

Conceptualizing transformative tourism experiences: An integrative framework for entrepreneurs

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Abstract

The study explores the factors that influence the design of transformative tourism experiences and the co-creation of value, from the perspective of tourism entrepreneurs. The research proposes a conceptual model that integrates various resources and triggers that contribute to the design of transformative experiences and the co-creation of value, ultimately leading to customer self-change. The model highlights the importance of considering both transformative experience design and value co-creation as distinct yet overlapping concepts, each requiring specific resources and attention. The study emphasizes the role of entrepreneurs in facilitating transformative experiences through activities, sensory design, human capital, social capital, and marketing capabilities. The findings offer valuable insights for tourism entrepreneurs and policymakers seeking to develop and promote transformative tourism experiences that foster meaningful and lasting change in travellers.

Keywords: experience design, transformation economy, value co-creation, service provider perspective.

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1. Introduction

Tourism research has always been concerned by the capacity of travelling to invoke meaningful experiences and even transform the tourist (Brown, 2013; Cohen, 1979; Graburn, 1989; Wang, 1999), as “no other human activity... has greater potential to alter your perceptions or ways you choose your life” (Kottler, 1998, p. 26). These studies highlight the liminal nature of the tourist experience, contrasting them with the structured and routine nature of everyday life. They also contextualize its historical evolution, tracing its development from pilgrimages and the Grand Tour to modern-day tourism, where the tourist might experience existential authenticity (Morgan, 2010; Robledo & Batle, 2017). Recently, there has been a rising interest in this aspect of tourist experience under the sub-field of ‘transformative tourism’ (Rus *et al.*, 2022). While any tourism type could invoke such a transformation, and discussions pertain as to the serendipitous aspect of transformative experiences (Kirillova *et al.*, 2017c; Ross, 2010), intentionality has been highlighted as a determining factor in supporting transformation, both on behalf of the tourist (Ross, 2010) and the service provider (Neuhofer *et al.*, 2020; Rossman & Duerden, 2019).

This study examines the efforts of service providers in the tourism industry to facilitate transformative experiences for tourists. Two main concepts provide the foundational structure for approaching this topic: ‘transformative experience design’ or the “intentional design of a transformative vehicle that offers a fertile ground for human transformative stimuli to be triggered” (Neuhofer *et al.*, 2020, p. 2894), and ‘value co-creation’ or the “joint creation of value by the company and the customer” (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004, p. 8). By focusing on these concepts, the paper aims to explore the factors that influence two increasingly relevant concepts in tourism research – transformative experience design and value co-creation, framing them within the broader framework of the experience and transformation economy. To achieve this objective, we synthesize previous research on these topics, to create a conceptual model, followed by propositions and managerial implications.

Transformative experience design emerges as increasingly relevant to tourism research as it becomes apparent that not only hedonic enjoyment is perceived as a desirable outcome of the tourist experience, but also eudemonic outcomes such as psychological well-being, quality of life and meaningfulness, which effects can be seen beyond the moment of experience (Knobloch *et al.*, 2017; Pasaco-González *et al.*, 2023). This design is essentially geared towards planning experiences that guide customers through the transformation process and result in lasting transformative outcomes (Bettencourt *et al.*, 2022; Pine & Gilmore, 2014; Rossman & Duerden, 2019). Jack Mezirow’s transformative learning theory is a useful framework for understanding and facilitating the transformation process within the field of tourism, as has been previously acknowledged (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022; Soulard *et al.*, 2021; Walter, 2016; Wolf *et al.*, 2017). While service providers should be concerned in supporting both peak experiences and consumer experiences (Quan & Wang, 2004), this study is primarily concerned with the operations and integration of resources towards facilitating the former.

Also, the perspective of value co-creation is highly relevant to the present study, given the experiential, customer-focused, and meaning-oriented nature of transformative tourism (Kabra & Singh, 2023). Value co-creation emphasizes the dynamic, interactive and relational process of value creation, departing from the traditional view where the supplier delivers value unilaterally (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008). Instead, it underscores the role of the supplier in facilitating resources with which customers can create value-in-use for their personal benefits (Grönroos & Ravald, 2011). As such, service providers are encouraged to design experience spaces wherein “the individual consumer is central, and [events] trigger a co-creation experience” (p. 14). The personal meaning that emerges, in our case, transformation, determines the value. Consequently, value is construed as experiential (Vargo & Lusch, 2008).

This study departs from the common approach of perceiving transformative experiences as inherently co-created. Several conceptual models situate co-creation as a major component of the transformative experience and its design (Kirillova *et al.*, 2017b; Kuokkanen & Kirillova, 2024; Soulard *et al.*, 2019; Teoh *et al.*, 2021), because “transformations... are achieved in partnership with the person being transformed” (Bettencourt *et al.*, 2022, p. 79). Notably, our approach advances a closer examination of each concept for its own. Moreover, this research identifies various factors that influence both transformative experience design and co-creation from a service provider perspective. Consequently, the implications of this research are expected to assist practitioners in determining which triggers and resources to incorporate in order to achieve co-creation, transformative experience design and/or transformative outcomes, as well as gain further understanding of what these constructs and their interrelationship entail.

