revelations are prohibited and forbidden.

On the other hand, P5 reflected on the experience regarding the local people: *"From the outside you can feel a sense of 'brainwashing' as you would consider it from the North Korean government. However, that idea didn't let me judge the North Korean people as a whole."* Similarly, P1 stated that *"actually, I was not thinking about this before going on this trip, and I felt quite influenced by the media, talking to other people, and my own imagination"* and that finally, *"it was so surreal to be on the other side and looking at the very place I had just visited. To be so close but to be so far apart in many senses was a very interesting yet disturbing feeling."*

6. CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper is to phenomenologically describe the essence of the lived experience of travelling to the DPRK through collecting and analyzing narratives from tourists who had recently visited the country. A process of phenomenological reduction based on Giorgi (2009) has resulted in identifying four essential dimensions of the North Korea travel experience, namely trepidation, self-regulation, doubt, and catharsis. Finally, these intersubjective dimensions have been discussed in a tourism context through highlighting some of their subjective manifestations offered by the respondents of this study.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this study. First of all, descriptive phenomenology, which has been widely related to research in other disciplines such as psychology and nursing (Giorgi, 2008) has shown to be a valuable asset to investigate lived experiences in a tourism context. Jamal and Pernecky (2010) had highlighted earlier that transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenology have often been misunderstood and poorly integrated into the field of tourism research – which in part is caused by a misunderstanding of the philosophical foundations of both concepts. In particular, through investigating the

travel experience through a phenomenological lens, this study hopes to open the doors for follow-up studies based on these philosophical guidelines.

Next, the lived North Korea travel experience's essence was found to be heavily related to feelings of trepidation, which culminate in a final catharsis through various individual manifestations. Although this research does not investigate travel motivations and behavioral outcomes of the experience, which are part of the overall tourist experience concept (Ryan, 2010), there are possible conclusions to be drawn from the described essence of the phenomenon. First of all, as suggested by Buda (2015), confrontation with what is feared and perceived as dangerous could be a possible catalyst for tourists to visit the DPRK. The almost spiritual feelings of catharsis which concludes the experience, has also been related to approaching what we don't know and fear (Le Breton, 2000; Long & Palmer, 2007 Saville, 2008). On the same line, Ryan and Li (2015) had earlier looked at travel motivations of the Chinese inbound market, stating that curiosity for visiting the country was a main motivator for a visit. However, the findings showed that this was often related to nostalgia about the past of China, rather than a confrontation with what is perceived as dangerous. Considering China's political history, these findings are believed to be highly market-specific (Ryan & Li, 2015). In light of this, future studies should investigate the travel motivations of visiting North Korea, which have been highly debated but not empirically validated in recent literature (Buda & Shim, 2015a; b; Connell, 2017).

The feeling of catharsis was found to be an essential part of the experience, but its manifestation has varied largely across respondents. In the context of almost "spiritual" experiences, Willson et al. (2013) had suggested earlier that one should investigate the relevant background of the tourist in order to contextualize their experience into individual lives. Although this was not the focus of this study, future research should investigate manifestations of catharsis in tourism across different cultural backgrounds, especially related to the case of the DPRK.

A power struggle between self-regulation and doubt in order to deal with the aforementioned trepidation has surfaced as an essential feature of the experience. Ellis et al. (2015) had highlighted the importance of "slow" and "fast thinking" tourist states when reflecting on the lived experience. Upcoming research could possibly focus on temporal sequences of a lived trip experiences and phenomenologically investigate their underlying psychological processes and their longevity as part of the experience.

It is fundamental to mention that the essence of the lived travel experience to the DPRK which has been described does by no means suggest that the overall experience of visiting the country is inherently negative. On the contrary, essences offer only the most iconic images of an experience and are incomplete by nature (van Manen, 2010). Several of the respondents in this study have narrated positive feelings, such as "excitement", "sense of exploration", and "bonding with the other members of the tour group". Nonetheless, the process of phenomenological reduction has not found these feature to be an essential part of the experience. It is suggested that future studies look at further features of the travel and also the overall North Korea tourist experience.

