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Transformative experiences in tourism: where, when, with whom, and how does tourists' transformation occur?

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Travel experiences have the potential to induce significant changes in tourists. This perspective paper aims to delineate directions for understanding the where, when, with whom, and why of transformative experiences in tourism, proposing future research directions across various dimensions of this multifaceted topic. The Transformative Experience Diagram is presented as a guide to addressing questions about where, when, with whom, and why travel transformation occurs. These propositions are grounded in a literature review spanning various disciplines, along with authors' quantitative and qualitative studies on the process of travel transformation and discussions with experts from diverse fields. Additional data, gathered from semi-structured interviews with people who previously had transformative travel experiences, inform the discussion on key questions of travel transformation and support the propositions for future research. In addition to conceptualizing the process of tourist transformation and proposing a framework for future research, this perspective paper has the potential to influence tourism management practices by guiding the design of experiences that trigger tourists' transformation, positively impacting personal growth, and enhancing the wellbeing of travelers.

KEYWORDS

tourism, transformation, experience, self-changes, personality, travel

1 Introduction

Travel experiences have the potential to bring about profound transformations in individuals. Transformative experiences in tourism can significantly alter tourists' values, worldviews, and behavioral intentions, leading to learning, development, and personal growth (Coghlan and Weiler, 2018; Pung et al., 2020; Teoh et al., 2021; Godovykh and Tasci, 2022). Tourists' transformation is a multifaceted process encompassing personal self-changes and subsequent behaviors that result from these changes (Kirillova et al., 2017a; Pung et al., 2020; Tasci and Godovykh, 2021; Teoh et al., 2021; Godovykh and Tasci, 2022). Various experiences, such as meeting new people, spending time in nature, or participating in events, can trigger tourists' transformation, shaped by factors like motivation, previous experience, socio-demographic characteristics, or personality traits (Kirillova et al., 2017a; Pung et al., 2020; Teoh et al., 2021; Godovykh and Tasci, 2022). Despite existing research, literature is scarce on the holistic frameworks for transformative experiences in tourism and the complex multi-stage process of tourists' transformation. This perspective paper aims to delineate directions for understanding where, when, with whom, and why tourist transformation occurs and proposes future research directions on various dimensions of this multifaceted topic, including its outcomes for tourists and society.

The propositions presented in this paper are grounded in a literature review spanning various disciplines, as well as the authors' quantitative and qualitative studies on the process of travel transformation and discussions with experts from diverse fields. Additional data were collected online from semi-structured interviews with people who previously had transformative travel experiences in order to inform the discussion on key questions of travel transformation and support the propositions for future research. A web-based survey was distributed to a sample of 441 people in the US older than 18 years old who previously had a travel experience that caused a significant change in them, and 428 responses were utilized for further analysis after eliminating responses with missing values.

Respondents were asked questions about the trip that provided the biggest change or transformation in their worldview, beliefs, personality, or vision of self. This included the name of the tourist destination, the nature of the experience, when this experience occurred, and other details of the trip. Open-ended questions were also posed to elicit descriptions of respondents' feelings, the changes they experienced after this trip and the actions they took as a result of their transformative experience. Typical socio-demographic questions were included in the survey together with questions about travel experience, such as the number of tourist destinations visited by respondents outside of their place of residence. IBM SPSS Statistics version 28 was used to analyze the data using descriptive statistics and frequency analysis.

The transformative experience diagram is introduced as a guide to answering questions about where, when, with whom, and why travel transformation occurs and its resulting outcomes. Beyond conceptualizing tourist transformation and proposing directions for future research, this perspective paper has the potential to influence tourism practices toward designing experiences that cause tourists' transformation and positively impact the personal growth and wellbeing of travelers.