Since its original introduction in 1998 (Pine & Gilmore, 1998), the concept of the ‘experience economy’ has been continuously evolving and recently entered a new phase, coined the ‘transformation economy’ (Kirillova *et al.*, 2017a, 2017c) whereby “experiences should yield transformations” (Pine & Gilmore, 2014, p. 26). Originally, the term was used to describe a shift from delivering services to staging engaging experiences for customers (‘experience economy 1.0’). In the ‘experience economy 2.0’, the focus shifts from staging experiences to co-creating unique experiences, where value is created *with*, rather than *for* the customer (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2003). In the emerging ‘experience economy 3.0’, the core economic value is derived from transforming the customers, rather than just engaging them or co-creating experiences with them. The goal is to partner with consumers to help them “improve some fundamental aspect of their lives—to achieve a “new you” (Bettencourt *et al.*, 2022, p. 72). However, as transformative experiences are inherently rare (Rossman & Duerden, 2019) and highly customized (Bettencourt *et al.*, 2022), and comprehensive socio-economic evidence on this transition has yet to emerge, statements that the transformation economy will replace co-creation should be treated with caution. As such, this new stage should currently be seen as a “promising frontier” (Pine & Gilmore, 2014, p. 26) for customers and service providers alike. Some scholars regard the three stages as complimentary elements in designing meaningful experiences rather than linear developments, and thus recommend combining staged, co-created and transformative experiences for best outcomes (Amaro *et al.*, 2023; Chirakranont & Sakdiyakorn, 2022). What is of interest for this paper is the transitional phase in which the transformation economy currently finds itself, and its implications for the design of tourism experiences. Exploring the relationship between transformative experience design, co-creation, and transformative outcomes contributes to this discussion and to mapping the current tourism landscape in this context.

Despite a surge in scholarly interest in transformative tourism over the last decade (Nandasena *et al.*, 2022; Rus *et al.*, 2022), significant gaps and opportunities for further research remain. Previous research set a solid theoretical foundation, exploring topics such as tourist motivations, triggers to transformation, the transformation process, in-situ experience, impact on tourists and strategies for designing transformative experiences (Amaro *et al.*, 2023; Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022; Kirillova *et al.*, 2017b, 2017a; Pung & Chiappa, 2020; Sheldon, 2020; Soulard *et al.*, 2021; Tasci & Godovykh, 2021; Wolf *et al.*, 2017). This paper follows the calls to further investigate managerial approaches to designing transformative experience (Soulard *et al.*, 2019; Wong *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, tourism research tends to be more concerned with the tourist perspective, as is also the case in transformative tourism research (Nandasena *et al.*, 2022; Rus *et al.*, 2022; Soulard *et al.*, 2019). This tendency undermines the role of experience facilitators in the process (Teoh *et al.*, 2021). This paper fills this gap, proposing a conceptual model for designing transformative experiences from the service providers’ perspective. As such, this paper contributes to this underexplored field, which is still fragmented and theoretically inconsistent (Duerden *et al.*, 2018; Wong *et al.*, 2023).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Transformative Tourism Experience Design

Design, at its core, is linked with transformation as it focuses on changing existing resources and conditions into better ones (Simon, 1969). As transformative tourism is primarily concerned with “an individualized process which can lead to a critical awareness of the self, leading to a new self-definition” (Coghlan & Weiler, 2018, p. 567) an evolved customer is the product (Pine & Gilmore, 2014). Zomerdijk & Voss (2010) argue experience design should be perceived as a distinct strategic approach, given its dynamic and continuous nature, as opposed to traditional service design’s rigidity. It is about designing *for* experiences rather than designing experiences, as these can never be fully controlled or predetermined (Rossman & Duerden, 2019; Svabo *et al.*, 2013). As such, transformative experience design is the “intentional design of a transformative vehicle that offers a fertile ground for human transformative stimuli to be triggered” (Neuhofer *et al.*, 2020, p. 2894).

When designing an experience, it is crucial to consider both the macroexperience, and the microexperiences that constitute it. Experience designers use tools known as experience maps (i.e. customer journey maps, service blueprints) with touchpoints, the participant’s interaction with experience elements, as the core feature (Rossman & Duerden, 2019). Before building the experience platform, it is important to understand the customers’ experiential worlds (Schmitt, 2010), as well as the perceived benefit, interest and familiarity they assign to certain experiences, to assess their market fit (Alcántara *et al.*, 2014). These insights, in turn, support the designer in characterizing different types of moments-based microexperiences, sequencing and structuring them mindfully within the larger customer journey to achieve the desired outcomes (Stienmetz *et al.*, 2021). In tourism, this approach is even more critical because tourist experiences involve multiple phases, with each one being rich in experiences and interactions (Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009; Cutler & Carmichael, 2010).

From an organizational perspective, “well-designed experiences can help companies build customer loyalty, attract and retain employees, and rise above the competition” (Rossman & Duerden, 2019, p. 3), supporting the notion of experience marketing (Schmitt, 1999, 2010). Nevertheless, experience design should not be caged within the experience economy’s fiscal orientation, but rather serve a higher purpose (Lundberg, 2018) as is the case with transformative tourism design.

An infinite number of scenarios can transform tourists (Sheldon, 2020, p. 5) and as such, various types of tourist experience could lead to such outcomes, such as adventure tourism (Arnould & Price, 1993), nature-based tourism (Wolf *et al.*, 2017), cultural tourism (Chirakranont & Sakdiyakorn, 2022), backpacker tourism (Noy, 2004), wellness tourism (Smith, 2013) and spiritual retreats (Fu *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, individuals experience certain triggers and the transformation process differently, which makes it even harder to systematize transformative tourism experiences (Rus *et al.*, 2022). Rossman & Duerden (2019) argue that “it’s a bit unrealistic, as well as ineffective, to aim to design only transformational experiences” as “it’s the less frequent experiences that have the greatest potential effect” (p. 40). This implies that understanding the factors and triggers that support transformation, as well as the transformation process is needed even more in the design of transformative experiences.