As a result, this study also acknowledges some limitations. First, the North Korea tourist experience was found to culminate in state of catharsis through regaining the freedom to judge, usually triggered by physical freedom from the constraints of the tour. The experience is found to be embedded in a state of temporary renunciation of personal freedom under the surveillance of a totalitarian regime, juggling feelings of trepidation, self-regulation and doubt, until culmination in catharsis. Due to the restricted nature of this study in terms of destination, future studies can investigate the role of prescriptive, totalitarian tourism for framing tourist experiences in general. This concept needs further investigation, especially in terms of its relationship with dark, danger-zone, extreme, bizarre, and learning/moral/political tourism.

In terms of methodology, transcendental phenomenology and the chosen definition for "trip experience" don't take the contextual factors commonly included in the tourist experience into account. Through reducing a lived experience to its essential features, only a temporary confined, lived experience is investigated. Also, transcendental phenomenology distinguishes between what belongs to the phenomenon and what belongs to the person perceiving it (Giorgi, 2009), whereas the latter has not been the focus of this research. However, identity and the tourism experience are believed to be intrinsically related (e.g. Desforges, 2000; Willson et al., 2013). As such, only part of the overall travel experience can be revealed through transcendental phenomenology.

Also, the Husserlian notion of bracketing is frequently criticized for not being a reliable method for avoiding personal bias in data analysis (Vagle, 2014). Division of literature review and data analysis was undertaken in this study and rigorous focus on the data was maintained throughout the research process as suggested by Giorgi (2009). However, future studies could include a larger number of researchers with no relations to the study in the data analysis to minimize the limitations of bracketing.

Next, the limited number of respondents has to be taken into account, although transcendental phenomenology asks for quality and not quantity of data. Tour operators in collaboration with North Korean authorities have been reported by the respondents to discourage tourists from engaging in research projects about their trip and related publications. Therefore, the request of respondents for privacy has been respected. As a possible consequence of these restrictions, only a small percentage of the contacted tourists declared themselves willing to participate in the research project.

Finally, the growing interest in the DPRK needs more understanding in order to accurately manage, promote, and guarantee safe trips for the increasing number of visitors. This paper, based on a sample of eight international tourists visiting the DPRK offers only a limited insight in regard, with a vast area left to explore. However, the ongoing feeling of

trepidation found as an essential part of the experience, as well as the constant struggle between self-regulation and doubt, can help the main tour operators organizing tours to the country to promote safety and security to their (potential) customers.

In general, it is hoped that the contribution made to the understanding of the experiential processes underlying a visit to the DPRK will help these tour operators, marketers, and promoters to effectively and safely manage tourism to the country. Negative feelings, such as safety concerns, are furthermore believed to compromise tourism activities and tourism in general (Bianchi, 2006; Korstanje, 2011). It is recommended for related tour operators to attempt a mitigation of negative emotions experienced during the trip, which can guarantee the tourists' mental well-being while travelling in the DPRK. Practically speaking, this can be done through giving a pre-trip introduction of the experience that the tourists' are going to face while travelling in the country. Tour operators should also be concerned with mitigating feelings of trepidation and doubt while in the DPRK, possibly through communication between tourists and their private tour guide(s).

This research also opens the door for studies concerning the myths underlying the tourist experience of certain phenomena. The border area between the DPRK and ROK (Panmunjom) can in fact be visited on tours from both countries. Future research can compare the tourist experiences of this destination as lived by visitors from North Korean and South Korean led tour groups and shed light on the importance of the mythology contextualizing such visits.

Further studies should thus aim at overcoming the limitations of the transcendental phenomenological approach by studying the relationship between the experience and the experiencing subject. Transcendental phenomenology does not study the experiencing subject or the experienced object directly, but focuses on the experiential relationship between the two (Vagle, 2014). As such, demographic features such as cultural backgrounds, genders, or generational differences could be taken into account. An approach based on the hermeneutic

phenomenological tradition could be a possible tool for a deeper understanding of the given experience.

