

Local perspectives on preferable tourism futures: insights from Finland and Japan

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Abstract

Purpose – Sustainable tourism development has been a key strategy for future destination development, yet much of the research predominantly focuses on tourists' needs, often overlooking host community perspectives. Following the "local turn," this study aims to address this gap by investigating preferable tourism futures in lesser-known and rural destinations from the host's viewpoint.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a qualitative approach, a series of Lego Serious Play workshops was conducted in August 2024 in Finland and in May 2024 in Japan with local participants ($n = 36$) to envision their preferable tourism futures in 2034.

Findings – This study highlights the importance of balancing preservation and innovation to achieve sustainable tourism development from the bottom-up. In particular, findings demonstrate the value of engaging local communities in shaping tourism strategies, revealing nuanced preferences across cultures. Finnish participants emphasized gradual improvements, community well-being and accessibility, reflecting European sustainability values. Conversely, Japanese participants prioritized heritage preservation and resilience, shaped by environmental and sociocultural challenges unique to the region.

Originality/value – These comparative insights illustrate that community-driven approaches to tourism development can foster sustainable and equitable insights on preferable tourism futures. This study offers practical implications for policymakers and practitioners, emphasizing the need to integrate local perspectives into tourism planning to achieve buy-in through balanced and future-ready outcomes, particularly to enhance the resilience of lesser-known destinations amidst global uncertainties.

Keywords Preferable futures, LEGO serious play, LSP, Community-based development, Climate change, Local turn, Localhood

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1. Introduction

Post-modernist ways of conceptualizing and operationalizing tourism in industrialized societies are undergoing significant transformations. Driven by the warming climate and its first- and second-order effects, tourism scholars have documented changes in consumer awareness, consumption patterns and human mobility related to climate change and so-called climate justice, exemplified by the harm caused by extreme weather events to tourism infrastructure and destination image (Becken, 2019). In many destinations, overtourism has also emerged as a pressing concern, leading to the degradation of natural and cultural resources, displacement of local residents and a decline in visitor experience quality (Dodds and Butler, 2019). Conversely, remote or peripheral areas seeking revitalization view tourism as a potential economic lifeline, though such efforts are often constrained by challenges in attracting and sustaining visitors without jeopardizing ecological and cultural sustainability (Sharpley, 2020). Simultaneously, climate justice has emerged as a critical issue, shedding light on the disproportionate impacts of climate change on vulnerable communities and emphasizing the need for equitable tourism practices (Gössling et al., 2023).

Amid these challenges, a shift in tourism paradigms seems imperative. Much of the existing research on tourism futures has been centered on the consumer or tourist perspectives (Tussyadiah and Miller, 2020), despite a rich body of literature on community-based tourism development (Dangi and Jamal, 2016), “localhood” (Jungersted, 2023) or the “local turn” (Higgins-Desbiolles and Bigby, 2024), particularly as a driver of successful sustainable tourism development at the local level (Sherlock, 2001; Zhang *et al.*, 2006; Dłużewska, 2019). Specifically, much of the focus has been on mitigating the adverse effects of overtourism through community-led strategies (Goodwin, 2017; Hughes, 2018), with relatively limited attention given to exploring how host communities themselves envision their tourism futures. In particular, there is a growing call to prioritize community-led tourism development in less-known destinations and rural areas, which often face unique challenges such as depopulation and economic stagnation (Cawley and Gillmor, 2008; Lane and Kastenholz, 2015). Exploring host communities’ preferences and aspirations for tourism development is critical for creating sustainable and resilient tourism futures that benefit both visitors and residents (Nunkoo and Gursoy, 2012).

Adopting a qualitative approach rooted in a preferable futures framework (Inayatullah, 2008) and drawing on a futures workshop facilitation technique called Lego Serious Play (LSP) (Tuomi *et al.*, 2019), this study investigates preferable tourism futures in less-known destinations with unique challenges and opportunities – Helsinki, Finland, and Wakayama, Japan – from the host perspective. On a national scale, Finland is looking for ways to drive tourism spillover from Helsinki to other parts of Finland, while conversely Japan is looking to attract spillover to Wakayama from high-profile destinations close by, e.g. Osaka or Kyoto. Exploring local hosts’ views on preferable tourism futures in two different sociocultural and geographical contexts allows for the triangulation of data to better shed light on the overall phenomenon. Specifically, the research addresses the questions:

RQ1. How should destinations ideally look in 2034 from local hosts’ perspective?

RQ2. How do Finnish and Japanese local hosts’ views for preferable tourism futures differ?

This study specifically focuses on international leisure tourism and seeks to uncover the aspirations of local communities regarding the balance between economic benefits, environmental sustainability and social well-being. By doing so, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of bottom-up tourism development that prioritizes local needs, fostering a more equitable and co-created sustainable future framework for the tourism industry.

The article is structured in five parts. First, we present a comprehensive literature review on past studies in tourism futures, with a specific focus on cultural heritage preservation and local involvement. Next, we discuss the method used in this study, detailing the practicalities of conducting our workshops in Japan and in Finland. Then, we highlight our key findings in chronological order. After that we provide a discussion on the managerial and theoretical implications of our findings. Finally, we conclude by discussing the limitations of our study, as well as future research directions stemming from these.

2. Past studies in tourism futures

Future studies offer a structured framework to explore and influence the trajectories of tourism development. Typically, futures studies differentiate between possible futures, representing the entire option space of what could happen (Bell, 2003); probable futures, which predict likely outcomes based on historical data, trajectories and trends (Slaughter, 1996), and preferable futures, which shift the focus toward shaping desired outcomes based on normative goals (Inayatullah, 2008). Preferable futures, as defined by Sardar (2010), emphasize the co-creation of a shared vision for the future that aligns with collective values and aspirations and considers equity.

In general, tourism futures studies are characterized by their interdisciplinary approach, often integrating environmental, socioeconomic and technological dimensions. Scholars such as

Yeoman (2012) have highlighted the importance of integrating strategic foresight methodologies, such as scenario planning or Delphi methods, to address uncertainties in and future development of tourism systems (Bergner and Lohmann, 2013). For instance, Ashton *et al.* (2025) used the Delphi method to explore the impacts of immersive technologies in tourism contexts; Tussyadiah and Miller (2020) used the “letters from the future” approach to capture tourists’ narratives about the future, while Tuomi *et al.* (2019) leverage LSP to organize futures workshops aiming to build future visions for food service in 2039.