Several attempts were made to characterize and segment the transformative tourist, as a foundation for managerial decisions (Fu *et al.*, 2015; Haq, 2022; Ross, 2010; Smith & Kelly, 2006; Wolf *et al.*, 2017). Particularly noteworthy is the model proposed by Wolf *et al.*’s (2017) given its empirical approach that details participant characteristics, participant motivations, experience characteristics and experience benefits as a base for segmented transformative experience design, marketing and monitoring. These studies portray the transformative tourist as a ‘seeker’, whether the sought after transformative outcome is relaxation, psychological balance, spiritual or personal growth. Thus, effective transformative design

involves creating highly customized experiences tailored to individual needs and goals, maximizing the potential for achieving desired transformative outcomes (Bettencourt *et al.*, 2022; Pine & Gilmore, 2014). An emerging literature observes transformative experience design strategies. Kuokkanen & Kirillova (2024) highlight the importance of both media, “the vehicle that drives change” (i.e. triggers), and form, “the style by which transformative content is delivered” (p. 6) as elements that should be taken into account in transformative design. These include creating an extraordinary liminal space through aesthetics, sensory design, storytelling and theming (Neuhofer *et al.*, 2020). A combination of deep human connectivity, deep environmental connectivity, self-inquiry and engaged contribution were also identified as holding a greater opportunity for transforming visitors especially when designed together with transformational moments such as peak experiences, flow or simple, authentic experiences (Sheldon, 2020). The socio-cultural organizational aspect was analyzed by Soulard *et al.* (2019), using the glocalization framework, pointing out to the importance of empowering employees as agents of change. Their strategies can be summarized as establishing legitimacy in the local community, breaking down cultural barriers in the organization and staging transformative encounters (*ibid.*, p. 97). Lastly, service and experience quality should not be dismissed as they effect transformative outcomes (Fu *et al.*, 2015; Pasaco-González *et al.*, 2023).

Through their offer, transformative experience designers should help tourists achieve their ‘jobs to be done’ – functional jobs (i.e. resolve a problem), emotional jobs (i.e. enhance / diminish certain feelings), social jobs (i.e. be perceived by others in a certain way) and aspirational jobs (i.e. bolster what motivates them). Considering the influence on the tourist mindset, Pung *et al.* (2022) categorised the transformation in several dimensions like reflection, changing worldviews, cross-cultural understanding, wellbeing, and behavioural change, among others. This requires them to define what tourists’ success looks like at every point along the transformation journey and identify potential barriers customers might encounter, along with ways to overcome them (Bettencourt *et al.*, 2022). Godovykh & Tasci (2022) have empirically validated a positive change in personality traits such as adventurousness, compassion and emotional stability following transformative trip experiences. On another study, they show that propelled inner power, personality change and change in outlook on life and others are transformative outcomes of trip experiences which lead to actual behavioral change in actions (Tasci & Godovykh, 2021). Lastly, Fu *et al.* (2015) point out to the multiple dimensions of change including bodily, emotional, attitudinal and skill change, as well as to the fact that some changes are more enduring and significant than others.

Tour guides, as “the eyes and ears of the organization” (Soulard *et al.*, 2019, p. 100) are one example of tourism professionals who play a vital role in the tourists meaning-making process in relation to both their inner and outer worlds (Cohen, 1985; Farkić *et al.*, 2020; Zatori *et al.*, 2018). Parsons *et al.* (2019) regard spiritual tourist guides as ‘experience brokers’ who facilitate self-development for the customers through pre-trip preparatory questions, creating a safe space for exploration, mentoring, triggering group reflections, and finally, guiding the integration of the insights gained in the trip.

It should be therefore re-emphasized that transformative experiences can only be invited or facilitated rather than fully constructed (Gaggioli, 2016). This paper supports this approach by focusing on organizational resources and factors that may support transformative experience design, and consequently, transformative outcomes.

2.2 Transformative Learning Theory and the Transformation Process

Drawing primarily on transformative learning theory, this subsection discusses the stages of the transformation process that underpin transformative experience design. Transformative learning theory was developed by Jack Mezirow and has since been applied to different tourism contexts, highlighting the link between travel and learning (Stone & Duffy, 2015). It has been used as the basis to

describe multiple transformation tourism process models (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022; Soulard *et al.*, 2019, 2021; Wolf *et al.*, 2017) and can therefore serve as a guiding framework for the elements that constitute transformative experience design.

Mezirow's theory constitutes of 10 stages – A disorienting dilemma; self-examination; critical assessment of previous assumptions; acknowledgement of the shared human nature of the transformation process and the challenges along the way; exploration of new possible roles; planning a course of action; acquisition of knowledge and skills; trying out new roles; building competence and self-confidence; reintegration of the new perspective into one's life (Mezirow, 1991). It finds parallels with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, where a concrete experience serves as a trigger to begin the process, like the disorienting dilemma (Walter, 2016). Direct experience in educational tourism settings is shown to be a catalyst for developing new attitudes and behaviors, while indirect experience leads to growth in knowledge (Duerden & Witt, 2010). The hero's journey (Campbell, 1968) also provides a useful framework, emphasizing the potential that lays in the liminality of travel. When travelling, one engages with a source of power, leading to a process of integrating the yet unknown, experienced in his journey, into everyday life upon his return (Robledo & Batle, 2017). Taken together, these models bring attention to the steps and stages involved in how individuals learn and undergo personal growth through meaningful experiencing, based on the idea that learning, change and reflection are deeply connected to personal experiences (Mackeracher, 2012).