REFERENCES

Berdychevsky, L., & Gibson, H. J. (2015). Phenomenology of young women's sexual risk-taking in tourism. *Tourism Management, 46*, 299-310.

Bianchi, R. (2006). Tourism and the globalisation of fear: Analysing the politics of risk and (in) security in global travel. *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, *7*(1), 64-74.Blom, T. (2000). Morbid tourism: A postmodern market niche with an example from Althorp. *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift – Norwegian Journal of Geography, 54*(1), 29-36.

Buda, D. M. (2015). The death drive in tourism studies. *Annals of Tourism Research, 50*, 39-51.

Buda, D. M., & Shim, D. (2015a). 'Real' and 'normal' North Korea: On the politics of shining light on the darkness. Reply to: 'Shining light on the darkness. Placing tourists within North Korean tourism. *Current Issues in Tourism,* (ahead-of-print), 1-3.

Buda, D. M., & Shim, D. (2015b). Desiring the dark: 'A taste for the unusual' in North Korean tourism? *Current Issues in Tourism, 18*(1), 1-6.

Carpenter, D. R. (2007). Phenomenology as method. In H. J. Streubert & D. R. Carpenter (Eds.), *Qualitative research in nursing: Advancing the humanistic imperative* (pp. 75-99). Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott.

Cho, M. (2007). A re-examination of tourism and peace: The case of the Mt. Gumgang tourism development on the Korean Peninsula. *Tourism Management, 28*(2), 556-569.

Choi, K., Lee, T. J., & Kim, H. K. (2015). Strategic marketing development of hospitals participating in medical tourism: A case of South Korea. *Tourism Analysis, 20*(1), 129-136.

Codrington, S. (2013). Case study of a national tourist industry. In S. Codrington (Ed.), *Planet geography* (7th ed., pp. 412-421). Sydney, Australia: Solid Star Press.

Connell, J. (2017) Shining light on the darkness. Placing tourists within North Korean tourism. Comment on: Desiring the dark: 'A taste for the unusual' in North Korean tourism?, *Current Issues in Tourism, 20*(4), 356-362,

Cumings, B. (2013). *North Korea: Another country*. New York, NY: The New Press.

Curtin, S. (2006). Swimming with dolphins: A phenomenological exploration of tourist recollections. *International Journal of Tourism Research, 8*(4), 301-315.

Dahlberg, K. (2006). 'The Individual in the World-The World in the Individual': Towards a Human Science Phenomenology that Includes the Social World. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, *6*(sup1), 1-9.

Desforges, L. (2000). Traveling the world: Identity and travel biography. *Annals of Tourism Research*, *27*(4), 926-945.

Dowling, M. (2007). From Husserl to van Manen: A review of different phenomenological approaches. *International Journal of Nursing Studies, 44*(1), 131-142.

Duranti, A. (2010). Husserl, intersubjectivity and anthropology. *Anthropological Theory*, *10*(1-2), 16-35.

Ellis, G. D., Jamal, T., & Jiang, J. (2015, June 5). Fast-thinking and slow-thinking: A process approach to understand situated tourist experiences. In *Tourism and Travel Research Association: Advancing Tourism Research Globally* (Paper 36).

Englander, M. (2012). The interview: Data collection in descriptive phenomenological human scientific research. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 43*(1), 13-35.

Giorgi, A. (2000). The similarities and differences between descriptive and interpretative methods in scientific phenomenological psychology. In B. Gupta (Ed.), *The empirical and the transcendental: A fusion of horizons* (pp. 61-75). New York, NY: Rowan & Littlefield.

Giorgi, A. (2008). Difficulties encountered in the application of the phenomenological method in the social sciences. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, *8*(1).

Giorgi, A. (2009). *The descriptive phenomenological method in psychology: A modified Husserlian approach*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.

Giorgi, A. (2012). The descriptive phenomenological psychological method. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 43*(1), 3-12.