A notable contribution from the futures studies field is the concept of futures literacy, which UNESCO (2023) identifies as the capacity to anticipate and prepare for change by imagining alternative futures. According to UNESCO (2023), futures literacy emphasizes the need for communities to proactively envision future scenarios that align and preserve their sociocultural and environmental contexts. In a similar vein, community-based tourism development approaches emphasize the active involvement of local communities in planning and managing tourism activities to ensure that benefits are equitably distributed and to achieve support and buy-in for tourism initiatives from the bottom-up (Okazaki, 2008). Adopting a similar terminology, Simpson (2008) laid the foundations for community benefit tourism initiatives, which emphasize “conveying net livelihood and economic, social and/or environmental benefits to communities and their members in a responsible and sustainable manner.” Higgins-Desbiolles and Bigby (2024) go even further, calling for a “local turn” in tourism development and a collective need to “socialize” tourism post-COVID-19 (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). Against this backdrop, we argue that in order to explore preferable tourism futures at the local level, an approach centered on giving voice to local perspectives is necessary, noting cultural and contextual differences and approaching future opportunities and risks from the bottom-up.

2.1 Cultural heritage preservation

Given the important role culture – understood in the context of tourism to refer to the “tangible and intangible attractions and products that represent material, intellectual, spiritual and emotional features of a society” (UNWTO, 2018) – plays in influencing human mobility, the intersection of cultural heritage preservation and tourism development has been extensively explored in academic literature. Scholars have highlighted the dual role of tourism as a catalyst for heritage conservation and as a potential threat to the integrity of cultural sites (Simpson, 2008). For instance, a systematic review by Mendoza *et al.* (2023) emphasizes the adoption of information and communication technologies in promoting and preserving both tangible and intangible cultural heritage, introducing the concept of Intelligent Heritage Management. Similarly, research by Zhang *et al.* (2023) provides a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of global cultural heritage tourism from 2002 to 2022, highlighting an evolution from a focus on heritage protection to the pursuit of synergy between conservation and tourism development.

Indeed, there is a growing recognition of the need to balance preservation efforts with a sustainable vision for tourism, both as a business and as a social practice (Becken, 2019). Importantly, preferred tourism futures may vary significantly across cultures, shaped by differing values, worldviews and social norms. For instance, Hofstede’s well-known cultural dimensions framework broadly posits that Western preferences may prioritize individualism and hedonistic experiences, while Eastern visions may emphasize collectivism, harmony with nature and spiritual enrichment (Reisinger and Turner, 2003). Moreover, comparative studies have highlighted that while European rural tourism strategies often focus on heritage conservation and local gastronomy (Bramwell and Lane, 2000), Asian approaches may place greater emphasis on spiritual tourism and community cohesion (Chhetri *et al.*, 2004). We argue that understanding such cultural nuances is essential for crafting inclusive and context-sensitive tourism policies and products, whereby incorporating diverse, community-based perspectives into tourism futures planning is essential in order to address the unique aspirations and context-specific challenges of different local communities.

2.2 Host perspectives towards tourism

Past studies have highlighted that successful sustainable tourism development depends on the support and participation of destinations' host communities (Sherlock, 2001; Zhang *et al.*, 2006; Dłużewska, 2019; Higgins-Desbiolles and Bigby, 2024). Positive host attitudes are essential, particularly in regional areas where tourism significantly impacts the lives of local "hosts" (Bimonte and Punzo, 2016; Mayaka *et al.*, 2019). To date, the majority of current research has focused on the economic and environmental impacts of tourism, often considering host perspectives towards tourism through a transactional and economic view (Bimonte and Punzo, 2016). For example, Bimonte and Punzo (2016) examine host perceptions by applying the economic exchange theory, suggesting that equilibrium must exist between hosts' willingness to welcome tourists and tourists' willingness to pay for local goods and services. Disequilibrium in this relationship, they argue, can lead to social friction. While such perspectives offer useful insights, they risk oversimplifying host experiences by focusing narrowly on economic variables. As such, some researchers argue that a more holistic understanding of host perspectives is needed (Lehto *et al.*, 2020). Sustainable tourism development must move beyond the environmental-economic paradigm and center the focus on the well-being of local hosts in the planning and development of tourism, rather than treating hosts' well-being as a secondary outcome (Dłużewska, 2019; Lehto *et al.*, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles and Bigby, 2024).

As Higgins-Desbiolles (2020, 617) puts it, there is a growing need to "socialize tourism." To this effect, it should be noted that sociocultural dimensions also shape host perceptions. Factors such as ethnicity and culture are said to influence how hosts interpret and respond to tourism development (Tasci and Severt, 2017; Zhang *et al.*, 2006). For example, Tasci and Severt (2017) illustrate that cultural tolerance and differing values among communities lead to diverse expectations regarding how tourism should be conducted and what outcomes are deemed desirable. This suggests that different destinations may require different tourism development strategies due to varying host perceptions and that culture influences what is considered important for different destinations. Furthermore, when exploring the various studies on host perceptions in tourism development, the majority of research tends to focus on hosts who are directly engaged in tourism activities such as business owners, tourism employees and taxi drivers (Maquera *et al.*, 2022; Mayaka *et al.*, 2019), thus marginalizing the voices of residents who are indirectly affected by tourism activities. There is limited research that explores the perceptions of local residents who may not be directly involved in providing tourism services, highlighted, e.g. by Hughes' (2018) work on the anti-tourism protests in Barcelona, Spain. Therefore, considering the current progress within the literature on tourism development and host perspectives, there is a need to further explore preferable tourism futures from a local host point of view.

3. Method

Rooted in these theoretical underpinnings, to address its research questions, this study used the LSP methodology. LSP is a workshop facilitation method that has been found particularly useful for exploring complex, abstract or divisive phenomena, such as technology development or the future, in tourism contexts (Tuomi *et al.*, 2019). In LSP workshops, participants build three-dimensional Lego models to imagine and discuss complex topics through the use of metaphors (Tuomi and Tussyadiah, 2020).

To capture culturally rich qualitative insight, this study adopted a two-part research design whereby a series of LSP workshops were organized in May 2024 in Wakayama, Japan, and in August 2024 in Helsinki, Finland. These two locations were chosen as case exemplars of two very different types of tourism destinations, allowing for the collection of a more holistic qualitative dataset through triangulation. Helsinki is a Northern European capital city and a key driver of Finland's overall tourism demand, exacerbated by its major seaports and airports. From a national tourism strategy point of view, there is a strong case for finding ways to enable tourism demand spillover from Helsinki to the rest of the country. In contrast, Wakayama is a relatively rural seaside

city destination in the close proximity of Osaka and Kyoto, both of which are major tourism destinations in Japan. From a national tourism strategy point of view, there is a strong case for finding ways to drive tourism demand spillover from Osaka and Kyoto to other destinations close by, e.g. Wakayama City. This is illustrated by, e.g. Kyoto's recent ban of tourists from parts of the Gion geisha district amidst growing local concerns over overtourism (McCurry, 2024).