The theory has evolved over the years in response to criticism that it overly emphasizes rational thought and follows a too linear progression. Dirkx (2012) calls for acknowledging the role of the “voice of the soul” (p. 123) as part of the learning experience, providing space for the symbolic, emotional and imaginative aspects of meaning making. Others have shown the disorienting dilemma might occur at different points of time, potentially even only after returning home (Kirillova *et al.*, 2017b; Soulard *et al.*, 2021).

Along these lines, transformative learning in tourism settings should be seen as both a product and a process (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022). Each stage can be seen as part of a different learning domain – introspective (i.e. self-examination), communicative (i.e. making sense of encounters), instrumental (i.e. knowledge & skills) and transformative (i.e. new roles) (ibid). Assisting the customer in making sense of the triggers throughout the experience is just as important, if not more impactful than the experiences themselves given learning's highly individual nature and link with one's prior knowledge and motivations (Falk *et al.*, 2012; Kirillova *et al.*, 2017b). As consequence, the tourist should be engaged towards self-inquiry, and incorporate the new insights through both cognitive and affective means (Mezirow, 2012; Tasci & Godovykh, 2021). Transformative experience design is therefore a crucial mediating factor in the process of meaning construction towards transformative outcomes.

2.3 Value Co-creation and Experience

The transformative experience has been described as co-created (Teoh *et al.*, 2021), making it challenging at times to conceptually separate one from another (Dieteren & Neuhofer, 2024). This section would elaborate on value co-creation as a separate construct, to set a foundation for exploring its function in transformative tourism.

Value creation has become the locus-point of contemporary marketing, and firms need to allocate their limited resources accordingly to facilitate this process (Cabiddu *et al.*, 2013; Grönroos, 2008). Value co-creation, embedded in the service dominant logic, implies that “the consumer is always involved in the production of value” (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, p. 11). Firms need to see themselves as enablers of a reciprocal value creation process rather than distributors of value (Bettencourt *et al.*, 2014; Grönroos & Ravald, 2011). In other words, two processes take place simultaneously – service-providers act as value

facilitators, producing resources from which the customers create value for themselves. These merge into a coordinated, interactive, and integrated joint value creation process, as the provider can enhance the value created by the customer throughout the process (Grönroos & Ravald, 2011). This requires the service provider to be open-minded, innovative and proactive (Chirakranont & Sakdiyakorn, 2022, p. 8).

Value is thus determined by the customers, based on whether the service meets their specific needs, their 'jobs-to-be-done' (Bettencourt *et al.*, 2014). Thus, the value emerges as value-in-achievement, realized when customers successfully accomplish their 'jobs' using the resources provided by the service provider (Grönroos, 2008; *ibid*). Moreover, the customer's experience plays a crucial role in this process of value co-creation. Hence, no longer is value embedded in the product itself but is largely determined by the customer's experience during its consumption (Schmitt, 2010; Vargo & Lusch, 2008). On a similar note, shifting to co-created experience encounters instead of rigid service encounters "can uncover tourists' experiential purposes and (latent) desires, raise the potential value of tourism experiences and facilitate new knowledge development" (Sørensen & Jensen, 2015, p. 339). Considering both value-in-experience (Minkiewicz *et al.*, 2014) and value-in-achievement, it is evident that value co-creation entails facilitating experiences that help customers to achieve their goals.

Firms should facilitate the creation of experience environments as a "robust, networked combination of company capabilities (including technical and social capabilities) and consumer interaction channels (including devices and employees), flexible enough to accommodate a wide range of individual context-and-time-specific needs and preferences" (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2003, p. 15). The more engaging an experience environment is, the more affordances it has (Rossman & Duerden, 2019), and the larger its potential to accommodate various combinations of experience encounters scenarios (Eide & Mossberg, 2013). Tourism holds the potential to offer such experience networks, or 'tourismscape', as demand for participatory, authentic and co-created experiences is rising (Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009).

Adopting a co-creation mindset is crucial for firms to gain a strategic advantage, especially in today's uncertain and ever-changing market conditions. This is because such an approach encourages the continuous adaptation of value propositions, in a way that is sensitive to emergent customer aspirations, while envisioning future possibilities, in line with the firm's knowledge and capabilities (Bettencourt *et al.*, 2014). Such an approach leads to a higher probability of making the right resources available in the market, those that potential customers value and need (Vargo *et al.*, 2008). Moreover, co-creation has been shown to effect emotions and drive customer loyalty (Pullman & Gross, 2004).

From the above we can infer that experience design can be harnessed in the process of value co-creation. Customers should be perceived as co-designers, co-actualizers and co-curators at the anticipation, participation and reflection phases, respectively (Rossman & Duerden, 2019). Morelli *et al.* (2021) identified three levels of value co-creation in experience design that require different firm capabilities – interaction, infrastructure and social institution. In any case, experience design should strive to facilitate human-centered interactions, grounded in co-creation, rather than limited commercial customer-supplier dynamics (Arnould & Price, 1993; Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009).