2 Where does travel transformation occur?

The understanding of the experiences that lead to tourists' transformation is not yet comprehensive. Transformation may result from various stimuli, such as meeting diverse people, observing poverty, spending time in nature, engaging in challenging activities, or simply reflecting on novel experiences. Kirillova et al. (2017b) identified the main triggers of transformative experiences as introspection, self-development, unity with nature and others, novelty, and aesthetic experiences. In a similar vein, Tasci and Godovykh (2021) conducted interviews with tourists, revealing that significant changes in worldviews, beliefs, values, and behavior were caused by observing poverty and visiting tragic places, meeting new people and engaging in romantic relationships, connecting with nature, and participating in cultural activities. Additionally, transformative changes might occur from receiving external information either on-site or even after the trip, such as recalling previous memories (Teoh et al., 2021). However, there is no unified understanding of where transformative experiences occur, including the most transformative locations, destinations, or activities.

The initial results reveal that study participants from the US have transformative experiences during both national and international trips. They visited popular destinations such as Rome and Florence in Italy or Cancun in Mexico, as well as less conventional places for US travelers like Seera Castle in Yemen or Mount Fuji in Japan. Some participants reported that their transformation occurred when venturing beyond the traditional routes and observing different lifestyles, often in impoverished conditions. Participants provided the following comments:

"I realized how different their culture was from mine. They have a different accent, foods, and world views."

"I saw children that were missing limbs, taking care of parents that were missing organs, while both lived in a literal shack of cardboard with a hole in the floor for bathing and toileting."

"The juxtaposition of being in a luxury resort after getting off a luxury cruise, to driving across the island and seeing how 90% of the houses were crude shacks built out of discarded boards, plastic, and metal."

"I think it made me change my beliefs about the world and my country. It made me feel like I need to explore other views and change how I felt about different cultures."

In general, consistent with previous studies, the most transformative places and activities can be broadly classified as poor destinations, dark tourism places, natural places, historical places, cultural events, self-improvement activities, etc. However, additional empirical evidence is required to develop a comprehensive picture of the most transformative places globally. A GIS map of the most transformative destinations can be created based on responses from individuals with transformative travel experiences, and the typology of transformative destinations can be developed through clustering after collecting data from travelers in different countries.

3 When does travel transformation occur?

The timing of transformative experiences during a trip remained ambiguous, encompassing the beginning, middle, and end of the journey. The study's findings revealed that transformative experiences predominantly occurred at the end of the trip (43%) or at the beginning (35%). This phenomenon warrants further investigation to understand why transformations tend to happen at specific phases of the trip. On one hand, psychology and neuroscience highlight the habituation effect, indicating a reduced response to repeatedly presented stimuli (Colwill et al., 2023). In the context of travel, individuals typically encounter novel experiences at the trip's onset, which may become less prominent as they habituate to novelty. On the other hand, the peak-end rule suggests that individuals recall and judge their experiences based on concluding moments (Do et al., 2008; Kim and Kim, 2019). In transformative travel experiences, it is plausible that individuals evaluate their overall experience based on the end of the trip. Furthermore, initial results suggest a U-shaped curve

in the transformative experience timeline, with higher values at the beginning and end of the trip and lower values in the middle.

Surprisingly, a majority of respondents (78%) anticipated the transformative experience, prompting further investigation. While research indicates that both positive and negative surprises intensify emotions, there may be explanations for the anticipatory nature of transformative experiences. People often seek cognitive understanding, influenced by pre-visit motivations, intentions, expectations, and familiarity. The combination of these factors creates symbolic representations integral to transformative experiences (Lean, 2012). It is plausible that travel transformation necessitates a specific pre-visit or anticipatory experience (Godovykh and Tasci, 2020), guiding tourists' focus on transformation. The literature also explores the potential for transformative experiences to be triggered by a disorienting dilemma before the trip (Nandasena et al., 2022). The dichotomy between surprising and non-surprising experiences may be explained by travelers' personality traits, such as sensation seeking, extraversion, or impulsive traits (Li et al., 2015; Zuckerman and Aluja, 2015).