Besides their contrasting profiles as tourism destinations, the selection of a European and an Asian city destination was seen as facilitating interesting comparisons between sociocultural, economic and environmental contexts in order to find parallels and an overall more thorough understanding of local community-led visions for preferable futures.

The workshops followed the same facilitation guide (Appendix 1) but included a different set of participants to imagine and discuss preferable tourism futures in the year 2034 from a host perspective. In both countries, participants were recruited through convenience sampling, i.e. through (physical and digital) A4-sized flyers that were publicly distributed on the authors' university campuses. A 10-year future perspective was adopted following McGonigal (2022), whereby a 10 year period was seen as long enough for significant change to take place but short enough to still have personal meaning to participants' personal lives.

Both workshops lasted for 75–90 min and had $n = 15$ (workshop 1, Japan) and $n = 21$ (workshop 2, Finland) participants. At the beginning of both workshops, participants were asked to answer a short background survey, which included obtaining informed consent, three questions about participants' background (Q1-3; age, gender and work experience in tourism), two questions about their general attitude towards and familiarity with tourism in their local destination (Q4-5) and four questions (Q6-9) about their general attitude towards the future adapted from McGonigal (2022). Following McGonigal (2022), a 10-point scale was used for Q4-9. Participants' background information is compiled in Tables 1 and 2.

In terms of the workshop facilitation process, the workshops included three LSP building exercises. The workshop started with a short warm-up exercise ("build a duck"), which is meant to ease participants into the LSP process and the idea of communicating via Lego models and the metaphors these convey. After this, the workshop moved to the main study, whereby participants were asked to build a model to illustrate what they thought were the most important factors related to cultural heritage, culture and the overall day-to-day life experience in their local area. Participants were encouraged to build both tangible (e.g. buildings and services) and intangible (e.g. traditions and feelings) elements. Participants were also told to include a minimum of three elements in their model, and it was stressed that there were no right or wrong answers. The aim of the building exercise and its subsequent discussion round was to highlight participants' local areas' key pull factors from a local host perspective, i.e. motivational factors for why someone should decide to travel to the hosts' destination.

This exercise was followed by another building exercise, where participants were asked to imagine how the three elements they had previously built would change in the next 10 years (by 2034). Specifically, participants were asked to make any changes to their previous Lego model, should they wish. This was followed by another round of sharing and a focus group-style open discussion.

Finally, participants were asked to imagine that it was the year 2034 and that international tourists were arriving in their local area for leisure purposes. Participants were asked to build a Lego model to illustrate the destination's tourism offering in 2034. The problem-setting was intentionally focused on international tourists and leisure travel (as opposed to, e.g. business travel), as this was deemed strategically most important for the studied areas (Helsinki and Wakayama). Participants were prompted to focus on tourism activities (e.g. attractions), tourism services (e.g. hotels and restaurants) or the overall concept of hospitality in their destination (e.g. hospitableness). The aim was to highlight participants' preferred changes to the local areas' tourism offering overall. The building exercise was followed by individual sharing (everyone briefly shared what they had built) and a focus group-style discussion.

Table 1 Participants' background details

<i>ID</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Tourism work experience</i>	<i>Personal interaction with tourists</i>	<i>Negative/positive attitude towards tourism (neg = 1, pos = 10)</i>
P1	Japan	45	F	Yes	Sometimes	4
P2	Japan	32	M	Yes	Often	5
P3	Japan	23	F	Yes	Often	6
P4	Japan	23	F	Yes	Often	5
P5	Japan	24	F	Yes	Sometimes	9
P6	Japan	22	F	Yes	Sometimes	3
P7	Japan	22	F	No	Never	4
P8	Japan	45	M	Yes	Often	5
P9	Japan	40	F	Yes	Often	2
P10	Japan	22	F	Yes	Often	4
P11	Japan	24	F	Yes	Often	3
P12	Japan	22	F	Yes	Often	5
P13	Japan	21	F	Yes	Sometimes	8
P14	Japan	23	F	Yes	Often	5
P15	Japan	22	F	Yes	Sometimes	3
P16	Finland	30	F	Yes	Often	6
P17	Finland	27	F	No	Sometimes	8
P18	Finland	35	F	Yes	Sometimes	7
P19	Finland	42	F	Yes	Often	4
P20	Finland	20	M	Yes	Sometimes	8
P21	Finland	32	M	Yes	Often	9
P22	Finland	32	M	Yes	Sometimes	5
P23	Finland	25	M	Yes	Never	8
P24	Finland	21	M	Yes	Often	10
P25	Finland	20	M	Yes	Sometimes	9
P26	Finland	19	F	Yes	Sometimes	6
P27	Finland	19	F	No	Often	9
P28	Finland	20	F	No	Sometimes	10
P29	Finland	28	M	Yes	Sometimes	7
P30	Finland	40	F	Yes	Often	5
P31	Finland	20	F	No	Sometimes	7
P32	Finland	30	M	Yes	Often	8
P33	Finland	49	F	Yes	Often	10
P34	Finland	21	M	Yes	Sometimes	6
P35	Finland	20	F	Yes	Often	9
P36	Finland	24	F	Yes	Often	4

Source(s): Authors' own work

To draw the workshops to a close, participants were asked to summarize the key element of their model one more time in one or two words only. Due to the large group size, in both workshops the groups were split up, and the workshops were facilitated by two researchers following the same facilitation guide. Participants' vocal descriptions of their Lego models and the subsequent discussions were audio recorded, transcribed and anonymized. Anonymous pictures of some Lego models were taken as illustration, but the analytical focus was not on the Lego models *per se*, but rather on the metaphors the models convey.