Hall, D. R. (1990). Stalinism and tourism: A study of Albania and North Korea. *Annals of Tourism Research, 17*(1), 36-54.

Hamill, C., & Sinclair, H. A. (2010). Bracketing–practical considerations in Husserlian phenomenological research. *Nurse Researcher, 17*(2), 16-24.

Harrison, J. D. (2003). *Being a tourist: Finding meaning in pleasure travel*. uBC Press.Hayllar, B., & Griffin, T. (2005). The precinct experience: A phenomenological approach. *Tourism Management, 26*(4), 517-528.

Henderson, J. C. (2002). Tourism and politics in the Korean peninsula. *Journal of Tourism Studies, 13*(2), 16-27.

Holroyd, C. (2001). Phenomenological research method, design and procedure: A phenomenological investigation of the phenomenon of being-in-community as experienced by two individuals who have participated in a community building workshop. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology, 1*(1), 1-10.

Isaac, R. K. (2010). Alternative tourism: New forms of tourism in Bethlehem for the Palestinian tourism industry. *Current Issues in Tourism, 13*(1), 21-36.

Jackson, S. A., & Marsh, H. W. (1996). Development and validation of a scale to measure optimal experience: The Flow State Scale. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 18*, 17-35.

Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Kang, E. J., Scott, N., Lee, T. J., & Ballantyne, R. (2012). Benefits of visiting a 'dark tourism' site: The case of the Jeju April 3rd Peace Park, Korea. *Tourism Management, 33*(2), 257-265.

Kim, S. S., Kim, M., Agrusa, J., & Lee, A. (2012). Does a food-themed TV drama affect perceptions of national image and intention to visit a country? An empirical study of Korea TV drama. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing, 29*(4), 313-326.

Kim, S. S., & Prideaux, B. (2003). Tourism, peace, politics and ideology: Impacts of the Mt. Gumgang tour project in the Korean Peninsula. *Tourism Management, 24*(6), 675-685.

Kim, S. S., & Prideaux, B. (2006). An investigation of the relationship between South Korean domestic public opinion, tourism development in North Korea and a role for tourism in promoting peace on the Korean peninsula. *Tourism Management, 27*(1), 124-137.

Kim, S. S., Prideaux, B., & Prideaux, J. (2007). Using tourism to promote peace on the Korean Peninsula. *Annals of Tourism Research, 34*(2), 291-309.

Kim, S. S., Timothy, D. J., & Han, H. C. (2007). Tourism and political ideologies: A case of tourism in North Korea. *Tourism Management, 28*(4), 1031-1043.

Kim, Y. K., & Crompton, J. L. (1990). Role of tourism in unifying the two Koreas. *Annals of Tourism Research, 17*(3), 353-366.

Kirillova, K., Lehto, X. Y., & Cai, L. (2016). Existential Authenticity and Anxiety as Outcomes: The Tourist in the Experience Economy. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, *19*(1), 13-26.

Korstanje, M. E. (2011). The fear of traveling: a new perspective for tourism and hospitality. *Anatolia*, *22*(2), 222-233.Langdridge, D. (2007). *Phenomenological psychology: Theory, research and method*. Harlow, Canada: Pearson Education.

Le Breton, D. (2000). Playing symbolically with death in extreme sports. *Body & Society, 6*(1), 1-11.

Lee, C. K., Bendle, L. J., Yoon, Y.-S., & Kim, M.-J. (2012). Thanatourism or peace tourism: Perceived value at a North Korean resort from an indigenous perspective. *International Journal of Tourism Research, 14*(1), 71-90.

Li, F., & Ryan, C. (2015). Chinese tourists' motivations and satisfaction of visiting North Korea. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research,* (ahead-of-print), 1-19.

Li, Y. (2000). Geographical consciousness and tourism experience. *Annals of Tourism Research, 27*(4), 863-883.