4 Who experiences transformation?

Transformative experiences were prevalent among more experienced travelers, with 51% having visited 6 to 10 destinations outside of their place of residence, and 32% having visited 11 to 20 destinations. These findings align with the evolution of travel motivation as explained by the travel career ladder model (Pearce, 2021). Early-stage travelers often embark on exploratory trips seeking new destinations, while later stages are characterized by a desire for cultural experiences and immersion in local cultures. More experienced tourists also tend to prioritize meaningful destinations, engage in socially responsible practices, and spend more time in nature. However, despite experiencing transformative travel, more experienced travelers did not report significant personality changes. This phenomenon may be attributed to their heightened familiarity with travel contexts, desensitization to novelty, cultural competency, higher expectations, tourism fatigue, and other factors (e.g., Sun et al., 2020; Hossain et al., 2023). Consequently, experiences that were transformative for individuals in earlier stages of their travel career may already be integrated into the identity and personality of those at higher stages. For instance, the study revealed notable differences in the changes in participants' level of conscientiousness across different stages of travelers ($F = 3.309$, $p = 0.01$). Participants who had previously traveled to 6 to 10 destinations outside of their place of residence (5.49) and those who visited 11 to 20 destinations (5.82) demonstrated significantly higher changes in their level of conscientiousness compared to those who visited 20 to 50 destinations (5.15) or more than 50 destinations (4.61).

5 How does transformation happen?

The process of transformation has been extensively discussed in multidisciplinary literature. According to Mezirow (2018), the steps of transformation encompass a disorienting dilemma, self-reflection, exploration of new roles, and taking further

actions. Transformative experiences are essential for triggering existential or behavioral transformations (Kirillova et al., 2017a; Pung et al., 2020). Moreover, travelers can construct online personas while documenting their travel experiences, which also contributes to self-transformation (McWha et al., 2018). In the context of tourism, transformative travel experiences initiate the transformation process through cognitive and affective stimulation, leading to self-reflection and significant changes in worldview, beliefs, values, and personality (Tasci and Godovykh, 2021). The transformation of tourists can also be presented as a hierarchical process of change, where the initial stages are individual and internal (Coghlan and Weiler, 2018).

Participants shared their reflections on their feelings after undergoing transformative travel experiences:

"Feeling small. Made me think of my place in the universe."

"I was able to forge ahead in my life when I got back home from this trip with renewed energy and commitment. That vacation was something I sorely needed to get myself back on a proper and productive track."

"It caused me to be positive in that I understood better the world in which we live and the expanse of our planet and people."

"I felt overall smaller in the grand scope of things. I never expected to feel that way, but it was such a grand place."

Behavioral changes constitute an essential component of tourists' transformation processes, leading to a willingness to acquire new knowledge, help others, make life-changing decisions, and engage in other positive actions. Participants expressed their intentions to volunteer, try new activities, spend more time in nature, and be environmentally friendly. Some of their comments include:

"... I feel like I need to do more for others and organize something."

"... it made me want to help those that are literally on their own in the world."

"I considered living in a completely different lifestyle than what I was used to."