As the study relied on qualitative workshop data from workshops facilitated by two researchers in different geographical and sociocultural contexts, a reflection on the positionality of the research team warrants some methodological remarks (Williams and Morrow, 2009; Willig, 2012). First, all of the workshops were facilitated in English, a second language to both of the facilitators and to the vast majority of the research participants. Following Tasci and Severt (2017), this was seen as a necessary compromise to allow for participation for a larger set of local participants than just those who are fluent in the local language, i.e. Finnish or Japanese. Second, the workshops were conducted in a university setting, where both of the facilitators hold primary or secondary

Table 2 Participants' attitude towards the future

<i>ID</i>	<i>Things to go on as usual (1) or drastically change (10)</i>	<i>Feeling of pessimism (1) or optimism (10) towards the future</i>	<i>Feeling of no control (1) or total control (10) regarding future</i>	<i>Feeling of pessimism (1) or optimism (10) towards climate change</i>
P1	5	2	2	2
P2	8	7	3	8
P3	6	5	4	3
P4	7	5	6	2
P5	8	6	4	2
P6	9	8	7	3
P7	8	5	7	1
P8	7	3	3	3
P9	10	1	5	1
P10	6	8	4	3
P11	8	9	8	1
P12	3	2	1	1
P13	8	9	6	2
P14	7	5	6	2
P15	9	8	7	3
P16	7	5	3	2
P17	7	2	3	1
P18	6	5	3	1
P19	8	6	1	3
P20	6	8	4	2
P21	3	3	6	2
P22	8	9	2	6
P23	9	1	2	5
P24	5	1	7	1
P25	8	9	1	5
P26	6	4	1	5
P27	6	3	8	3
P28	4	7	5	3
P29	7	5	4	5
P30	6	5	3	2
P31	4	4	3	2
P32	7	6	6	5
P33	10	10	6	5
P34	6	4	3	2
P35	8	4	6	3
P36	8	4	6	1

Source(s): Authors' own work

affiliations. In particular, stemming from the facilitators' positionality, the workshops were aligned with business and tourism management research centers, inevitably influencing the types of participants recruited through convenience sampling to the workshops.

Figure 1 illustrates a quick overview of the adopted research design and its intended outcomes.

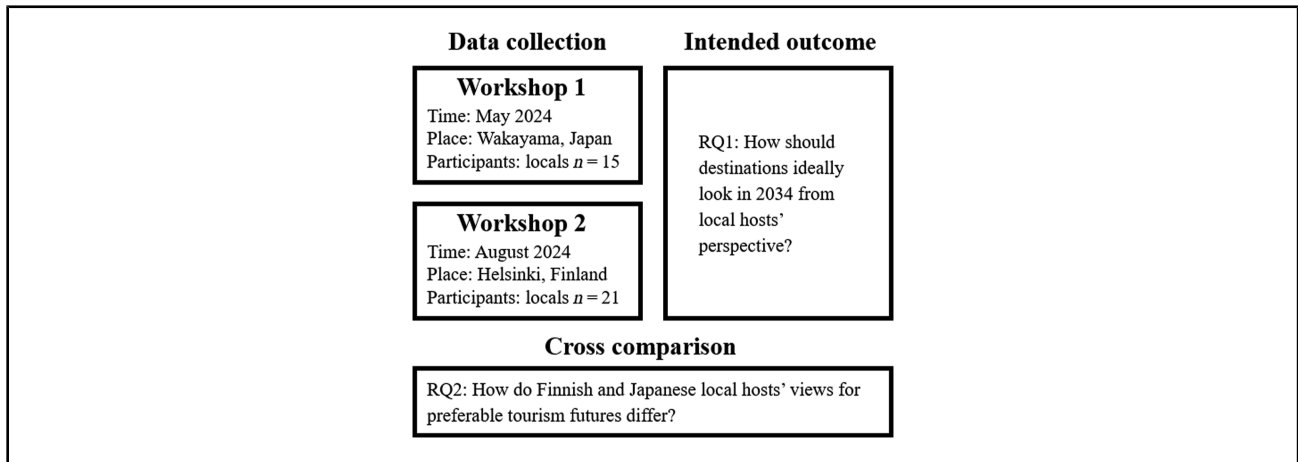
4. Findings

The next two sections present the findings of the study. As the research followed a two-part research design, the findings are presented chronologically and then compared and contrasted in the discussion.

4.1 Findings from workshop 1, Japan

Based on the pre-workshop questionnaire, most Japanese participants had past work experience in tourism and extensive experience engaging with tourists. Participants showed

Figure 1 Overview of the research design. Source: Authors' own work



mixed attitudes towards tourism, tending towards a neutral perspective overall (mean 4.7, scale 1–10). Additionally, the majority believed there to be drastic changes in the future and, on average (mean 7.3, scale 1–10), perceived themselves as having somewhat limited control over the future (mean 4.9, scale 1–10). This perception may be influenced by the anticipation of a potential major earthquake expected to occur in the region. Participants' feelings of pessimism and/or optimism towards the future varied as well, with a slight skew towards optimism (mean 5.5, scale 1–10). Finally, participants felt predominantly pessimistic towards the future impact of climate change on tourism (mean 2.5, scale 1–10).

During the LSP workshop discussions, common themes of “cultural heritage” and “nature” emerged as the most important aspects of Wakayama from the perspective of local hosts. Participants unanimously described various intangible and tangible heritage elements that represent their destination. Examples included Shinto shrines, historical castles, cherry blossoms, local people and the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage trail. For example, P1 and P2 remarked:

I wanted to express the sea culture and the agriculture. Cultural heritage, which I feel Wakayama is very proud of and could still be developed critically in the future. (P1)

I wanted to highlight the nature, culture, temples and castles. (P2)

Participants P4 and P6 also highlighted the unique spirit and connectedness of the local people in comparison to less rural areas:

Another point that I think is very unique is the people. People here are very, very kind. They are really approachable and open minded. They are also very attentive to nature, to the cleanliness and to the surrounding world. I think rural people still keep that uniqueness, that “Japanese spirit” more than Tokyo area people. (P4)

I witnessed pretty interesting things about local people. Even though they don't know each other, but, they connect with each other. The master owner of the izakaya sometimes provides ramen for free. (P6)

Despite the emphasis on the beauty and cultural richness of the surrounding rural area, some participants also reflected on geographical challenges. As P3 noted:

Wakayama is the mountainous area on the Nankai Trough. The bottom part is of a tectonic plate. So it might break apart anytime soon, but they're still going strong. (P3)

Similarly, P1 discussed the potential and unpredictability of balancing development with nature:

The developmentalism mentality of controlling nature in between, which has a lot of potential. For instance, it could include wind energy or something to use nature for civilization purposes or for industry, but at the same time it's also quite unpredictable. (P1)

When imagining the future, participants expressed greater concern and worries, with positive visions largely limited to the potential development of the destination's tourism offerings and technological advancements. For instance, participants mentioned "new roads for accessibility" (P8), "more robots in restaurants and cafes" (P14) and "more shops, restaurants or activities around the castle to make more money" (P13). Interestingly, P8 anticipated that more tourists will be coming to Wakayama due to the decline of nearby major tourist destinations: "All the tourists are going to come to Kumano Kodo because, in 10 years, Kyoto will be finished due to overtourism." Indeed, participants believed that tourist motivations for visiting Wakayama would primarily center on "spiritual enlightenment" (P8) in the future.