3. Conceptual Framework

An integrative model can be presented to explore the elements that influence transformative experience design, and value co-creation (Figure 1.). Both firm resources (human capital, social capital, marketing capabilities) and major value triggers (sensory experiences, activities) were chosen as influencing factors, to provide a wider perspective. Furthermore, the relationship between transformative experience design, co-creation and customer self-change is presented. Previous research inspired the creation of this model. First, Activities are widely accepted as major elements and triggers in the

transformative experience process and design (Kirillova *et al.*, 2017b; Tasci & Godovykh, 2021). Second, Kuokkanen & Kirillova (2024) model describing transformative experience process in hospitality settings assumes the relationship between a sensory experience, performance of employees (corresponding to human capital), co-creation, transformative content and outcome. Finally, Clauss's (2017) breakdown of sub-concepts in business models that support innovation in value creation and proposition, guided the inclusion of human capital, social capital, and marketing capabilities as major firm resources. In the next section we would elaborate the rationale for our conceptualization in the form of propositions.

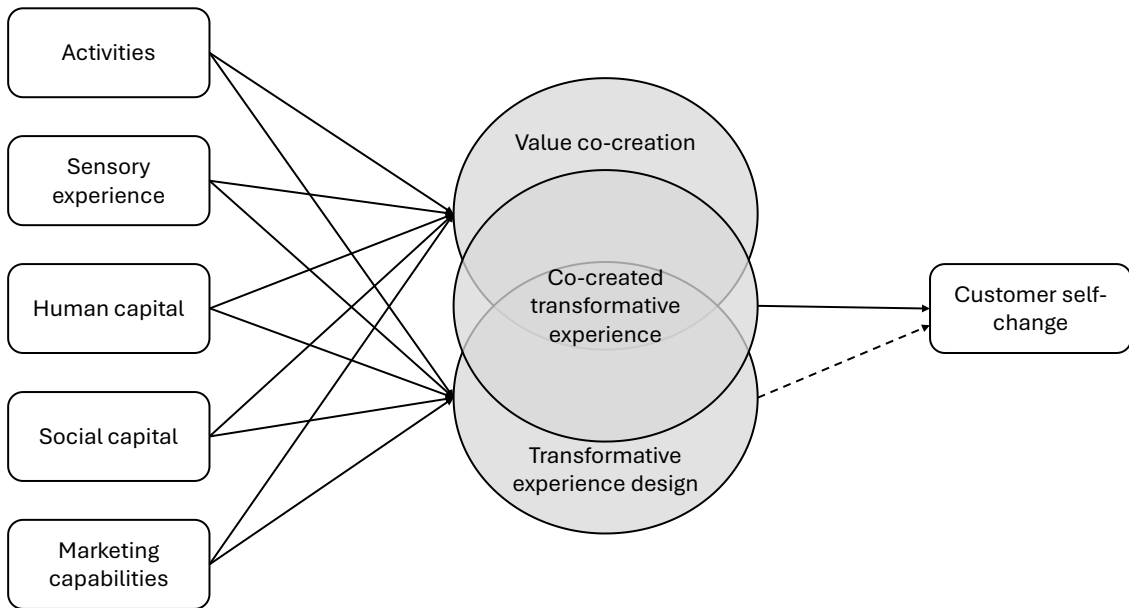


Figure 1. Integrative model for transformative experience design

Challenging and self-improvement activities are central to the transformation process, especially in tourism, where they shape participant outcomes (Kirillova *et al.*, 2017c). Content, therefore, is not to be disregarded when designing transformative experiences. A significant relationship between transformative travel experiences (activities) and affective and cognitive stimulation leading to self-change is demonstrated by Tasci & Godovykh (2021). Thus, transformative experience design should be very much about stimulating participants. Meaningful activities effect experience memorability and participants' well-being (Sthapit & Coudounaris, 2018) and are the core of many transformative tourism providers' offers (Kelly, 2010). Moreover, Tasci & Godovykh, (2021) underscore the role of challenge in the transformation process as "activities involving a reasonable degree of adversity should be embedded in the [transformative] experience" as "tourist comfort zones should be tested, religiously held assumptions should be challenged, and previously unrecognized needs should be exposed" (p. 23). Challenging activities can act as a springboard for incorporating different aspects of transformative learning, such as exploring new possible roles or building competence and self-confidence. In a similar vein, trigger activities are a foundational element that is co-created towards the value the customer seeks. As such, customer needs, and what they 'seek' should be reflected in flexible, customized activity programming that facilitates co-creation (Fu *et al.*, 2015). Based on the above, the following propositions are considered:

Proposition 1a. *The degree of immersion of the activities is an important element of the transformative experience design.*

Proposition 1b. *The degree of immersion of the activities is an important element of value co-creation.*

The tourism experience is “involved in our aesthetic or sensual existence” (Quan & Wang, 2004, p. 303), through a sensory mechanism which is constantly operating, alongside other subsystems (Stienmetz *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, it is through the senses that one experiences the external environment. Senses are used as marketing tools to differentiate companies, add value, provide more engaging experiences and essentially influence consumer perceptions and behavior (Bitner, 1992; Kotler, 1973; Schmitt, 1999). Moreover, sensory brand experiences are shown to be positively related to consumer brand engagement, encouraging managers to co-create unique sensory experiences with their customers (Hepola *et al.*, 2017). Sensory design is fundamental to experience-based services and value, and its organizations with a stronger orientation towards design, approach sensory design more seriously (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). Accordingly, ‘sensitizing’, that is, designing to delight and surprise the senses, is crucially important (Rossman & Duerden, 2019, p. 155). Transformative processes are “emotionally intensive, sensorially impressive and cognitively stimulating” (Kirillova *et al.*, 2017a, p. 645). As such, sensory experiences and design can facilitate an accommodating environment for transformative content and customer engagement (Kuokkanen & Kirillova, 2024; Neuhofer *et al.*, 2020). Thus, the following proposition is proposed:

Proposition 2a. *Providing sensorial experiences is an important element of the transformative experience design.*

Proposition 2b. *Providing sensorial experiences is an important element of value co-creation.*

Service is the “application of competences (such as knowledge and skills) by one party for the benefit of another” (Vargo *et al.*, 2008, p. 145) as people don’t possess value, but rather the capabilities to create it (Bettencourt *et al.*, 2014). Both value co-creation and transformative experience design and facilitation give a central place to the service-provider’s skills, capabilities and knowledge, which can contribute to or hinder the design and delivery of meaningful experiences (Sheldon, 2020; Vargo *et al.*, 2008). Hence their essential link to human capital. Service providers “use their personal knowledge to assist tourists in co-creating their individual desired experiences” (Sørensen & Jensen, 2015, p. 344) as meaningful experience brokers (Farkić *et al.*, 2020; Parsons *et al.*, 2019). Access to resources is not enough for designing and providing services; providers need to have the right personal and professional capabilities to use them wisely and effectively (Morelli *et al.*, 2021). While many design tools exist, not everyone who has access to them or necessarily has the right capabilities to maximize their potential towards transformative outcomes. In the same way, not everyone can design or manage a transformative tourism business – a certain level of professional competence is needed, combined with motivation and dedication. On a similar note, managers should be familiar with fundamental concepts of experience design in order to apply it (Kuokkanen & Kirillova, 2024). As consequence, tourism professionals should strive to be transformative leaders who can stage, co-create, and facilitate transformative experiences (Chirakranont & Sakdiyakorn, 2022). While acknowledging that the entrepreneurs’ human capital is an important element of the transformative experience design, not only in shaping tourist outcomes but also in fostering self-change for the service provider as they gain insights and grow through meaningful interactions, the following propositions are proposed:

Proposition 3a. *The entrepreneurs’ human capital is an important element of the transformative experience design.*

Proposition 3b. *The entrepreneurs’ human capital is an important element of value co-creation.*

Social capital can be defined as “the value of the resources obtained from relationships with other agents” (Rastrollo-Horrillo & Rivero Díaz, 2019, p. 1577). Value co-creation should be seen as value configurations within interactive networks of social and economic actors based on collaborative

resources (Bettencourt *et al.*, 2014; Vargo & Lusch, 2004), also in the tourism context (Cabiddu *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, both concepts are fundamentally tied. In a similar vein, the service provider's capacity to collaborate and engage stakeholders facilitates service design (Karpen *et al.*, 2017; Morelli *et al.*, 2021). In the context of transformative tourism, Soulard *et al.* (2019) have emphasized the importance of firms' establishing legitimacy and sustaining partnerships with the community. Transformative design, as consequence, should incorporate local communities' well-being, by integrating their wishes and values (Sheldon, 2020). We also acknowledge that the entrepreneurs' social capital is an important element of the transformative experience design, potentially creating reciprocal opportunities for self-change as providers form deeper connections within their networks. Accordingly:

Proposition 4a. *The entrepreneurs' social capital is an important element of the transformative experience design.*

Proposition 4b. *The entrepreneurs' social capital is an important element of value co-creation.*

From a service dominant perspective, marketing is a core firm competency supporting value co-creation (Grönroos, 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Alcántara *et al.* (2014) identify two stages in strategic experience design – “identifying experiences from people's perspective and assessing their market position” (p. 1080). This reinforces the idea that successful experience design is linked with understanding and catering for customer characteristics and needs, incorporating triggers, gathering feedback and adapting accordingly (Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009; Rossman & Duerden, 2019; Tasci & Godovykh, 2021). Marketing capabilities support experience designers to ensure alignment with brand values (Martins & Santos, 2022) and when applied purposefully, these capabilities hold potential to induce transformative outcomes (Karpen *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, it is recommended to provide marketing tools in retreat operators trainings (Kelly, 2010). As such:

Proposition 5a. *The entrepreneurs' marketing capabilities is an important element of the transformative experience design.*

Proposition 5b. *The entrepreneurs' marketing capabilities is an important element of value co-creation.*

Teoh *et al.*'s (2021) model highlights that transformative customer experiences are influenced by both the customer and the service provider, along their predispositions. The customer is seen as a partner, as the desired outcome is his own self-change (Bettencourt *et al.*, 2022). As such, customers should be included throughout the experience design process, as design is inherently inclusive (Karpen *et al.*, 2017; Rossman & Duerden, 2019). Mathis *et al.* (2016) show that a co-created tourist experience leads to satisfaction with the vacation experience which improves the tourist's life satisfaction after returning home. Interactive authenticity has also shown to influence transformative experience, both directly and indirectly through value co-creation (Kabra & Singh, 2023). In addition, transformative experience design's contribution to transformative outcomes was postulated (Kuokkanen & Kirillova, 2024; Teoh *et al.*, 2021). This is driven by the intentionality on the side of the service provider, strategic planning and knowledge of the transformation process and learning (Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022; Rossman & Duerden, 2019). As such, transformative experience design must integrate co-creation processes, fostering mutual transformation where service providers, through their active facilitation, also encounter opportunities for reflection and growth. According to these considerations, the following propositions are proposed:

Proposition 6a. *Transformative experience design must integrate co-creation processes.*

Proposition 6b. *Transformative experience design alone is less effective in driving customer self-change.*

4. Discussion

The findings of this study align with Mezirow's transformative learning theory, underscoring the critical stages of self-examination, critical reflection, and the reintegration of new perspectives into an individual's life. The integration of these theoretical constructs provides a framework that bridges the experiential and transformative dimensions of tourism. More specifically, it provides a deeper understanding of how service providers can actively contribute to the customer's learning and growth journey.