Long, P., & Palmer, N. J. (2007). *Royal tourism: Excursions around monarchy*. Clevedon, UK: Channel View Publications.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964). *The primacy of perception*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Moerer-Urdahl, T., & Creswell, J. W. (2004). Using transcendental phenomenology to explore the "ripple effect" in a leadership mentoring program. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *3*(2), 19-35.

Moran, D. (2000). *Introduction to phenomenology*. London, UK: Routledge.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Petrescu, A. (2013). The Transcendental-Phenomenological Perspective on Intersubjectivity: Various Aspects. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *71*, 14-20.

Pernecky, T. (2006). Co-creating with the universe: A phenomenological study of New Age tourists. *Tourism, 54*(2), 127-143.

Pernecky, T., & Jamal, T. (2010). (Hermeneutic) phenomenology in tourism studies. *Annals of Tourism Research, 37*(4), 1055-1075.

Raine, R. (2013). A dark tourist spectrum. *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, *7*(3), 242-256.

Reilly, J. (2014a). China's market influence in North Korea. *Asian Survey, 54*(5), 894-917.

Reilly, J. (2014b). China's economic engagement in North Korea. *The China Quarterly, 220*, 915-935.

Ryan, C. (1997). *The tourist experience: A new introduction*. London, UK: Cassell.

Ryan, C. (2010). Ways of Conceptualizing the Tourist Experience A Review of Literature. *Tourism Recreation Research*, *35*(1), 37-46.

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, *55*(1), 68.

Shearlaw, M. (2014, June 29). North Korea launches tourist website – although border remains closed. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/02/-sp-north-korea-launches-tourist-website-border-remains-closed

Shin, Y. (2010). How stable is peace linked with tourism? The case of Mt Geumgang tourism development project on the Korean Peninsula. In O. Moufakkir & I. Kelly (Eds.), *Tourism, progress and peace* (pp. 199-211). Wallingford, UK: CABI.

Sokolowski, R. (2008). *Phenomenology of the human person*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Stewart, D. (1990). *Exploring phenomenology: A guide to the field and literature*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.

Stewart, D., & Mickunas, A. (1974) *Exploring phenomenology*. Chicago, IL: American Library Association.

Tung, V. W. S., & Ritchie, J. B. (2011). Exploring the essence of memorable tourism experiences. Annals of Tourism Research, 38(4), 1367-1386.

Vagle, M. D. (2014). Crafting phenomenological research. London: Routledge.van Manen, M. (2002). *Writing in the dark: Phenomenological studies in interpretive inquiry*. London, Ontario, Canada: The Althouse Press.

van Manen, M. (2010). The eideic reduction: edios. *Phenomenology Online*. Retrieved from http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/methodology/reductio/eidetic-reduction/

Wertz, F. J. (2011). A phenomenological psychological approach to trauma and resilience. In F. J. Wertz, K. Charmaz, L. M. McMullen, R. Josselson, R. Anderson, & E. McSpadden (eds.), *Five ways of doing qualitative analysis* (pp. 124-164), Guildford, UK: The Guildford Press.

Willson, G. B., McIntosh, A. J., & Zahra, A. L. (2013). Tourism and spirituality: A phenomenological analysis. *Annals of Tourism Research, 42*, 150-168.

Winsor, M. (2015. September). Surfing in North Korea? Kim-Jong-Un launches tour to boost tourism, rebrand county's image. *International Business Times*. Retrieved from http://www.ibtimes.com/surfing-north-korea-kim-jong-un-launches-tour-boost-tourism-rebrand-countys-image-2095162

Yu, J. Y., & Ko, T. G. (2012). A cross-cultural study of perceptions of medical tourism among Chinese, Japanese and Korean tourists in Korea. *Tourism Management, 33*(1), 80-88.

Zahra, A., & McIntosh, A. J. (2007). Volunteer tourism: Evidence of cathartic tourist experiences. *Tourism Recreation Research, 32*(1), 115-119.

Zuo, B., Huang, S. S., & Liu, L. (2015). Tourism as an agent of political socialisation. *International Journal of Tourism Research,* (ahead-of-print), 1-10.