Nonetheless, the majority of participants envisioned a more negative trajectory for Wakayama's future. The most pressing concerns revolved around climate and demographic changes in Japan. As highlighted by P2:

I assume in 10 years there will be a massive earthquake and the environment could change. (P2)
Participants also highlighted the growing threat of extreme weather and the shifting sea climate:

I'm mostly worried about the climate. It's getting more and more extreme year by year. There will be more water pollution. (P4)

The 'Kuroshio Current' is going away from the coast, so there's less fish coming into Wakayama. So in the future there might no longer be the same marine culture in Wakayama. (P3)

In addition to environmental challenges, participants emphasized the significant demographic issues facing the region, including depopulation and its cascading effects, e.g. the loss of cultural and intangible heritage. P3 noted:

People leaving [...] There's less young people. And then there's an increase of empty houses [...] the traditional soy sauce industry will become smaller because there's no more people continuing the practice of these traditional industries in this area. (P3)

Nevertheless, P2 offered a slightly more hopeful perspective, whereby:

Perhaps in the future, people will cherish the historical objects much more than they used to because they know how important those old architectures or buildings are. (P2)

From a social perspective, participants foresaw challenges in balancing cultural preservation with meeting the needs of tourists. As P8 remarked:

Local tourism will be facing many issues. The concept of 'omotenashi' [Japanese hospitality] will be very challenging when you have international tourists coming from all over the place. You can't really guess in advance the different needs, wants and desires. So locals are going to try really, really hard but it's going to be difficult. So they [elements in participant's Lego model] are kind of falling over from exhaustion. (P8)

Concerns over technological advancements were also raised:

More AI will be serving the guests. But people will lose their humanism. People will be more isolated (P14).

Despite these concerns, participants also highlighted the potential for tourism to address some of these challenges. P9 emphasized the importance of sustainable tourism practices, suggesting that destinations should develop "tourism that gives something to the destination but doesn't burden other places. [...] Maybe there are other solutions that we should look at, not just tourism, because it's an easy fix sometimes." Similarly, P13 advocated for greater collaboration among local destinations to improve planning and coordination: "Destinations should look at each other and collaborate to create better planning coordination."

Figure 2 illustrates workshop participants' Lego models.

4.2 Findings from workshop 2, Finland

Based on the pre-workshop questionnaire, most Finnish participants also had past work experience in tourism and extensive experience engaging with tourists. Participants showed mixed attitudes towards tourism, tending towards a positive perspective overall (mean 7.4, scale

Figure 2 Lego models from the workshop in Wakayama, Japan. Source: Authors' own work



1–10). Similar to their Japanese counterparts, Finnish participants also saw drastic changes in the future (mean 6.6, scale 1–10) and, on average, perceived themselves as having limited control over the future (mean 4.0, scale 1–10). Participants' feelings (pessimism/optimism) towards the future were neutral (mean 5.0, scale 1–10); although similar to their Japanese counterparts, participants felt predominantly pessimistic towards the future impact of climate change on tourism (mean 3.0, scale 1–10).

When asked about factors most important to participants in their local area, the most common answer – with twice as many mentions as the second most common answer – was nature: its closeness, ease of access to nature-based activities (e.g. hikes), its calming effect, how it offers a counterforce for urban and increasingly digital day-to-day life experience, etc. This is in line with Japanese participants' replies, which also highlighted nature as one of the key themes of importance.

However, contrary to their Japanese counterparts, who highlighted cultural heritage as the second most important factor about their local area, Finnish participants frequently mentioned more practical things, such as the importance of good (public and other) transport options, as well as ease of access to day-to-day services, e.g. grocery stores, coffee shops or related to hobbies, e.g. libraries and many swimming pools. This might reflect differences in cultural priorities, with Japanese participants placing greater emphasis on preserving and celebrating their rich historical and cultural identity, while Finnish participants, with less historical identity to preserve, prioritize functional aspects of daily life and infrastructure that directly enhance quality of living and convenience. This contrast could also stem from differing societal values, where Japan often integrates tradition into modern living by, e.g. placing temples in the middle of cities, while Finland emphasizes practicality and accessibility in creating a high standard of living.

In line with Japanese participants, several Finnish participants also mentioned connectedness to other people as an important factor in their local area, with expressions such as “close connection to neighbors” (P25), “I like that my family is close by” (P32), or “here [in the participant's local area] there are many different kinds of families and a nice diversity of people. I think that is important” (P27).

Interestingly, participants also mentioned their personal feelings towards a specific area as important factors. For instance, the sense of feeling safe, calm, peaceful or happy was mentioned multiple times.

To a lesser degree, participants mentioned specific landmarks, both relating to the built and unbuilt environment (e.g. a specific building or a specific road; a specific forest or a specific hill). Participants also mentioned the importance of the heritage of their local area, both the history of the buildings and neighborhoods and the personal connection the place had to the participant's own life and sense of belonging:

"I grew up here. I have a lot of memories from here, and it has always been a central point of my life" (P24).

Finally, a few participants mentioned factors relating to the aesthetics of a place, e.g. "I think the building where I live just looks nice" (P41), "there's a nice view from where I live" (P30), "small, compact and peaceful. The city has a nice culture, too, with many interesting events. It also has a nice sea view, it's not just endless rows of houses, but there are unique details, and it is pleasing to the eye" (P16), "I like that my area has a lot of tall buildings. It makes the area feel very homely and urban at the same time" (P19).

When it came to imagining preferable futures, participants were generally optimistic about the future, despite the current challenges facing the destination, e.g. high inflation and the ongoing war in Ukraine, which directly influences the number of Russian tourists in Finland. However, perhaps due to this backdrop, participants were quite conservative in their future scenarios, not imagining radical change as indicated in the survey responses, but rather seeing that things would continue mostly as is, with tourism slowly growing in importance. For instance, rather than reimagining the whole concept of "going to a restaurant," participants imagined there to simply be more fusion-style restaurants or a broader and more creative mix of cuisines in the future as the population gets more diverse due to immigration. As put by P28:

In the future, I think people will come for food and culture. [In the model] There's also snow, as I think tourists will still want to experience our winter. So, I think we could try to get more people here during winter holidays, build bigger winter markets, things like that. Food I think will be mostly the same, but perhaps more international cuisines might also be mixed in. But for me it's important that the traditional flavors remain there too, like salmon soup or game. (P28)

There was also a general notion of how growing urbanization might affect the local nature and hence, local residents' quality of life negatively while also offering new opportunities for tourism. As put by participants:

The city is expanding, a lot of new habitants, but it will also kind of trample on the beautiful nature, when a lot of new buildings are built on top. But then new nature-based activities can also be built, like new saunas, for making it more pleasant to go swimming [. . .] summers are getting warmer, and as a result, there's also more algae in the seawater, kind of polluting the water. (P18)