Transformative experience design, as conceptualized, operates as a facilitator for these stages by creating contexts that prompt disorienting dilemmas and encourage self-inquiry. The incorporation of co-creation further amplifies this process by enabling collaborative meaning-making between service providers and tourists, which reflects the communicative domain of transformative learning. As such, the integration of co-creation in the process contributes to the instrumental acquisition of new knowledge and skills, and, simultaneously, provides the opportunity for a deeper introspection and emotional engagement necessary for meaningful transformation.

While this study primarily focuses on the transformation experienced by tourists, it is important to consider the potential for self-change among service providers during co-creative encounters. Drawing on the principles of transformative learning theory, these interactions may serve as disorienting dilemmas for service providers, prompting self-reflection, critical assessment of their practices, and reintegration of new perspectives into their professional roles. As such, a reciprocal nature of transformation should be considered in the conceptualization of co-creation as a bidirectional process, where both parties engage in and benefit from meaningful growth.

The propositions pointed in the previous section outline a conceptual structure for tourism service providers who are interested in driving customer self-change through their operations. Applying a service provider approach, this model highlights the importance of applying both resources and triggers in the value creation, proposition and delivery stages, towards achieving customer self-change.

As outlined earlier, several authors postulate a shift from experience economy 2.0, with co-creation at its core, towards experience economy 3.0, known as the transformation economy (Kirillova *et al.*, 2017c). Ideally, each stage builds upon the previous one, incorporating its benefits, strategies and novelty (Amaro *et al.*, 2023; Chirakranont & Sakdiyakorn, 2022). In practice, tourism business are often pulled forward, constantly trying to be in line with the latest trends and innovations. That might result in shifting towards transformative experience design, while dismissing co-creation, rather than integrating it. While transformative experience design can lead to transformative outcomes, it also risks adopting a rather top-down approach, focusing on a pre-conceived idea of the transformed self. The application of co-creation in transformative experiences is therefore decisive for ensuring a personalized, enhanced and holistic outcome. The study highlights the interplay of co-creation and transformative design as essential for integrating transformative tourism products.

Correspondingly, this model emphasizes value co-creation and transformative experience as separate constructs, each requiring its own resources and special attention. By proactively bringing them together, service providers can enhance the unique qualities of each construct, creating something new – the co-created transformative experience, which holds the highest potential to drive customer self-change. Seeing them as one from the start, will most likely lead to undermining one in favor of the other, dismissing their individual characteristics, and making it difficult to monitor and improve performance. This is in line with Jaakkola *et al.* (2015) assertion that “viewing co-creation as a default feature of any experience overlooks the nuances of the collaborative, interactive aspect of service experience”.

Further research should explore to what extent the customer is genuinely part of the designed transformation process as well as the actual distribution of resources to both constructs. Empirical investigation of this model, as well as evidence-based examination of the relationship between co-creation and transformative experience design are encouraged.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Theoretical contributions

This study set out to explore the factors influencing two increasingly relevant concepts in tourism research—transformative experience design and value co-creation—situating them within the broader framework of the experience and transformation economy. Building on Mezirow's transformative learning theory, the research highlights the theoretical foundation for understanding how service providers can facilitate the stages of disorientation, self-reflection, and reintegration, which are critical for achieving meaningful customer transformation.

We propose a conceptual model that distinctly identifies value co-creation and transformative experience design as separate yet complementary constructs. Each contributes uniquely to the formation of co-created transformative experiences, emphasizing their interplay as essential for generating significant transformative outcomes. This theoretical contribution refines our understanding of transformative learning in tourism by integrating its principles with practical frameworks, providing actionable insights for service providers to design more effective experiences. The findings underscore the need for service providers to recognize and operationalize the distinct roles of transformative experience design and value co-creation. By strategically incorporating the identified resources and triggers into their offerings, providers can holistically harness these concepts' combined potential. This has implications for consistently delivering transformative outcomes that extend beyond momentary experiences to lasting personal growth.

Theoretical advancements from this study stress the necessity of a deeper understanding of how transformative value is created and delivered. As the field of transformative tourism remains emergent, ongoing engagement with transformative learning theory and continuous learning through experimentation, monitoring, and collaborative knowledge sharing are vital for advancing its impact. In alignment with prior recommendations (Farkić *et al.*, 2020; Kelly, 2010; Walker & Weiler, 2017), this study calls for the development of targeted training and certification programs to equip service providers with the necessary skills to support transformative tourism provision.

Finally, we propose that transformative tourism is in a transitional phase, reflecting the evolution of the experience economy. By treating transformative experience design and value co-creation as distinct, empirically grounded concepts, this research offers a nuanced framework that can guide both academic inquiry and practical applications. Adopting such an approach is essential for fostering a responsible and sustainable transformative tourism economy, where the transformative process is intentional, inclusive, and ethically attuned to shaping customer consciousness and identity.

5.2. Managerial and policy-making implications

This study offers several practical and policy-making implications for managers and stakeholders in the tourism industry who aim to design and deliver transformative experiences.

First, a closer examination of co-creation and transformative experience design as individual constructs is highly recommended. Tourism businesses should identify what each concept entails, apply resources to each construct's development, and only then unite their qualities to create a co-created

transformative experience. Overlaps exist, but they should be exposed based on the unique circumstances of each tourism business, rather than assumed.