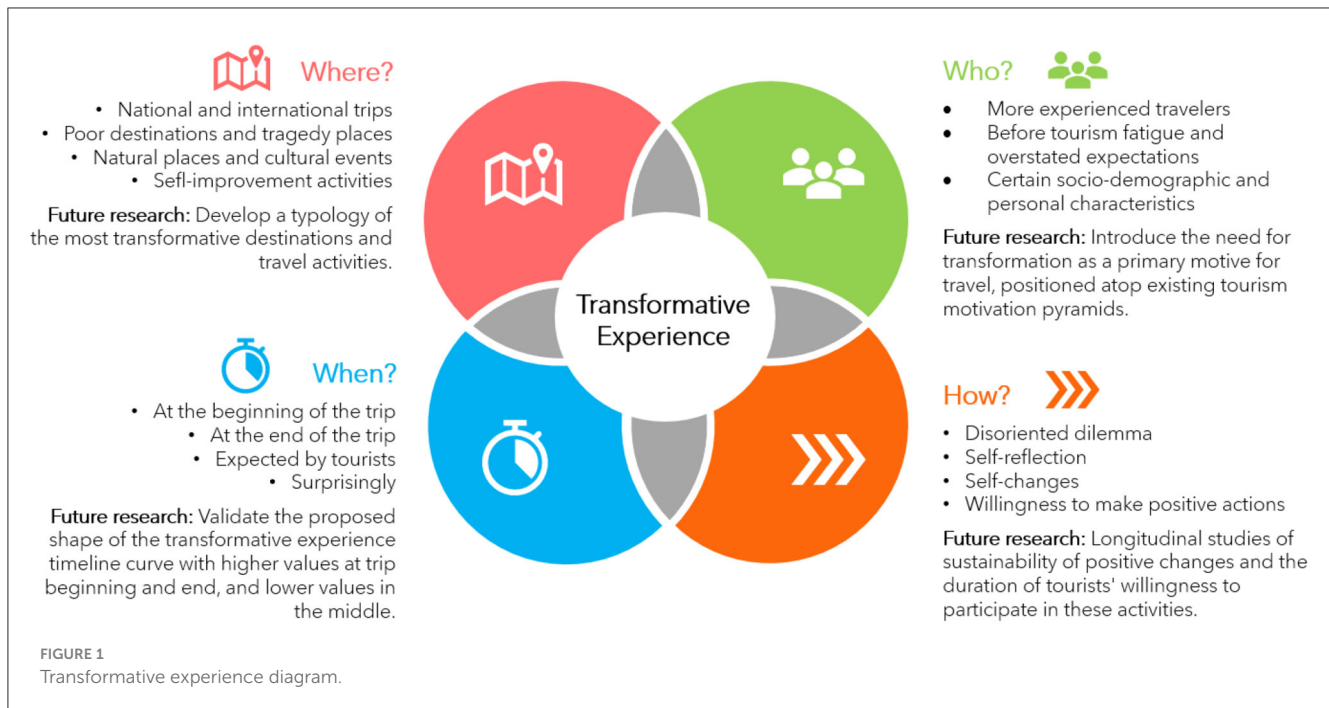
"I became nicer to others, and less worried about insignificant things."

"I came away with it learning that there are a lot of bad things in the world and we need to fight 'against that.'"

"I felt like I was more at peace in my life and changed the way I lived my life."

6 Conclusion

The Transformative Experience Diagram presented in Figure 1 integrates responses to questions about where, when, with whom, and how tourists experience transformation. These responses stem from the literature review across different disciplines, supplemented by additional data collected from semi-structured interviews with tourists who have experiences transformative travel. Identified as the most transformative locations and activities are destinations characterized by poverty, tragic sites, natural settings, historical landmarks, cultural events, and self-improvement activities, among others. A promising direction for



future research involves developing a typology to categorize the most transformative destinations and travel activities.

The study's findings indicate that transformative experiences are predominantly concentrated at the beginning and end of a trip. Subsequent research efforts should validate the proposed shape of the transformative experience timeline curve, suggesting potentially higher values at trip beginning and conclusion, and lower values in the middle. Transformative experiences were not surprising to the majority of respondents, underscoring the influence of pre-visit expectations, familiarity, and motivations. The need for transformation could be introduced as a primary motive for travel, positioned atop existing tourism motivation pyramids.

Transformative experiences were more prevalent among more experienced travelers, although the most advanced tourists did not report significant personality changes after having transformative travel experiences. Hence, transformation frequently occurs among tourists at a specific stage of travel maturity—individuals familiar with travel but before encountering travel fatigue, desensitization to novelty, or overstated expectations. The relationships between transformative travel experiences and resulting self-changes can be moderated by prior experience, socio-demographic characteristics, and various personal and contextual factors, warranting exploration in future studies.

The transformative process involves cognitive and affective triggers, leading to self-reflection, self-changes, and subsequent actions. Transformed tourists express intentions to actively pursue acquiring new knowledge, aiding others, making life-changing decisions, and engaging in positive activities. Longitudinal studies are deemed valuable to explore the sustainability of positive changes and the duration of tourists' willingness to participate in these activities. The proposed framework has the potential to guide tourism researchers in shaping the directions of future studies

on travel transformation and assist practitioners in designing travel experiences that trigger transformation, positively impacting tourists' personal growth and wellbeing.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Institutional Review Board, University of Central Florida. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

MG: Writing—original draft, Writing—review & editing.

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