In the future, Helsinki is an interesting tourism destination as it's still quite cool, climate change has not made it too hot. Wealthy tourists travel here to experience nature, like to touch moss, and it will influence them to also preserve nature in their home countries. Here [in the Lego model], the visitor is entering a forest restaurant, enjoying a fine dining experience (P16), The archipelago area might grow in importance, if the city expands, as now many of the small islands around the city are uninhabited. (P36)

Finally, multiple participants reflected on current political events, particularly how the national Destination Management Organization's (DMO's) funding was recently halved. Participants saw that this will, on one hand, lead tourism stakeholders to feel frustrated, but, on the other hand, it will force the industry to organize itself and "make do" without as much government support. A few participants noted how this could be illustrated by new strategic partnerships and more industry-led forums for sharing best practices, as well as more creativity and innovation from the ground up. Participants saw that especially key tourism destination cities and regions (e.g. Helsinki and Lapland) should take even more active roles in leading tourism development in the

future. Interestingly, regardless of worries related to climate change, participants saw long-haul tourists in particular as a strategic priority going forward:

As Helsinki is a lesser-known destination [compared to other major European capital cities], we should be happy to welcome whoever wants to come here. We are probably not the first choice to a lot of people. In particular, it would be great to get long-haul tourists, as they might stay longer, and spend more. (P24)

Figure 3 illustrates workshop participants' Lego models, while Table 3 provides a concise cross-comparison between key findings of the workshops conducted in Japan and Finland.

5. Discussion

Our findings highlight, on one hand, the diversity, but on the other, uniformity of local perspectives on preferable tourism futures in Finland and Japan, stressing the influence of environmental,

Figure 3 Lego models from the workshop in Helsinki, Finland. Source: Authors' own work

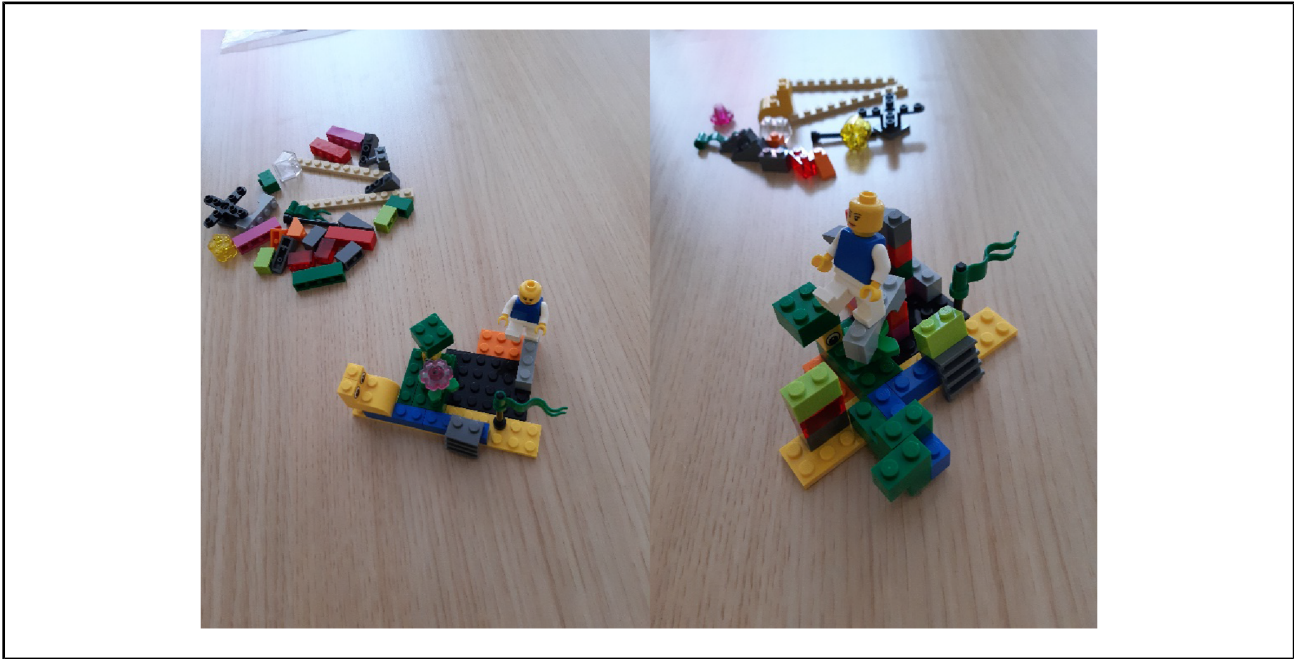


Table 3 Cross comparison across workshops in Japan and Finland		
Compared category	Shared insight	Distinct insight
Valued assets	Nature is central to locals in both locations	Japanese participants also stress cultural heritage; Finnish participants highlight services, transport and daily convenience
Social ties	Community connectedness is seen as a strength	Japanese participants praise kindness of rural neighbors; Finnish highlight closeness to family and neighborhood diversity
Main concerns	Future challenges dominate discussion	Japanese participants fear earthquakes, depopulation, heritage loss; Finnish fear urban sprawl, funding cuts, geopolitical shocks
Tourism outlook	Technology and collaboration viewed as potential fixes	Japanese participants expect overflow pilgrims and mixed tech impacts; Finnish expect steady growth, winter nature demand, long-haul focus
Strategic cooperation	Locals in both Japan and Finland call for stronger local alliances	Japanese participants seek inter-destination heritage networks; Finnish foresee industry-led partnerships
Source(s): Authors' own work		

sociocultural and economic contexts. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on tourism futures by emphasizing the need for community-based, bottom-up tourism development approaches that are sustainable, equitable and resilient in the face of local and global challenges (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles and Bigby, 2024).

Futures studies sometimes distinguish between utopian (i.e. an idealized vision of a perfect society where harmony, equality and prosperity prevail, often serving as a critique of current societal shortcomings), dystopian (i.e. a speculative scenario depicting a society characterized by oppressive, degraded or nightmarish conditions) and protopian (i.e. a perspective on societal evolution emphasizing incremental, pragmatic improvements) futures. In our study, participants' envisioned futures predominantly reflect a protopian outlook, characterized by aspirations for incremental improvements rather than hopes or expectations of radical or utopian transformations or dystopian fears.