Second, the study reveals that activities, particularly those that challenge participants and foster self-improvement, are crucial for transformative experiences. Tourism providers can enhance their offerings through incorporating more adventure-based activities, personal development workshops, or cultural immersion programs that push participants out of their comfort zones and encourage personal growth. Third, the research emphasizes the importance of transformative experience design (TED) in driving self-change among customers. To capitalize on this, tourism businesses should invest in training and development programs for their staff, focusing on the principles of TED and transformative learning theory. As such, tourism businesses should equip them with the knowledge and skills to design experiences that facilitate deep personal transformation, thereby differentiating their offerings in the competitive market.

Fourth, the study suggests that continuous learning and development are essential to maintain a competitive edge, namely fostering a culture of learning within organizations, encouraging employees to participate in workshops, conferences, and training programs related to transformative tourism and experience design. Moreover, there is significant potential for knowledge sharing among/between practitioners (i.e. life coaches, tour-guides) and other tourism stakeholders (i.e. tourism boards, academic institutions) – the latter by incorporating approaches for creating meaningful, collaborative inner experiences, and the former, especially operators of retreats, by incorporating knowledge and innovative approaches grounded in the tourism experience and industry expertise.

Fifth, the research proposes the positive impact of sensory experiences on co-creation and transformative experience design. Tourism providers, known for their rich cultural and natural heritage, should leverage this strength by incorporating sensory elements into their experiences. For example, tourism businesses could develop experiences using local cuisine, traditional music, or natural landscapes, combined with the pillars of transformative experience design, to create a more immersive and engaging experience for tourists, thereby fostering co-creation and enhancing the transformative potential of the experience.

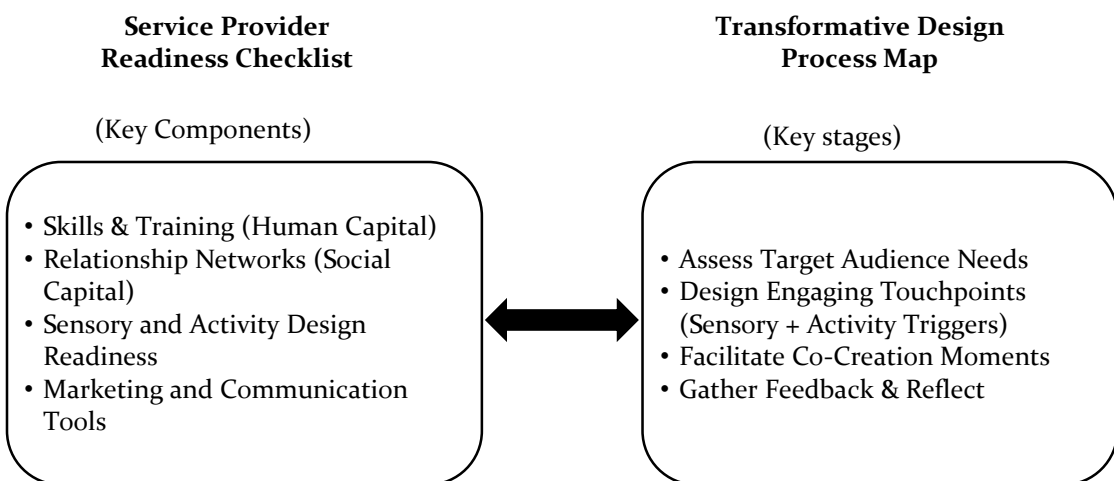


Figure 2. Toolkit for Transformative Experience Design

Finally, to operationalize the framework for managerial purposes, this study introduces a practical toolkit aimed at tourism service providers and trainers (Figure 2). The toolkit consists of two integrated components: (i) A checklist for service provider readiness aiming to evaluate the capabilities and resources required to facilitate transformative experiences. The checklist includes human capital (skills and knowledge), social capital (network strength), and sensory and activity design; (ii) A map for transformative design process that provides a structured approach to crafting transformative experiences, highlighting critical touchpoints such as participant engagement, sensory stimulation, and feedback mechanisms.

5.3. Limitations and future research

This manuscript has a conceptual nature. As such, the propositions put forth in this article are grounded in previous research, but empirical research is needed to confirm its applicability. In practice, some of the propositions may turn to be inaccurate, reflecting the current transitional stage the transformation economy finds itself. Nonetheless, we agree with Kuokkanen & Kirilova's (2024) statement that transformative tourism models should be regarded as utopian. They should not be dismissed, as they show a desirable direction. These models should be viewed with an understanding of the practical complexities involved in designing or facilitating transformative experiences.

Many opportunities for further research exist, given the evolving nature of the fields of transformative tourism and experience design. Empirical research should be prioritized, to ground and direct the conceptual discussions that have dominated these fields so far. First, the role of value co-creation in transformative tourism and experience design should be further explored. For instance, testing this model quantitatively with TT service providers, would provide further evidence for its operationalization. Specifically, the relationship between co-creation and transformative experience design and outcomes deserves closer empirical attention. Second, the elements identified in this study could be elaborated to gain further insight, for instance by investigating which competencies contribute to the design of transformative experiences and/or influence their outcomes. Lastly, it is recommended to compare the performance, experience design and impact of self-declared TT service providers with similar tourism providers, such as adventure and nature-based tour operators, who do not identify as 'transformative', because it will shed more light on whether and how the intention to be 'transformative' makes a difference. This comparison should be conducted from both the customer and service provider perspectives. This study has provided a fresh perspective on transformative tourism, along with a strong theoretical base for future explorations.

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