In Finland, participants expressed general optimism about tourism development, focusing on the preservation of nature, the enhancement of public and private services [e.g. transportation, libraries and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)] and the maintenance of community well-being amidst a projected growth of the Helsinki Metropolitan Area and its tourism demand. This is generally in line with broader European discourses on sustainable tourism, which prioritize gradual, community-centered improvements (Bramwell and Lane, 2000). Further, while some Finnish destinations, e.g. specific areas of Lapland, have recently voiced growing concerns over the negative impacts of overtourism (Helsinki Times, 2024), the effects of this in the context of Helsinki were less pronounced. Conversely, while not only negative, Japanese participants demonstrated a more cautious stance, shaped by concerns of acute natural disasters, demographic decline and the need to preserve tangible and intangible cultural heritage. These concerns might be reflective of Wakayama's unique environmental, sociocultural and economic challenges, including its vulnerability to earthquakes, the looming effects of depopulation (Sharpley, 2020) and the negative media publicity in Kyoto regarding concerns of overtourism (McCurry, 2024). Against this general backdrop, next, specific managerial and theoretical implications of our findings are discussed.

5.1 Managerial implications

Comparing and contrasting findings from Japan and Finland highlights both cultural and contextual divergences and areas of agreement. As for differences, Japanese participants' concerns about the future were more pronounced, shaped by the region's susceptibility to natural disasters such as those along the Nankai Trough. Such anxieties about environmental unpredictability highlight the need for tourism strategies and tourism products that incorporate disaster preparedness, continuity, resilience and reassurance (Gössling *et al.*, 2023). In Helsinki, Finland, while challenges such as inflation and geopolitical instability were acknowledged, participants' outlooks were generally more optimistic. However, the restrained nature of Finnish visions, with a focus on incremental rather than radical innovation, reflects broader tendencies toward pragmatic and incremental adaptation and risk mitigation in Northern Europe (Bramwell and Lane, 2000). Tourism policies and products should take this into account, planning for potential resistance to radical changes and instead highlighting incremental development efforts to achieve local buy-in. Recent research has stressed the importance of connecting with current discussions on tourism degrowth and highlighting the role local communities, particularly local businesses, play in achieving sustainable tourism development (Falter, 2024).

Interestingly, Japanese and Finnish participants also agreed across several themes. For instance, the majority agreed that things could be drastically different in 2034 as compared to 2024. Both also expressed general concern over climate change, but also shared the feeling of low personal agency towards enacting change. Previous studies looking at attitudes towards the future have highlighted similar results, whereby, for instance, the Finnish Futures Barometer (Sitra, 2023) found that citizens were generally interested in futures thinking and futures literacy but lacked

knowledge and practical tools for actioning change at the personal or local level. Tourism managers and destination developers could leverage this by illustrating to guests and employees how their particular visit, specific work process or a concrete touch point impacts the broader surrounding environment. Such a micro-level perspective could complement traditional approaches in corporate social responsibility or environmental, social and governance efforts, bringing tangibility to strategic sustainability goals and other future-facing endeavors. Benchmarking other destinations, e.g. Scotland, that have used futures research approaches to inform local and national tourism policy for decades, could provide a useful starting point (Yeoman *et al.*, 2009; TravelTech, 2022).

In a similar vein, nature emerged as a central theme in both Finland and Japan. However, the interpretation and emphasis seemed to vary slightly. Finnish participants emphasized the accessibility and calming effects of nature, viewing it as a counterbalance to urbanization and digitalization, likely reflected by the focus on a capital city. This aligns with broader trends in Northern European tourism, where rural and natural environments are often positioned as essential for well-being and sustainability (Lane and Kastenholz, 2015) and digitalization is seen as a competitive advantage. Japanese participants, on the other hand, framed nature in connection with cultural and agricultural heritage, exemplified by mentions of the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage trail and local produce such as oranges and persimmons. This reflects a more integrated view of nature and culture, rooted in Japan's deep historical and spiritual traditions (Reisinger and Turner, 2003). Where feasible, tourism managers should therefore aim to leverage nature-based activities as a counterbalance to urbanization and digitalization, whilst preserving the environment, adapting the approach to local realities and priorities.

In recent years, tourism researchers have highlighted the concept of hospitableness as a useful idea for illustrating host-guest relationships. Defined by Blain and Lashley (2014) as the hosts' involvement in "offering hospitality in a giving and generous way, without thought of repayment in kind or any other form of reciprocity," hospitality has been linked to, e.g. pro-social attitudes (Alrawadieh *et al.*, 2024) and social well-being (Altinay *et al.*, 2019). In this vein, in Japan, the concept of "touristship" has recently gained some traction, calling for local involvement and mutual responsibility in co-creating pro-social host-guest relationships (Mainichi, 2023). By engaging in community-based, bottom-up tourism development activities, tourism stakeholders can better co-create destination-specific strategies for building hospitable tourism services, products and sustainable and resilient local communities. Tourism managers and destination marketing and management organizations should therefore aim to actively build bridges between and across locals and tourists (local-local, local-tourist and tourist-tourist) by proactively designing experiences that facilitate spontaneous interaction between stakeholders.

5.2 Theoretical implications

Besides managerial implications, the present study makes several contributions to the field of tourism futures. First, continuing on the line of inquiry paved by, e.g. Hughes (2018), Jungersted (2023) and Higgins-Desbiolles and Bigby (2024), the present study shifts the focus from tourists' expectations and experiences to local hosts' preferences, providing a more holistic understanding of how destinations can and should evolve in ways that align with local values and aspirations. This approach complements and adds to a growing body of existing literature on community-based tourism, "localhoods" and the "local turn," which emphasize the importance and challenges of engaging local stakeholders in tourism planning and development (Nunkoo and Gursoy, 2012; Ditta-Apichai *et al.*, 2024; Higgins-Desbiolles and Bigby, 2024). Concretely involving locals in tourism futures planning helps bridge the gap between individuals anticipating radical change as passive observers towards acting as change agents that co-create the future. This is particularly important in tourism, where socioeconomic and political development initiatives – e.g. building new transportation infrastructure to improve the accessibility of peripheral areas – may have unplanned implications for the local communities impacted (Apollo, 2025).

Rooting our findings into the broader body of work on participatory design, particularly making a connection to [Arnstein's \(1969\)](#) seminal ladder of citizen participation model, which categorizes levels of citizen involvement in decision-making processes, ranging from non-participation to full citizen control, a co-creation approach focused on building preferable future visions for local areas should avoid tokenism and instead work towards truly joint decision-making to guide tourism policy and practice. While the present study illustrates one step in this direction, future research should explore mechanisms and frameworks that facilitate such co-creative partnerships and their immediate and long-term effects, as well as factors leading to non-participation and low impact. Concepts such as citizen assemblies, as well as other frameworks for deliberative governance, might offer a useful starting point for theory development ([Tuomi and Ascensão, 2023](#)).

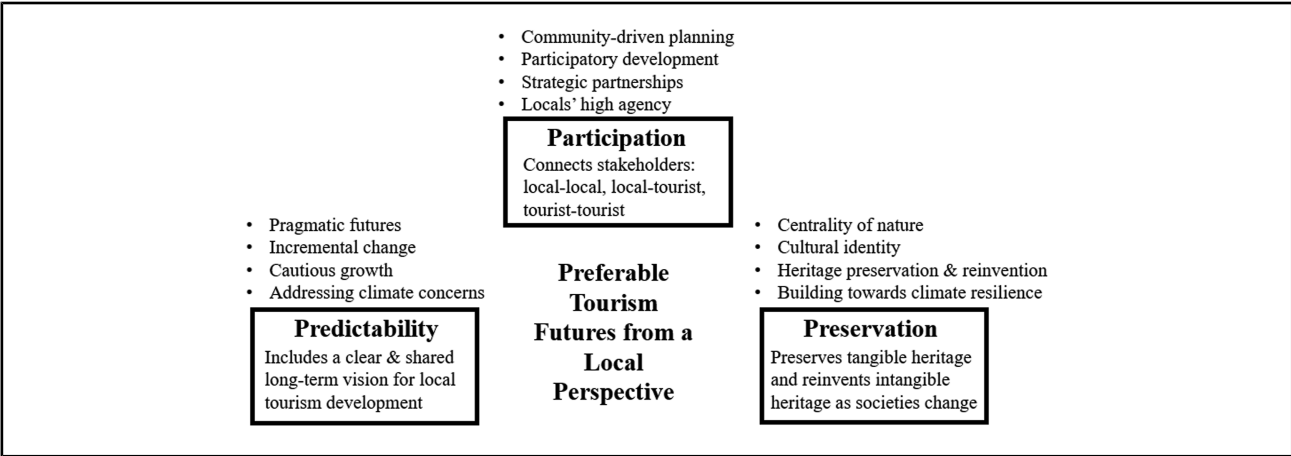
The use of LSP as a participatory methodology highlights the value of creative and metaphorical tools in uncovering complex and intangible dimensions of community preferences in the context of futures research. This methodological contribution demonstrates the potential of participatory foresight methods in tourism research, aligning with calls for more inclusive and futures-oriented approaches ([Yeoman, 2012](#); [Inayatullah, 2008](#)) and demonstrating the particular usefulness of the LSP method to tackle complex phenomena ([Tuomi et al., 2019](#)). Further, the adoption of a preferable futures framework emphasizes the importance of normative visions in shaping sustainable and equitable tourism practices. By framing the future as something that can and should be actively shaped, this study aligns with futures literacy principles, which advocate for the proactive anticipation and reflexivity of change in alignment with collective values ([Mangnus et al., 2021](#)).

Based on our empirical findings, we put forward a normative framework for preferable tourism futures from a local host perspective ([Figure 4](#)). We see preferable tourism futures as participatory and predictable, highlighting the need for locals to feel empowered whilst rooted in a clear broader vision for the future. Preferable tourism futures should also be preserving in terms of tangible heritage and the surrounding environment (e.g. nature), while allowing for flexibility to re-invent intangible heritage to better reflect changes in society (e.g. demographic shifts, depopulation and immigration).

6. Conclusions, limitations and future research

Sustainable tourism development has been a key focus for futures-oriented tourism research, yet many studies focus on tourists' needs, often overlooking host community perspectives. Adopting an LSP approach, this qualitative study ($n = 36$) addresses this gap by investigating local hosts' preferable tourism futures in two destinations with a distinct and complementary profile, namely Helsinki, Finland, and Wakayama, Japan.

Figure 4 Normative framework for preferable tourism futures from a local perspective. Source: Authors' own work



The findings emphasize the importance of engaging host communities in envisioning the future of tourism, reaffirming previous calls for more local involvement in tourism development by, e.g. [Jungersted \(2023\)](#) and [Higgins-Desbiolles and Bigby \(2024\)](#). The comparative perspectives from Finland and Japan reveal that successful tourism development in lesser-known destinations will require a careful balance between preservation and innovation. For instance, Finnish participants preferred gradual improvements and the maintenance of community well-being, while Japanese participants emphasized heritage preservation and resilience, reflecting unique challenges related to environmental and demographic change. These insights demonstrate that community-based tourism futures thinking can support sustainable and equitable outcomes, contributing to the resilience of the tourism industry in the face of global uncertainties ([Becken, 2019](#)) and beyond ([Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020](#)).

To that end, a novel normative framework for preferable tourism futures from a local host perspective is put forward, highlighting the participatory nature of community-based tourism development, whilst emphasizing predictability, i.e. that stakeholders share a clear long-term vision for tourism, and preservation, i.e. ensuring that development does not come at the cost of tangible and intangible heritage.

Despite collecting data in two countries, this study is subject to several limitations that warrant consideration. First, the convenience sampling approach, which relied strongly on university-affiliated participants, limits the generalizability of the findings. While this method provided access to diverse perspectives, it may not fully represent the broader public or specific stakeholder groups, such as tourism SMEs. Future research could address this limitation by incorporating a wider range of participants, including older residents, local business owners and government officials. Similarly, the researchers' positionality may pose limitations. Roughly half of the workshop participants in both Finland and Japan were or had previously been students on one of the researchers' courses. This assumed power hierarchy might have influenced the data collection (e.g. accentuate response bias), whereby future research should extend the use of LSP futures workshops to explore a more diverse set of tourism stakeholders with no direct relationship with the research team.

Additionally, the findings are shaped by the socioeconomic and environmental contexts of Finland and Japan, including the aftereffects of the COVID-19 pandemic, rising inflation and geopolitical tensions. These contextual factors may have influenced participants' attitudes and visions for the future, highlighting the need for caution in extrapolating these findings to other regions. Moreover, the study's temporal focus on a 10-year time horizon, while meaningful for participants, limits the exploration of longer-term dynamics in tourism development. Future studies could adopt a longer time frame to examine how host community aspirations evolve over decades, particularly in the context of black swan events and global challenges ([Gössling et al., 2021](#); [McGonigal, 2022](#)). In particular, there is a need to investigate the role of technological innovation in supporting sustainable tourism, particularly in areas such as heritage preservation ([Mendoza et al., 2023](#)), gender equality ([Webster and Farmaki, 2025](#)) or pro-environmental tourist behavior ([Majid et al., 2024](#)). By embracing the "local turn" as suggested by [Higgins-Desbiolles and Bigby \(2024\)](#), that is, integrating host perspectives – including both local residents and local businesses ([Falter, 2024](#)) – into strategic planning, researchers and practitioners can foster a tourism industry that is more inclusive, resilient and aligned with the aspirations of local communities.

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Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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